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AVOIDING ICEBERGS IN TROUBLED TIMES

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ISRAELI MILITARY WARNS PALESTINIANS NOT TO RETURN TO GAZA

MONEY 10

SENSEX, NIFTY TANK OVER ONE PER CENT

Published From
DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL BHUBANESWAR
RANCHI RAIPUR CHANDIGARH
DEHRADUN HYDERABAD VIJAYWADA

Late City Vol. 34 Issue 105
*Air Surcharge Extra if Applicable

NEW DELHI, TUESDAY APRIL 16, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹3

Established 1864

the pioneer

www.dailypioneer.com



RR BRACE FOR NARINE SPIN TREAT 12 SPORTS

Delhi Government's Vigilance Department exposes Kejriwal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to the Government," the order a show cause notice copy said. The notice said the direct order was placed to SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd as per ICMR circular. But subsequent procurement was not done u/s 50 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, it was done based upon recommendation by committee under Chairmanship of Dr RN Das, Dr ZSIC Marak and Dr Poonam Panwar. In its observation that led to a needle of suspicion, the vigilance noted that three members were common in all the committees formed to be involved in the procurement of several items and incidentally flouting the norms all these committees were headed by RN Das in the capacity of chairperson in all the committees. **No relief from SC for Delhi CM. Details on Page 3**



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

Kerala under shackles of drug mafia: Modi

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

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

A massive crowd has turned up at Kunnamkulam and Kattakkada to greet the Prime Minister and listen to him. Waxing eloquence on the natural beauty and salubrity of the State's climate, Modi said he is at a loss to understand why the Congress-led UDF and the CPI(M)-led LDF kept Kerala as an underdeveloped region despite the fact that nature has been very kin to the State. Explaining the salient points in the election manifesto released by the BJP on Sunday, which happened to be the Vishu Day, the Prime Minister told the gathering that what they have witnessed in the ten years was just a trailer while the mega action is to be expected in the next tenure of the NDA Government. The Prime Minister said the bullet train connecting Ahmedabad and Mumbai will become a reality in the next few months. **Continued on Page 2**

Boost for Indian agriculture as IMD predicts above normal monsoon

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

M Ravichandran, secretary at the Union Ministry of Earth Sciences said "there are multiple favourable factors indicating a high probability for above-normal rainfall during the June-September period this year". "Of these, the vital oceanic factor is the El Nino, an event associated with the above-normal sea-surface temperatures prevailing over the equatorial Pacific Ocean. It is known to cause extreme heatwaves and suppress the Indian summer monsoon rainfall," he said. The ongoing El Nino event, the IMD said, is weakening. "But it continues to remain in the 'moderate' category. Closer to the onset of the southwest monsoon season, El Nino Southern Oscillation neutral conditions are likely to establish," added Mohapatra. **Continued on Page 2**



Registration for Amarnath yatra begins

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The 52-day-long Shri Amarnathji Yatra will commence on June 29 this year and it will culminate on August 19, 2024 amid tight security arrangements. Meanwhile, the advance registration for the annual Amarnath pilgrimage began on Monday across designated bank branches. The Shrine Board authorities have also taken up the task of snow clearance on both tracks on a war footing. The leftover track expansion work will be taken up further after the completion of the snow clearance work. "The advance registration has started today at bank branches here. The exercise is being conducted at 540 branches of PNB (Punjab National Bank) across the country," an official involved in the registration process said. It is Aadhaar authentication-based form generation for Yatris rather than the manual procedure followed in 2022, said the officials, adding that forms will be system-generated now. "For registration, it is mandatory for the pilgrims to produce a health certificate. However, children below 13 years of age, elders above 70 years and six-week pregnant women will not be permitted for the pilgrimage." For issuing a Compulsory Health Certificate (CHC) for advance yatra registration, more than 230 doctors have been authorised in various medical centres in all 20 districts of Jammu and Kashmir. **Continued on Page 2**

Iran to allow Indian officials to meet seized cargo vessel crew

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

readout quoted Amir-Abdollahian as saying. He also reportedly called for India's role to stop the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. The readout said Jaishankar expressed his concern about the situation of the 17 Indian crew members and requested assistance from Iran in this regard. Special Naval Forces of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) seized 'MSC Aries' reportedly in view of its links with Israel. The MSC (Mediterranean Shipping Company) said on Saturday that it is working closely with relevant authorities for the well-being of 25 crew members and the return of the vessel. **Continued on Page 2**

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

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With the 'mystery' and 'controversy' over the Electoral Bonds yet to settle, the flow of 'unaccounted' money of about ₹5,000 crore by the Election Commission in the last one and a half months has raised eyebrows. In a move to crackdown on black money in form of cash, liquor, drugs, precious metals and freebies supply ahead of the first phase of polling for the 102 Lok Sabha seats on April 19, the poll watchdog has seized ₹4658.167 crore since March 1. So on an average the poll watchdog has seized ₹100 crore per day. What is more concerning is the seizure of drugs worth ₹2,069 crore during this period. Out of the total recoveries worth ₹4,658 crore, freebies and other items stand at over ₹1142.49 crore, the cash component stands at over ₹395.39 crore, while liquor stands at more than ₹489.31 crore. Significantly, 45 per cent of the seizures are of drugs (₹2,069

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

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



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

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

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

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

Ram Rajya taking roots in country, says Rajnath in JK

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Opposition Congress made last-ditch efforts to woo voters on Monday as electioneering peaked ahead of the last day of campaigning in the Udhampur-Doda Lok Sabha constituency.

From the BJP, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh arrived in Basohli to address an election campaign meeting in support of MoS PMO Dr Jitendra Singh.

On the other hand, Jammu and Kashmir National Conference Vice President Omar Abdullah addressed a series of meetings in the Bhaderwah area in support of the INDI Alliance candidate Choudhary Lal Singh of the Congress party. Lal Singh himself focussed on the Kathua district and continued his road-side campaign meetings. J&K BJP Chief Ravinder Raina campaigned in support of Dr Singh in the Doda district along with former party MLAs. Sachin Pilot is also scheduled to campaign in favor of Lal Singh on Tuesday in Kathua before the curtains come down ahead of the first phase of polling on April 19.

Dr Singh specially invited the Defence Minister to address an



election rally in Basohli as it was previously represented by his nearest rival Choudhary Lal Singh in the state legislature. Seeking votes in favor of Dr Jitendra Singh, Rajnath Singh Monday said the BJP government has fulfilled all promises like the abrogation of Article 370, construction of the Ram temple, and implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

Rajnath Singh said "Ram Rajya" has started taking root in the country and nobody can stop it from becoming a reality. Singh assured people that nobody who is an Indian national is going to lose his citizenship after the implementation of the CAA, while the BJP will keep its promise to implement the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as promised in

the party manifesto in the next five years. He also referred to the banning of triple talaq and said "Whether we form the government or not, attack on the dignity and honor of the women is not acceptable to us." Singh said that Ram Rajya means that the people have a realization and awareness of their duties. There is a problem when people start having a sense of authority," he said. Expressing confidence about Jitendra Singh winning from the constituency for the third term with a huge margin, the defence minister appealed to the people to pick up the party's past manifestoes, since its origin from the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, and see to it that "we have fulfilled all our promises".

In a threat to MVA, Congress leader to contest as Independent from Sangli

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In an emerging threat to the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) unity, Congress leader and former chief minister Vasantdada Patil's grandson Vishal Prakashbapu Patil on Monday filed his nomination as an Independent candidate for the contentious Sangli Lok Sabha seat in western Maharashtra, challenging the MVA Shiv Sena (UBT) nominee Chandraraj Patil. Nearly a week after the MVA - comprising Congress, Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (Sharad Pawar) - inked the seat-sharing deal under which the Mallikarjun Kharge-led party gave its claim on Sangli seat and gave the Uddhav Thackeray Sena, the Congress' Vishal Patil is no mood to give up his plans to contest the Lok Sabha polls from the traditional Congress stronghold. With four days to go for the end of nominations, Vishal Patil - who is the son of five-time MP Prakashbapu Patil - quietly filed his papers as an Independent candidate from the Sangli constituency. If he remains in the electoral fray, Vishal Patil will take on Chandraraj Patil of the Shiv Sena (UBT) and BJP's two-time sitting MP Sanjaykaka Patil who is seeking election for the third time, in a three-

nered contest. Interestingly enough, the development came on a day when the ruling BJP's former MLA Vilas Jagtap resigned from the primary membership of his party and announced his support to Vishal Patil. "For several years now, I have been working for the growth of the BJP at Sangli. But, the party leadership has not taken cognisance of efforts. Instead, the group opposed to me within the party has complained to the BJP leadership. I cannot tolerate this kind of thing," Jagtap said, after announcing his resignation from the BJP. Meanwhile, sources close to Vishal Patil - who is still hopeful of getting the Congress ticket to contest the Lok Sabha polls -- said that if allowed to do so, he might file a second set of nomination as a Congress candidate on Tuesday. However, party sources said that the Congress leadership - after having given up its claim on the Sangli seat - is quite unlikely to give Vishal Patil Form-B, authorising him to contest the Lok Sabha polls from Sangli constituency. In case, Vishal Patil decides to contest as an Independent candidate, the Congress may not do much except expelling him from the party. It may be recalled that Vishal Patil - who along with

Congress MLA Dr. Vishwajeet Kadam from Palus-Kadegaon in Sangli and other senior district party leaders had met Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and other top brass in New Delhi several times insisting that the Congress should not give up its claim on the Sangli. Last week Vishal Patil and Kadam also made a public appeal to Shiv Sena (UBT) President and former chief minister Uddhav Thackeray to forsake the Sangli seat to the Congress. However, the Shiv Sena (UBT) chief - who had staked claim for the Sangli seat and even announced the candidate even when the MVA was in the midst of the seat-sharing talks - is no mood to oblige the Congress on Sangli seat. Following the refusal by the Shiv Sena (UBT) to give up the Sangli seat, the Congress workers have been threatening not to campaign for the Sena (UBT) nominee Chandraraj Patil, who is a wrestling champion. The Sangli Lok Sabha seat has been a major bone of contention for several weeks now. So much so that state Congress chief Nana Patole had made an issue of Sena (UBT) unilaterally 'grabbing' the Sangli seat even when the seat-sharing negotiations were in progress last month.

Firing near Salman home: Cops identify shooters, trace bike

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

A day after the sensational shoot-out witnessed in front of Bollywood super star Salman Khan's Bandra residence, the Mumbai police on Monday traced the motorbike used in the incident to the adjoining Raigad district and identified the two shooters involved in the motorbike. Two unidentified motorcycle-borne miscreants, who were covering their faces with helmets, had opened four rounds of fire outside his Bandra (west) residence "Galaxy Apartment" in north-west Mumbai in the early hours of Sunday, before speeding away immediately after the shoot-out. The investigations, being carried out by the Mumbai police crime branch sleuths, have revealed that the motorcycle used in the crime carried a Raigad registration number plate - as could be seen in the CCTV footage. The investigators are trying to ascertain if the motorbike was bought by the suspects from someone or were they using a "missing" or "stolen" bike. Of the two suspects involved in Sunday's shoot-out, one of whom has been identified as Vishal alias Kalu, from

Gurugram in Haryana, while the other one is said to be from Rajasthan. Vishal, a member of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang, had been arrested in a motorbike theft case for the first time in 2020 and sent to Tihar jail. After Sunday's shooting, Anmol Bishnoi, the younger brother of incarcerated gangster Lawrence Bishnoi, had in a Facebook post claimed responsibility for the firing at Salman Khan's home. Lawrence Bishnoi is currently lodged in a Gujarat jail. Meanwhile, after the shooting incident that took place at 5 am on Sunday, the police have beefed up security in and around "Galaxy Apartments", where Salman lives with his parents, brothers and other family members. Fifty-eight-year-old Salman and his father Salim Khan have been facing threats to their lives allegedly from the Lawrence Bishnoi gang, after the 1998 blackbuck poaching incident in Rajasthan. It may be recalled that on November 29, 2023, the Mumbai police had reviewed the security provided to Bollywood super star Salman Khan after he allegedly received yet another threat from gangster Lawrence Bishnoi.

Bengal CM Mamata attacks Modi

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Bachao! Is Desh ko bachao B... Modi se Bachao! ... Is Desh ko Modi kha lega (save India from Modi or else he will devour it). That is how Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee expressed her anger against the BJP Government at the Centre, a day after the Income Tax Department officials searched Trinamool Congress general secretary Abhishek Banerjee's helicopter on Sunday.

Even as her wrath fell on Prime Minister Narendra Modi she also accused the Election Commission of India for acting in a biased manner even as she asked why the State officials were being transferred when their central counterparts were not being touched.

Wondering as to why the I-T officials would search the helicopters of the BJP leaders Banerjee told a rally at Cooch Behar on Monday, "if things continued like this and if the people did not wake up at right moment then nothing will be left of a democratic India," because "If this government returns to power, there will be no election in this country.



They will destroy the federal structure. There will be one nation and one leader. An autocratic government will be formed." She said, that the BJP Government had sent the "I-T officials to search the chopper of Abhishek but found nothing ... they had thought that they would get gold or money in it ... the TMC does not need gold and money for fighting elections ... it is the BJP which does that business ... my question is would any central agency dare check helicopter of the BJP leaders." Hours later at a rally at Alipurduar Banerjee said she was ready to go to jails and that

she was not afraid of the Prime Minister's jail threat. Apparently referring to Prime Minister's earlier speech where he warned that he would send all the corrupt politicians to jail Banerjee said, "they are threatening to send us to jail ... I am not afraid of jails ... I am not a coward ... I have seen such threats several times before ... I will see how many jails you have. How many cops do you have ... How many people can you beat up" Curiously Banerjee's statement nearly matched that of Pradesh Congress president Adhir Chowdhury who asked why

the I-T would not check the choppers of Prime Minister Narendra Modi." Chowdhury was however speaking in reaction to an alleged check conducted by the ECI officials in Rahul Gandhi's chopper. Cautioning the electorate once again that there would be no democracy left in India if the BJP returned to power Banerjee raised the issue of Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens and Uniform Civil Code saying, "when I said that CAA is only the beginning and there are many more things to follow none believed ... Now their (BJP's) manifesto says it all ... There is a fish whose head is the CAA and tail is the NRC and stomach is the UCC," adding when all the three were implemented the "all rights will be gone ... the minorities, tribals, mothers and sisters will be the worst sufferers... it is they who will decide as what you will eat in the morning and what you will eat at night." Saying once again that the BJP which called others thieves was itself a party of dacoits Banerjee said, "the BJP is a party of dacoits. Gali gali mein

shor hai, BJP chor hai (there is a word in every by-lane that BJP is a thief)" during the saffron government to "publish comparative details of corruptions that took place in Bengal, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra." Threatening to go on a hunger strike if the Election Commission continued to act in a biased manner Banerjee said how State officials were being transferred at the drop of hat whereas their central counterparts were being allowed to act partially. Referring to the transfer of the Deputy Inspector General of Murshidabad range Banerjee said how "even today, they have transferred the DIG of Murshidabad just following the directions of the BJP..." adding, if a single riot took place anywhere then it was the ECI that would be responsible. To register her protest she said that if the situation would not improve then she would go on yet another hunger strike as the one she did during the Singur movement. "In Singur days I went on a hunger strike for 26 days ... now if this continues then I will do it for 55 days," she said.

Court gives conditional nod to Ramnavami procession

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

With general elections to commence in a few days from now the Calcutta High Court on Monday gave a conditional permission to the organization Ramnavami procession. Passing a conditional order Justice Joy Sengupta directed petitioners Anjani Putra Sena and another such organization apparently backed by some larger saffron outfits to take a rally that would not consist more than 200 men and that asked them to provide the name of five people that would lead the procession. The Court also said that during the procession neither any weapon should be carried nor inflammatory speech should be given, nor DJs would be played. The Court order against the backdrop of riots last year at Howrah and Serampore. Incidentally the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and some other organisations have planned to celebrate the Ramnavami Mahotsav in a grand manner from April 9 to April 23 throughout Bengal.



While the VHP leadership said that they have numerous programmes lined up throughout the State the Left leadership said such programmes were being organised during the election times in order to give impetus to the TMC-BJP binary. "The people have understood things and they will not fall prey to such programmes ... though these issues tend to create emotions in the remote areas the people have come to realise that they would generate bread and butter neither they would provide jobs and pull down the price rise," said CPI(M) central committee member Sujay Chakrabarty. Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee too asked the people

not to step into the trap being laid by the BJP. "They are trying to lay traps for you ... by creating communal tensions and riots ... I will request all not walk into their traps and play it cool ... avoid making statements because the BJP wants to polarize votes," she said. Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari on the other hand blamed Banerjee for creating communal situation. "There is no question of communal tension when the religious programmes are organized ... it is the Chief Minister who is trying to create situation in order to frighten the Muslims and make them vote for her," he said.

Online food delivery menus fail to provide nutritional labelling: Study

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In a revelation that should serve as a wakeup call for Indian authorities, a study has flagged that a significant majority of menus on popular online food delivery platforms fails to provide comprehensive nutritional labeling, raising concerns about consumers' ability to make informed and healthy choices.

After investigating menu items on major online food delivery outlets and apps, the researchers from the University of Sydney noted that as most advertised items were missing nutritional information in online food delivery menus, the consumers were not able to make healthy choices. They found that less than 6 per cent of menus of food outlets on online food delivery apps like UberEats, Menulog and Deliveroo had complete nutritional labelling. A total of 482 menus from UberEats, Menulog and Deliveroo were reviewed by the researchers in the study published in the journal Public Health Nutrition.

"There are multiple studies that show menu labelling having real-world impact that consumers who were provided with nutritional information selected meals with significantly lower energy content," said lead study author Sisi Jia.

Boost for Indian...

From Page 1

"Thereafter, La Nina conditions are expected to emerge during the second half of the monsoon season, which could bring higher-than-normal rainfall over the country," he explained. In a study, the IMD noted that during a La Nina year following an El Nino event (like 2024), the southwest monsoon rainfall had in the past remained normal or above (nine occasions during 1951-2023). "But there are many other ocean-atmospheric dynamic factors which affect rainfall during the monsoon season apart from La Nina, which we do not have good knowledge of yet," clarified Ravichandran. The Indian Ocean Dipole - which is the Indian Ocean counterpart of El Nino - is in its neutral phase. But its positive phase is most likely to emerge during the coming months, according to the IMD. The IMD DG pointed out that during the start of the

monsoon season, positive IOD conditions would emerge. The positive phase of the IOD is good for the rainfall over India. Another positive factor that could favour the monsoon this year is the below-average snow cover along Eurasia and the northern hemisphere during December-March. The shift in the number of rainy days and the increase in heavy rain events align with global climate change trends, leading to more frequent occurrences of both droughts and floods. These extreme weather events can significantly impact agricultural productivity and food security. The IMD said the historical data analysis between 1951 and 2023 reveals a correlation between La Nina following an El Nino event and above-normal monsoon rainfall in India. This indicates the importance of understanding large-scale climatic phenomena like El Nino, the Indian Ocean

Dipole (IOD), and the snow cover over the northern Himalayas and Eurasian landmass in forecasting monsoon patterns. While El Nino events typically bring weaker monsoon winds and drier conditions to India, the current shift towards La Nina conditions by August-September is expected to enhance rainfall. Positive Indian Ocean Dipole conditions and low snow cover in the Northern Hemisphere further support the likelihood of above-normal rainfall during the monsoon season. Given that the southwest monsoon contributes significantly to India's annual rainfall, which in turn is vital for the agriculture sector constituting a substantial portion of the GDP, accurate forecasting and preparation for potential climate-related challenges remain critical for sustainable agricultural practices and economic stability.

Kerala under shackles of...

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"Once Ahmedabad is linked with Mumbai through the high speed bullet train, we will launch the works to link the North, East and South with bullet trains and this will see India making a quantum jump in infrastructure development. Works are in full swing to complete highways, expressways and super express highways which would connect the entire length and breadth of the country. The parties that ruled the State all these years failed to exploit the tourism potential of Kerala," said Modi. He came down heavily on the CPI(M) and Congress Governments for their callousness towards the needs of the common man. "The Communists have made Kerala a quagmire of corruption and nepotism. Though the Central Government offered 3.6 million water connections to the State, the CPI(M) was not interested in implementing the scheme. Now, the people of Kerala are struggling to get drinking water. The Central Government is providing free ration to 1.5 crore people in the State and this would be continued for the next five years. What the LDF and the UDF were doing was to retard the progress of the State. Wherever the LDF was in power, (West Bengal and Tripura) there is nothing left and they have done nothing right," said the Prime Minister. Giving enough indications that Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his family members were in for major trouble in connection with the Cooperative Bank scam and the sand mining scam, Modi said whatever money swindled by the Marxist leaders from the cooperative banks would be returned to the poor and middle class people who had invested the hard earned money with these banks. "The cooperative bank scam is being investigated and we will not allow the misappropriation of the poor account holders' cash," said the Prime Minister.

Iran to allow Indian officials...

From Page 1

Hours after the Iranian action, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said the ship's crew consisted of Indian, Filipino, Pakistani, Russian and Estonian nationals. Official sources in India said it is in touch with Iran to secure the release of 17 Indians. During the phone call, Amirabdollahian told Jaishankar about the need to reduce tensions and defended his country's "legitimate defence", while referring to Iran's attack on Israel. He called for India's continued role through international institutions, including the UN Security Council, to stop the war in Gaza, as well as to end the

Israeli offensive in the Palestinian enclave, according to the Iranian Foreign Ministry. He reiterated Iran's demand for a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza and the establishment of peace and security in the region from the Mediterranean shores to the Red Sea, it said. On his part, Jaishankar said the most important issue was to ensure a reduction in tensions. He also called on all parties to exercise restraint and measures to ensure a favourable end to tensions between Iran and Israel. On Sunday, Jaishankar said he spoke to his counterparts from Iran and Israel and shared his concerns over the ongoing tensions between the

two Middle East countries. During a phone call with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Jaishankar said he raised the issue of 17 Indian crew members stranded on board the MSC Aries. "Spoke to Iranian FM @Amirabdollahian this evening. Took up the release of 17 Indian crew members of MSC Aries. Discussed the current situation in the region. Stressed the importance of avoiding escalation, exercising restraint and returning to diplomacy. Agreed to remain in touch," he wrote on X. In a similar tweet after holding talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, Jaishankar said, "Just concluded a conversation

with Israel FM @Israel_katz. Shared our concern at the developments yesterday. Discussed the larger regional situation. Agreed to stay in touch." On Sunday, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan wrote to Jaishankar, seeking decisive action through diplomatic channels to ensure the safety of 17 Indian crew members on board the MSC Aries. In the letter, the Chief Minister emphasised that three of the crew members on the ship, Sumesh, PV Dhanesh, and Syamath, are from Kerala. He said the unexpected seizure of the ship had led to anxiety and concern among families and friends of the crew members.

Excise policy case: No interim relief by SC to Kejriwal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday did not get any interim relief from the Supreme Court which sought a response from the Enforcement Directorate by April 24 on his plea challenging his arrest in a money-laundering case stemming from the alleged excise policy scam.

A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta issued notice to the ED on Kejriwal's plea challenging the Delhi High Court's April 9 order that had upheld his arrest in the case.

The bench said the matter would be heard in the week commencing April 29.

Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for Kejriwal, questioned the timing of his arrest after the model code of conduct for the general elections had come into force and said it was done to disable him

from campaigning. Terming it a "very unusual matter", not just because Kejriwal was a chief minister, Singhvi told the bench that he wanted to show some facts which would "shock" the conscience of the court.

He said a lot of "selective leaks all over the place" was giving everybody a wrong impression. "I am not aware of selective leaks," Justice Khanna said, adding, "Let a notice be issued." Solicitor General Tushar Mehta and Additional Solicitor General S V Raju, who represented the ED, said the probe agency will file its reply to the petition.

"I am now asking for an extremely short date of Friday for a reason," Singhvi said, underlining the need for the matter to be heard early.

"We will give a reasonable date, a very short date, but not what you are saying. That is not possible," Justice Khanna told Singhvi.



During the hearing, the senior advocate said the CBI and the ED have filed eight chargesheets in the excise case and Kejriwal had not been named in any of them.

"The story starts from September 2022 and he (Kejriwal) is arrested in March 2024," he said. Singhvi said during this period, 15 statements, including nine by one person and six by others, were recorded and none of them named Kejriwal.

"Reserve your arguments for the next date," Justice Khanna told the veteran advocate, who continued to question the timing of the AAP national convener's arrest. Now, Singhvi said, the first round of polling is going to be held on April 19. Mehta insisted electioneering cannot be a ground for seeking relief in such matters.

"After we have said issue notice, you should not have even argued," the bench told Singhvi, adding, "We know the facts. We

have gone through the paper book. We spent so much time". The bench, while issuing notice to the ED, asked the central agency to file its reply on or before April 24 and rejoiner, if any, can be submitted by April 27.

The high court had on April 9 upheld Kejriwal's arrest in the money laundering case, saying there was no illegality about it and that the ED was left with "little option" after he skipped repeated summonses and refused to join the investigation. Kejriwal has described his arrest ahead of the general elections as an "unprecedented assault on the tenets of democracy" and urged the apex court to release him by declaring the case against him as "illegal".

In his appeal, the Delhi chief minister said his arrest was "obviously motivated by extraneous considerations".

"The intervention of this court is urgently warranted, as over and above the issue of illegal

curtailment of liberty, the petitioner's arrest also constitutes an unprecedented assault on the tenets of democracy, free-and-fair elections and federalism, both of which form significant constituents of the basic structure of the Constitution," he has said.

The arrest was made solely relying on "subsequent, contradictory and highly-belated statements" of the co-accused who have now turned approvers, he has said in the appeal.

"The petitioner's arrest bears serious, irreversible ramifications for the future of electoral democracy in India and if he is not released forthwith to participate in the upcoming elections, it will establish a precedence in law for ruling parties to arrest heads of political opposition on flimsy and vexatious charges before elections, thereby eroding the core principles of our Constitution," the plea said.

Punjab CM meets Kejriwal in Tihar jail

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann met Arvind Kejriwal in Tihar jail Monday and alleged he was being treated like a terrorist, even as AAP said its Government in Delhi will start functioning from jail under a "proper format" with Chief Minister Kejriwal planning to meet two Ministers from next week.

Mann, who was accompanied by Aam Aadmi Party Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak, said they met Kejriwal for half-an-hour but they were separated by a glass wall and had to interact over a phone call. Mann said Kejriwal asked him to campaign for INDIA bloc candidates in different parts of the country.

Pathak said Chief Minister Kejriwal will start meeting two Ministers in the jail every week from next week and review their works. "We will undertake whatever legal processes are needed (to make this happen)," he said. "From next week, when the ministers meet, the Government will start functioning from jail in a proper format."

Delhi BJP Spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor hit



back at the AAP Government saying the claim of Pathak, the general secretary of the AAP, to run the Government from jail in Delhi is humorous and misleading. "In reality, Kejriwal is in jail and the Government has come to a standstill," he said.

The BJP has been demanding Kejriwal's resignation since his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate on March 21 in an excise policy-related money laundering case. The AAP and its ministers have, however, maintained that Kejriwal will continue to run the government from jail.

The Punjab Chief Minister told reporters after the meeting that he got emotional when he saw his party's chief.

"It is very sad to see that Arvind Kejriwal is not even getting the

Constitution survives, the party will also survive." "We don't know why there is so much hostility towards us that we are being treated like terrorists," he asked. Mann also dismissed suggestions that AAP has been hit by defections since Kejriwal's arrest, saying it's a disciplined party and is completely together and united.

"We all stand with Arvind Kejriwal like a rock. Arvind Kejriwal will come out of jail soon," he added.

Pathak said Kejriwal was concerned about the people of Delhi and was constantly enquiring whether they were getting their subsidies.

"Even while being in the jail, he is worried about the people of Delhi. He said that from next week, he will call two ministers to discuss issues. He has also asked party MLAs to go out among people and address their grievances," Pathak said.

Later, addressing a press conference, Pathak said Mann was crying after seeing Kejriwal and was choked for a few minutes. "When we asked Kejriwal about his health, he said, 'I am ready for the struggle. Do not worry about me. First tell me what is the public saying? Is the electricity subsidy continuing and are there any power cuts?"

Are free medicines available in government hospitals?' He asked us everything and was only satisfied after we told him everything about the people of Delhi," the MP added.

Pathak said that during his meetings with two ministers from next week, Kejriwal will review the work being done by their departments. He will issue them guidelines and directions. He has also asked party MLAs to meet people in their constituencies over their issues and stay 24 hours among the public. He asked MLAs to put in twice the effort that they were putting in earlier," Pathak said. He said the chief minister also enquired about the Delhi government's Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana for 2024-25 under which eligible women will get Rs 1,000 every month.

"He said that nobody should be worried and assured that the scheme will be implemented as soon as he comes out of jail. There was no sign of worry on his face. He assured that wherever he stays he will continue to struggle," he added.

The meeting between the three AAP leaders took place in the 'mulakat jangla', a room divided with a glass wall, a Tihar jail official said.

CAT declines to grant relief to Kejriwal's former PA Bibhav

SAMAR PANDEY ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) has declined to grant any relief to Bibhav Kumar, former private secretary to the Chief Minister, who challenged his termination order issued by the Vigilance Department on April 10.

A bench comprising Justice Ranjit More (Chairman) and Member Anand Mathur issued notice on Kumar's plea challenging the termination order passed on April 10, as well as the show cause notice. However, the bench refused to pass any interim order at this stage, observing that granting it would amount to final relief.

"Having heard learned counsel for the applicant, we issue notice to the respondents Mrs Avinash Ahlawat, Mr Amit Anand and Mrs Sriparna Chatterjee, learned counsel appear and accept notice on behalf of the respondents. Learned counsel for applicant presses for grant of interim relief. We are not inclined to grant such relief at this stage inasmuch as granting the same will amount to the final



relief," the CAT order said. The next date of hearing is fixed for April 29.

The Assistant Director and Special Secretary from the Vigilance Department attended the hearing.

In his petition, Bibhav sought various reliefs, including the quashing of the termination order and show cause notice, along with interim relief to stay the termination order until the final adjudication. It was Kumar's case that if stay is not granted, he will not be allowed to continue his services as the Private Secretary to the Chief Minister of Delhi. Kumar's plea states that he was appointed against a permanent and co-terminus post

and as such his tenure appointment could only be curtailed by the Chief Minister as per the terms and conditions as contained in order of appointment, and not Special Secretary (Vigilance).

"In such view of the matter, the action of respondent in terminating the services of Applicant under CCS (Temporary Service) Rules, 1965 is illegal and void ab-initio. In addition, it is also relevant to clarify that the Tenure Appointments can only be interfered with justifiable reasons and in consonance with the principles of Natural Justice," the plea said.

Manoj Tiwari 40 day tour, tukde tukde gang dig at rival Kanhaiya



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A day after Congress fielded Kanhaiya Kumar from the North East Delhi Lok Sabha seat, BJP nominee Manoj Tiwari took a dig at him, saying he was on a "40-day tour" of the constituency and could see how an MP works in his area.

The Congress is contesting three of the total seven seats in the national Capital under a seat-sharing agreement with its Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) partner AAP, and announced its candidates on Monday.

Tiwari, who is representing the North East Delhi seat for a second consecutive term, questioned, without naming Kumar, "how responsible could be those who led a tukde-tukde gang and who cannot respect the country and its army".

Kumar, a former Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union (JNUSU) president, was involved in an incident on the campus in February 2016, in which slogans were raised allegedly against the country. Tiwari said, "Those who have come for a 40-day tour will also see the work done with Rs 14,600 crore in my area. They will see how, for the first time, metro trains, central schools, passport office, elevated roads and a bridge like the Signature

bridge were developed in North East Delhi."

The BJP MP alleged the Congress always "ignored" North East Delhi, and hoped Kumar will be able to see how an MP can do development works worth Rs 14,600 crore in his constituency.

North East Delhi was hit by a riot in February 2020 in which over 50 people died and hundreds were injured besides a massive loss of public and private property. The constituency having a sizeable population of minorities, also has dominance of people from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, loosely called as Purvanchalis.

Both Tiwari and Kumar hail from Bihar. An interesting one to one contest in North East Delhi constituency is on the cards with Tiwari, a popular Bhojpuri singer and actor, and young, vocal leader Kumar pitted against each other. With the AAP and the Congress entering a seat-sharing agreement, all the seven Lok Sabha constituencies in Delhi are going to witness a direct, one to one contest between the candidates of the INDIA bloc combine and the BJP on May 25 polls. The AAP has fielded candidates on East Delhi, West Delhi, South Delhi and New Delhi seats under the seat-sharing agreement.

AAP to hold 200 meetings in four LS constituencies: Rai

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party will hold 200 "Sankalp Sabha" meetings in four Lok Sabha constituencies of Delhi it is contesting as part of a seat-sharing deal with the Congress, to seek people's support against Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest.

Addressing a press conference, Delhi Minister Gopal Rai said the meetings, to be held in 40 Assembly segments under the four Lok Sabha seats, will be attended by senior AAP leaders and ministers.

Rai and AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh will take part in the "Sankalp Sabha" meetings in the 40 Assembly segments. Rai will hold the first meeting in the Vishwas Nagar Assembly segment under the

East Delhi Lok Sabha constituency.

When asked if Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal will attend these meetings, Rai said only party leaders will hold the 'Sankalp Sabha' meetings.

Poll management is crucial in this Lok Sabha elections rather than the candidates, Rai said and claimed that under the ongoing door-to-door 'Jail Ka Jawab, Vote Se' campaign, a majority of three lakh households have said that the arrest of the Delhi chief minister and the treatment meted to him in the jail was wrong.

Kejriwal has been arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with a money-laundering case linked to the alleged excise policy scam in the national capital.



He is currently in judicial custody. The first phase of the 'Jail Ka Jawab, Vote Se' campaign launched by the AAP to generate support against Kejriwal's arrest and judicial remand will end on April 25. The party will hold 'Sankalp Sabha' meetings to augment support against Kejriwal's

arrest. "After each meeting, people take a pledge to respond to the imprisonment of Kejriwal with a vote in the May 25 Lok Sabha polls. We are aiming to prepare one lakh people who will further visit households in the city and seek support for the party," Rai said.

He said under the 'Jail Ka Jawab, Vote Se' campaign launched on April 9, over 2,000 teams of party volunteers visited three lakh households in the four Lok Sabha constituencies. These teams covered on an average 50,000 to 60,000 households per day, he said.

"Around 90 per cent of the people contacted believed that the arrest of Kejriwal was wrong. Also, many who voted for the BJP in the last Lok Sabha polls said they were angry over the arrest of Kejriwal and will not vote for that party this time," he claimed.

Sharing with reporters the feedback received during the campaign, Rai claimed that the BJP's allegation that Kejriwal was arrested for corruption. They believe his arrest was

political in nature, he said. "The emotional attachment of people with Kejriwal has increased and those who voted for AAP in the Assembly elections said that it was an insult to their vote," he said and added that there was a "qualitative change" in the perception of the people that will be visible in the election results.

The 'Sankalp Sabha' meetings will conclude on May 23, Rai said and added that after the Congress prepares its campaign planning for the three seats it is contesting, the AAP will extend to it whatever cooperation the party needs for the polls.

The Lok Sabha polls are scheduled to be held in seven phases starting April 19 and the counting of votes will be taken up on June 4. Delhi goes to polls on May 25.

ED arrests man who managed AAP funds for Goa polls in 2022

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has arrested Chanpreet Singh, who allegedly "managed" cash funds for AAP's campaign in 2022 Goa Assembly polls, in connection with the Delhi excise policy-linked money laundering case. Singh was taken into custody under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) on April 12 and was produced before a special court here the next day, the sources said. He has been sent to the ED custody till April 18 by the court, they said.

This is the 17th arrest in the case by the ED. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, his party colleague and former Delhi deputy CM Manish Sisodia, BRS leader K Kavitha and a number of liquor businessmen and others have been

arrested earlier by the federal agency. Singh was earlier arrested by the Central Bureau of Investigation too in the same case. The money laundering case stems from the CBI FIR. The ED has informed the court through its official documents that Chanpreet Singh "managed" cash payments for the campaign of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) during the 2022 Goa elections and had a "relationship" with the political outfit that rules Delhi currently.

It has been alleged by the agency that the 'South Group' - comprising Kavitha, TDP candidate from Ongole Lok Sabha seat Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy, his son Raghav Magunta, businessman Sarath Chandra Reddy and others -- paid Rs 100 crore bribe to the AAP for obtaining

a prime position in the Delhi liquor market as part of the now-scrapped excise policy for 2021-22.

Out of these alleged kickbacks, the ED has claimed, Rs 45 crore was used by the AAP to fund its Goa election campaign.

The ED has claimed that cash payments were made to survey workers, area managers, assembly managers and others in Goa who were engaged in election campaign activities of the AAP and these people told the agency that this was "managed" by a person named Chanpreet Singh.

It also said that an employee of an 'Angadia' firm, which allegedly moved cash funds illegally, had "admitted" to disbursing huge amounts of cash in Goa to some people including Singh, who used to work for Chariot Productions Media Pvt Ltd.

Cab driver shot dead in road rage incident near Red Fort

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A cab driver, who was shot dead in a road rage incident near Red Fort on Monday, was a humble man who never got into a fight, a friend said. "We are worried about the future of his wife and eight-month-old son," said Shah Faisal, a family friend of Sakib.

At around 12 am, the cab, being driven by Mohammad Sakib (36), approaching from Kodia Pul to the Chatra Rail Crossing allegedly hit an e-rickshaw, which led to an altercation between the drivers of the two vehicles.

Sakib was forcibly dragged out of his vehicle by two people. As onlookers began to gather, Sakib managed to catch one of the attackers, but the other shot the cab driver and Luv Kush (15), a local beggar. The two injured were rushed

to LNJP hospital where Sakib, who had suffered a gunshot injury on his upper abdomen, died, Deputy Commissioner of Police (North) M K Meena said. "I had never seen him fighting with anyone for any reason. He was extremely courteous towards his passengers as well," Faisal said.

"It was around 1 am, when I got a call from Sakib's younger brother Salman. He told me that something had happened to Sakib and was rushed to LNJP hospital. It took us around 25 minutes to reach here, but by that time he had died," Faisal said outside the mortuary. He further said that the entire incident has been caught on CCTV cameras.

"I saw the footage. Sakib was not at fault. After the collision, an altercation ensued between Sakib and the e-rickshaw driver. All of a sudden two men

on a scooter reached the spot and picked a fight with him," Faisal said, adding that passers-by first intervened and the matter was sorted out.

Faisal alleged that the two attackers tried to snatch Sakib's cell phone. "Those two men started thrashing Sakib, dragged him out and in the melee, one brandished a gun and fired a few rounds," he said.

"We saw in the video that every single person was on the side of Sakib, as he was not wrong at that time, which may have enraged the assailant and he shot Sakib in a fit of rage," Faisal said.

An FIR has been registered under sections 302 (murder) and 307 (attempt to murder) of the IPC and provision 27 of the Arms Act. We are also checking the CCTV footage, the DCP added.

Manifesto recognises aspirations, needs of rising middle class: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP asserted on Monday its manifesto recognises the aspirations and needs of the rising middle class, and identifies opportunities for them and promises to create conditions for a better quality of life. The ruling party has promised better cities, higher quality infrastructure, faster and better digital infrastructure, controlling pollution, investment in technologies of tomorrow and better living conditions, it said, adding that the middle class will benefit a lot from these, it said.

Its promise of encouraging the creation of new satellite townships near metro cities, boosting transit-oriented development, building unified metropolitan transport systems, ensuring water-secure cities, leveraging best practices for waste water treatment and eliminating open landfills will address immediate liveability



concerns of the middle class, the party said.

It has also promised in its manifesto, which was released on Sunday by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other senior leaders of the BJP, high-value jobs not just in big cities but in tier-2 and tier-3 cities besides leveraging tourism to promote local entrepreneurship and jobs.

The manifesto's focus on increasing the number of

Global Capability Centres (GCCs), Global Tech Centres (GTCs) and Global Engineering Centres (GECs) and making the country a global hub will also help the middle class, who will benefit also from the resolve to make housing more affordable.

Noting that medical treatment for senior citizens, and those 70 years and above, is costly and can be a financial drain on middle class families as getting

insurance for them is not always easy, the party said its promise of bringing them under the 'Ayushman Bharat' cover for health cost up to Rs 5 lakh irrespective of their family income will be a big help to them.

The party also cited its promise of zero electricity bill through solar rooftops, including in housing societies, and the expansion of IITs, IIMs and AIIMS to make its point.

The BJP's promise of new investments in agricultural storage will lead to not only farmers getting more remunerative prices but also lower and more predictable food prices for the consuming middle class, it said.

The manifesto's details on India's proposed foreign policy initiatives, promoting the country's ideas and values to the world and carving a place for it at the global level, also benefits the middle class the most as they will play a key role as its ambassadors to the world.

21 retired judges write to CJI against attempts to undermine judiciary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



A group of 21 retired judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts have written to the Chief Justice of India on the escalating attempts by "certain factions to undermine the judiciary through calculated pressure, misinformation, and public disparagement".

Congress alleged that the letter by 21 judges to the Chief Justice of India was part of an "orchestrated campaign of the prime minister" to "threaten, browbeat and intimidate" the judiciary that has flexed its muscles in recent months.

These critics are motivated by narrow political interests and personal gains and are striving to erode public confidence in the judicial system, they said.

Though the retired judges, including four from the apex court, did not specify the incidents which prompted them to write to the CJI, their letter came amid a war of words between the ruling BJP and opposition parties over

the actions against some opposition leaders in corruption cases.

With affected leaders and their parties moving courts to seek relief, the BJP has often accused them of using judicial decisions selectively and cited any lack of relief for several arrested leaders to rebut the opposition's criticism.

The retired judges, including justices (retired) Deepak Verma, Krishna Murari, Dinesh Maheshwari and M R Shah, accused the critics of having insidious methods with clear attempts to sway judicial processes by casting aspersions

on the integrity of courts and the judges.

"Such actions not only disrespect the sanctity of our judiciary but also pose a direct challenge to the principles of fairness and impartiality that judges, as guardians of the law, have sworn to uphold," they said in the letter titled "Need to safeguard judiciary from unwarranted pressures".

The strategy employed by these groups is deeply troubling, ranging from the propagation of baseless theories intended to malign the judiciary's reputation to engaging in overt and covert attempts to influence judicial outcomes to their favour, they said.

"This behaviour, we observe, is particularly pronounced in the cases and causes of social, economic and political significance, including the cases involving certain individuals, wherein the lines between advocacy and manoeuvring are blurred to the detriment of judicial independence," they added.

The letter writers said they are particularly concerned about

the tactics of misinformation and the orchestration of public sentiment against the judiciary.

"The practice of selectively praising judicial decisions that align with one's views while vehemently criticising those that do not, undermines the very essence of judicial review and the rule of law," they said.

They urged the judiciary led by the Supreme Court to fortify against such pressures and ensure that the sanctity and autonomy of the legal system are preserved.

"It is imperative that the judiciary remains a pillar of democracy, immune to the whims and fancies of transient political interests," they said.

Asked about the letter at a Press conference at the AICC headquarters, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh alleged that the "greatest threat" to judicial independence comes from the BJP. He also referred to name on that list and said it will give away the whole objective, background and authorship of the letter.

Government issues high risk warning for Indian Microsoft users

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Government has issued high risk warning for Microsoft services users in India after multiple vulnerabilities were found in various Microsoft products. Vulnerabilities could allow hackers to gain control, steal information remotely.

The caution note issued by the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) is for users of Windows OS, Microsoft Office, Bing, Outlook and other Microsoft services.

The Indian cyber security agency has found multiple vulnerabilities in Microsoft products and has issued a high severity rating to the issue. The vulnerabilities affect a number of Microsoft software, including Microsoft Windows, Microsoft Office, Microsoft Developer Tools, its Azure services, Bing, System Center, Microsoft Dynamics, and Exchange Server.

Microsoft Exchange Server is a tool used by businesses to help them work together. It has things like email, calendars, contacts, and schedules all in one place. People can check their emails using programs like Microsoft Outlook. Plus, it works well with other Microsoft Office programs. And the current set of vulnerabilities that have been found



by CERT-In affect all these services mentioned above. Which means, anyone using any of these services could be a possible target of vulnerability.

The CERT-In website reveals that multiple vulnerabilities were reported in Microsoft Products. Reportedly, these security loopholes could allow an attacker to "gain elevated privileges, obtain Information Disclosure, Bypass Security restriction, conduct remote code execution attacks, perform spoofing attacks, or cause denial of service conditions".

This basically means that these vulnerabilities might let a hacker do things like get more power, find out secret info, get around security rules, control your computer remotely, trick you with fake links, or even stop your computer from working. The vulnerabilities in Microsoft Windows could allow an attacker into your

computer and take charge or steal information remotely.

Such vulnerabilities take place because the computer does not protect itself well enough. One problem, according to CERT-In, is with a feature called Smart Screen, which is supposed to keep a device safe of malware. However, due to the vulnerability, it is actually letting the malware in.

This means, a hacker can take advantage of these security loopholes by sending special requests. If they succeed, they can take control of your computer or make it do things it should not.

How do you keep yourself safe from such vulnerabilities, you ask? Always ensure your device is up-to-date with the latest updates. These timely updates are meant to patch vulnerabilities or any security loophole that may exist in a product or software that you are using.

X bans over two lakh accounts in India over policy violations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

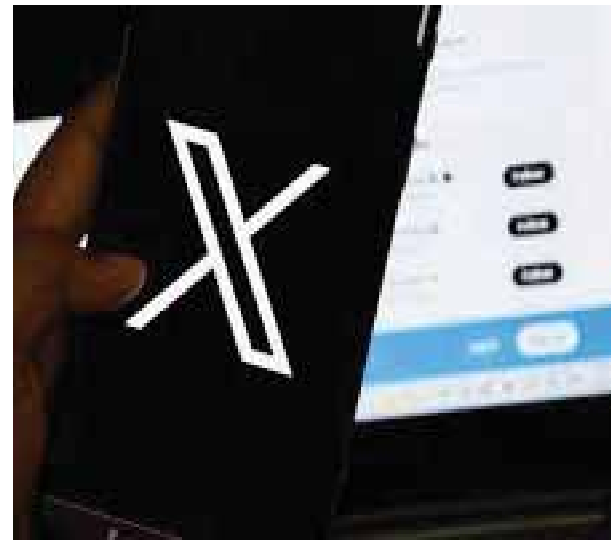
Elon Musk-led X Corp has banned a staggering 212,627 accounts in India within the span of a month, marking a significant crackdown on content promoting child sexual exploitation and non-consensual nudity. The micro-blogging platform also took down 1,235 accounts for promoting terrorism on its platform in the country.

X said it has implemented several measures that relate to the mitigation of child sexual exploitation and terrorism.

X, in its monthly report, said that it received 5,158 complaints from users in India in the same time frame through its grievance redressal mechanisms.

Most complaints from India were about ban evasion (3,074), followed by sensitive adult content (953), hateful conduct (412), and abuse/harassment (359).

In addition, X processed 86 grievances which were appealing account suspensions. "We overturned 7 of these account suspensions after reviewing the specifics of the situation. The remaining reported accounts remain suspended," said the company. "We received 29 requests related to general questions about accounts during this



reporting period," it added.

This information was released by Elon Musk-owned X (formerly Twitter) in its monthly compliance report. The company banned over 213,000 accounts in India between February 26 and March 25. It cited violations related to promoting child sexual exploitation and non-consensual nudity as the primary reasons for ban.

"There are many measures that have been in place for a long time on our platform that relate to the mitigation of child sexual exploitation and non-consensual nudity as the primary reasons for ban. X does not tolerate any material that features or promotes child sexual exploitation. This includes

media, text, illustrations, or computer-generated images," the report stated.

Amid growing concerns over the proliferation of harmful content online, platforms like X seem to be intensifying efforts to combat such activities and maintain a conducive environment for healthy discourse.

In response to user complaints, the social media platform also reported receiving 5,158 grievances from users in India during the same reporting period. The ban is to highlight the platform's initiative to address user concerns promptly and effectively through its grievance redressal mechanisms.

Pilot awarded gallantry medal for recovering advanced light helicopter from control failure

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Lieutenant Commander Bhabskar Rajvanshi was on Sunday awarded a gallantry medal by the Navy for his exemplary professionalism and courage in recovering an advanced light helicopter (ALH) from a state of "catastrophic control failure", according to an official statement.

A Navy spokesperson in a statement said this was the "first ever documented with limited control available to effect an 'extraordinary ditching at sea,' the citation said.

The pilot ensured that the helicopter ditched clear of merchant and fishing traffic and thereby avoided loss of civil property or lives. Even after effecting safe touchdown over the sea surface, the helicopter remained extremely vulnerable to unbalanced aerodynamic forces that could lead to toppling and sure loss of machine or lives, it added.

"The pilot observed utmost discipline, maintained composure and guided his crew to safety by swift deployment of emergency floatation gear and safety equipment," the citation further said. The singular act of bravery, grit and presence of mind in the face of danger has upheld the Indian Navy's ethos, it said.

catastrophic control failure, wherein the aircraft suffered uncommanded loss of collective power, rapid descent without any warning or failure indication in cockpit," read the citation. With no collective control available, the situation was likely to turn into a "fatal disaster," it said.

However, Rajvanshi, captain of the 321 Shikra ALH flight, did not surrender to the given circumstances, displaying tremendous courage and extraordinary piloting skills, he manoeuvred the helicopter with limited control available to effect an "extraordinary ditching at sea," the citation said.

"The pilot with his limited flying experience ensured safe recovery of the helicopter and aircrew in an extremely challenging scenario, thereby saving an asset worth over Rs 100 crore. The recovery of the aircraft has enabled the services to undertake accurate investigation of the failure towards putting remedial measures in place for the entire ALH fleet," read his citation for the Nao Sena Medal (Gallantry).

On March 8, 2023, IN 709, ALH MK III (MR) helicopter was disembarking from the aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant, to Mumbai with three personnel onboard. Flying at altitude 500 ft above mean sea level, the pilot suddenly encountered a

SC appreciates protective measures by railways to prevent train accidents, disposes of petition

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday appreciated the steps taken by the Indian Railways to prevent train accidents, including the automatic train protection system 'Kavach', to avoid collisions. A bench of Justices Surya Kant and K V Viswanathan disposed of a petition that raised several issues related to passenger safety after taking note of multiple steps taken by the public sector behemoth to prevent accidents and promote safe travel.

"We appreciate the steps taken by the Railways," the bench said, while taking note of the status report filed by Attorney General R Venkataramani.

While hearing the plea filed by petitioner Vishal Tiwari on January 2, the apex court had sought to know about the protective measures, steps implemented so far or proposed to be taken by the Centre, including the 'Kavach' system.

It had asked the petitioner to hand over a copy of his plea to the office of the Attorney General.

Referring to the train accident in Odisha's Balasore district in June last year that had left 288 people dead, the petitioner had claimed non-implementation of the 'Kavach' scheme was resulting in accidents. He had said a lot of accidents have taken place in the past due to collision between trains.



The plea had sought directions to the Centre to set up an expert commission headed by a retired judge of the apex court and consisting of technical members to analyse and review the risk and safety parameters in the railway system and to suggest systematic safety modifications for strengthening the safety mechanism.

It claimed that non-implementation of 'Kavach' at the earliest had resulted in a massive loss of life and damage to public property which impeded direct liability of gross negligence and breach of duty of care to respondent authorities. It had also sought issuance of guidelines for implementation of the 'Kavach' system with immediate effect.

The petition was filed days after the crash involving Bengaluru-Howrah Superfast Express and Shalimar-Chennai Central Coromandel Express, which were carrying around 2,500 passengers, and a goods train in June last year near Bahanaga Bazar station in Balasore.

Army Chief on visit to Uzbekistan to enhance bilateral collaboration

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Army Chief General Manoj Pandey on Monday embarked on a four-day visit to Uzbekistan to explore new avenues of bilateral military collaboration.

He is scheduled to hold wide-ranging talks with the top military brass of the Central Asian nation besides visiting a number of defence establishments.

The defence ministry described the Army Chief's visit to Uzbekistan as a "significant step" in bolstering defence cooperation between the two countries.

"The visit by General Pandey aims at strengthening military cooperation between India and Uzbekistan besides exploring new avenues of collaboration between the two nations," it said.

Pandey will hold talks with Lieutenant General Bakhodir Kurbanov, the Defence Minister of Uzbekistan; Major General Khalmukhamedov Shukhrat Gayratjanovich, the First Deputy Minister of Defence and Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. "These dialogues are pivotal in fostering stronger military cooperation," it said in a statement.

On Tuesday, General Pandey will visit late prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's memorial in Tashkent and pay homage to him, it said.

Thereafter, he will visit the Victory Park, commemorat-



ing Uzbekistan's contributions and sacrifices in the Second World War. On Wednesday, the Army Chief will travel to Samarkand where he will meet Commander of the Central Military District.

"The visit will culminate in Termez, on April 18, where the Army Chief is also scheduled to witness the joint exercise DUSTLIK between the armed forces of India and Uzbekistan, highlighting the interoperability and camaraderie developed between the two countries," the ministry said.

Meanwhile, the Indian Army contingent departed on Monday for the 5th edition of India-Uzbekistan joint military Exercise DUSTLIK. The Exercise is scheduled to be conducted from April 15-28 at Termez.

Exercise DUSTLIK is a yearly event conducted alternatively in India and Uzbekistan. Last edition was conducted at Pithoragarh (India) in February 2023.

The Indian Armed Forces contingent comprising 60 personnel is being represented by 45 personnel from the Indian

Army, majorly from a battalion of the Jat Regiment, and 15 personnel from the Indian Air Force. The Uzbekistan contingent comprising approximately 100 personnel, from Uzbekistan Army and Air Force, will be represented by personnel from Southern Operational Command, part of South-West Military District. Aim of Exercise DUSTLIK is to foster military cooperation and enhance combined capabilities to execute joint operations in mountainous as well as semi urban terrain. It would focus on high degree of physical fitness, joint planning, joint tactical drills and basics of special arms skills.

Tactical drills to be practiced during the exercise will include creation of a Joint Command Post, establishing an Intelligence and Surveillance Centre, securing of landing site, Small Team Insertion & Extraction, Special Heliborne Operations, Cordon and Search Operations, Room Intervention Drills and Demolition of illegal structures.

The complexity of this edition of Exercise DUSTLIK has been enhanced with conduct of multi domain operations as the contingent comprises of personnel from combat support arms and services besides Infantry. Two Women Officers also form part of the Indian Army contingent, including one from the Regiment of Artillery and the second from the Army Medical Corps.

Expect India to play role in bringing stability to West Asia, says Israeli envoy

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Israel is "strong and resilient" and, if needed, it will "confront Iran" after the recent attack, the Israeli envoy here asserted on Monday and said India should play a role in bringing stability in the West Asia region.

In an interview to PTI at the Israeli Embassy here, the country's ambassador to India Naor Gilon said that Israeli defence forces with the support of the US and "other friends in the region" were able to "intercept 99 per cent" of the UAVs and missiles fired by Iranians.

However, there was "minor damage" suffered at Nevatim air base in the attack late Saturday, he said.

With Iran's attack on Israel triggering the spectre of a wider conflict in West Asia, India on Sunday said it is seriously concerned over the escalating hostilities between the two sides and called for an immediate halt to violence and return to the path of diplomacy.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held separate telephonic conversations with his Iranian and Israeli counterparts and underlined the importance of avoiding escalation and exercising restraint.

Iran carried out the attack on Israel in response to a suspected Israeli strike on its consulate in Damascus on April 1 that killed seven Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards including a senior general.

Ambassador Gilon, in the



interview, said India as a "very respected player in the international arena should put its influence and weight" in bringing things back to normal.

He was asked what role he expected from India in the present situation, given the telephonic conversations of Jaishankar with his counterparts in Israel and Iran.

"I think that we expect from India, as a friend, to be very strong in international community in making sure that Iran stops its destabilisation of West Asia.

"I think West Asia as a region is also very important for India because there are millions of Indians working in that region. Many business connections, strong ones with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar. And, I think, this is very important that India will be active as a part of the international community, in stopping Iran," he said.

Gilon said the Iranians had shot about "350 different UAVs to cruise missiles to surface to surface missiles, all in all about

60 tonnes of explosives", trying to overcome the Israeli defence system by shooting simultaneously.

"Thanks to the US and other friends in the region, and the huge capacity of our air defence and air force, we were able to intercept 99 per cent of these missiles and UAVs and luckily, no casualty. There was one young, seven-year-old girl, a Bedouin Muslim girl from the south of Israel, who was severely wounded, I hope she comes out of it," the Israeli envoy said.

Gilon alleged that the attack was a "clear continuation of the behaviour of Iran" for a very long time, bringing instability in West Asia.

Two days ago, they "changed mould and attacked Israel directly from the territory of Iran" and other territories and also proxies, he said.

"Iran cannot continue this behaviour, if we need we will confront Iran. It is not a choice of ours. We are merely the receiving side here, and we will probably find the right time and moment to retaliate or send back a message to Iran that this is unacceptable.

"We should send the retaliating message that this is unacceptable," the envoy said.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in a post on X on Sunday night had said that the close cooperation between the US military and the IDF has led to the "formation of a strong coalition that proved itself last night in the face of Iran's aerial attack".



Vote for NDA to end goonda raj, dynasty politics in Bihar: Yogi

PTI ■ AURANGABAD/NAWADA

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Monday urged people in Bihar to vote for the NDA to put an end to "goonda raj" and "dynasty politics" in the state.



"We put an end to this... Bihar was passing through an 'identity crisis' during RJD's goonda raj. People should ensure that they (RJD) are finished in this electoral battle. "This election is about family first versus nation. The 'parivarwadi' (family-centric) party pushed the country towards terrorism, separatism and corruption. Now, we have Narendra Modi's guarantee of a developed and self-reliant India. The country's prestige has grown all over the world under Modi ji's leadership. Its borders are secure," the chief minister asserted.

"RJD is against development... They indulge in 'rangdaari' (extortion) and believe in brandishing the 'tamancha' (revolver). The party leaders are responsible for criminalising politics. I am sure the people of Bihar will give them a befitting reply this time," Adityanath said. "Today, there is no curfew and riot in UP and everything is fine there. The BJP government stands by its promises and actions. Now, the mafia and criminals either languish in jail or rot in hell. No one dares to threaten women or businessmen in UP. If you indulge in wrong doing, you will be finished ('Ram Naam Satya Ho Jayega')," the CM said. The NDA government in Bihar will do the same and that is why people of the state must ensure a third term for Modi, asserted Adityanath. He also alleged that the Congress and its Bihar ally RJD

INDIA Bloc has nothing to do with general public: Nadda

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

Launching a vitriolic attack on the opposition INDIA bloc, BJP president JP Nadda on Monday said that it has nothing to do with the general public and all parties in it are concerned only about their families.

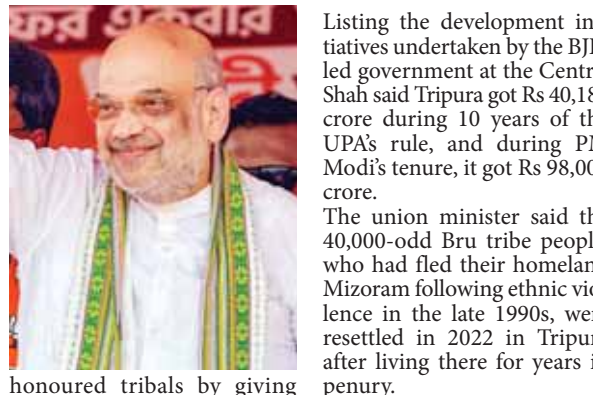
Addressing a poll rally in Mussoorie in support of BJP candidate from Tehri Garhwal Mala Rajya Laxmi Shah, Nadda said on one side there is the BJP's manifesto (Sankalp Patra) which lays the roadmap for a developed India and on the other side the INDIA bloc constituents who have their separate manifestos. "What will they do for development when they cannot even come together," he said. Describing the INDIA bloc as a conglomeration of the corrupt who are either in jail or on bail, he said that all they are concerned with is saving their families. Nadda said this election is not as much about electing a local MP as about electing a government under the leadership of Narendra Modi for a developed India. The BJP president spoke of a changing India under Prime Minister Modi's leadership. He said that Prime Minister Modi has changed the definition of politics in the last ten years. Even Europe could not deal with the challenge of the Covid 19 pandemic as efficiently as Modi. Within nine months India developed two anti-covid vaccines under Prime Minister Modi's leadership and gave it to 100 countries, he said.

Nadda said that all constituents of the opposition bloc have been involved in scams be it Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Yadav's fodder scam, Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav's laptop scam or the numerous scams committed during the UPA. The BJP president said it is also a gathering of family centred parties led by Lalu Yadav, Akhilesh Yadav, Mamata Banerjee (TMC) or Stalin (DMK). "The only ones who care about you are your Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party," he added. Nadda said this election is not as much about electing a local MP as about electing a government under the leadership of Narendra Modi for a developed India. The BJP president spoke of a changing India under Prime Minister Modi's leadership. He said that Prime Minister Modi has changed the definition of politics in the last ten years. Even Europe could not deal with the challenge of the Covid 19 pandemic as efficiently as Modi. Within nine months India developed two anti-covid vaccines under Prime Minister Modi's leadership and gave it to 100 countries, he said.

Tripura's tribal areas priority for BJP: Shah

PTI ■ AGARTALA

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday said development of the tribal areas in Tripura is a priority for the BJP, and asserted that all issues of the community have been taken care of in the "historic agreement" signed with Tipra Motha, a party which joined the state government last month.



Measures for harmony between communities and the development of the state have been ensured in the agreement, he said, accusing the CPI(M)-led Left Front of spreading misinformation. Addressing an election rally in Kumarghat, Shah alleged the Congress and CPI(M) which had ruled the state for several years tried to belittle the contribution of the erstwhile 'Maharaja' of the state, Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya. "It was PM Narendra Modi who gave due respect to Maharaja Bir Bikram by naming the Agartala airport after him, and installing his statue," he said. Shah claimed that the Congress and the Left never allowed anyone from the tribal community to hold a higher position in government. "PM Modi, for the first time,

honoured tribals by giving India a president from the community," he said. "Before 2014, the budget for the Ministry of Tribal Affairs was Rs 24,000 crore. Under PM Modi, it increased to Rs 1,25,000 crore," he added. Shah said a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was being set up in Sabroom at a cost of Rs 1,550 crore, and it will attract investments and create employment opportunities for the people of the state. Attacking the CPI(M), he claimed that the communists handed over guns to the youths, while PM Modi provided them with laptops. "It is PM Modi who facilitated more than 10 accords in the Northeast, and paved the way for 10,000 youths to return to the mainstream," he said.

Rajkot LS seat to remain BJP fortress: Analysts

PTI ■ RAJKOT

Even as Parshottam Rupala, the BJP's nominee from Gujarat's Rajkot Lok Sabha seat, is facing agitation by Kshatriya community members, political analysts and voters believe the Union minister will emerge victorious. While the analysts claim Rajkot is an "unbreachable fortress" of the BJP, voters laud the development works done by the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. Rupala recently claimed the erstwhile 'maharajas' succumbed to the persecution of foreign rulers, including the Britishers. Despite Rupala's apology, the Kshatriyas, also called Rajputs, see his remarks as an insult to them and have asked the BJP to withdraw his candidature or face defeat in Rajkot, a

Patidar-dominated seat considered as BJP's stronghold. Elections to all the 26 Lok Sabha seats in Gujarat will be held on May 7. The BJP has dropped two-time MP Mohan Kundariya and nominated Rupala, belonging to the Kadva subsect of Patidar community. The Congress has fielded former MLA Paresh Dhanani, a Leuva Patidar. Rupala and Dhanani belong to neighbouring Amreli district. Three-term Rajya Sabha member Rupala is contesting the Lok Sabha election for the first time. He was an MLA from Amreli in 1991, 1995 and 1998. In the 2022 assembly polls, Dhanani defeated Rupala from Amreli. Dhanani also won the assembly seat in 2012 and 2017 but lost to BJP's Kaushik Vekaria in 2022. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Dhanani contested from

Amreli but lost to BJP's Naran Kachhadia. Rajkot Lok Sabha seat has nearly 23 lakh voters. The Patidars - Kadva and Leuva - are a decisive force with around 5.8 lakh electors. There are also 3.5 lakh Koli voters, 2.3 lakh Maladhari (both OBCs), 1.5 lakh Rajputs, 1.8 lakh Dalits, around 2 lakh voters from minorities and 3 lakh from Brahmin and Lohana communities. Talking to PTI, political analyst Jagdish Acharya claimed the maximum damage Rajputs can do to Rupala is reduce his winning lead by around 50,000 votes. On the possibility of Dhanani's win with the help of nearly 4 lakh Leuva Patidars and a few thousand anti-BJP Rajput voters, Acharya said the chances are remote.

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

CHANGE OF NAME I, Shivraj Thakur S/o Naryan Thakur R/o Village - Basai Sector -70 Noida District - Gautam Buddha Nagar (U.P) 201301 My name is Shivraj Thakur & Shiv Raj Singh are the same person. My correct name is Shivraj Thakur Future for all purposes. PD(369)A

KOTAK MAHINDRA BANK LIMITED. PUBLIC NOTICE We, Kotak Mahindra Bank Limited, (KMBL), for our Bank Branch and other related business (including setting up Automated Teller Machine -ATM), desire to make change in one of Lessor in Lease Agreement dated 08 July 2021 due to Demise of Lessor No. 4 out of 7 Lessors: Mrs. Usha Suri, more particularly described in the schedule hereunder written, owned by owners as mentioned herein below.

NORTHERN RAILWAY OPEN-E-TENDER NOTICE The Sr. Divisional Engineer-III, Northern Railway, Delhi Division invites E-Tender for the following work:

1. Name of work: Annual zone work for PE 30.06.2025 for repair to service building & station building in the section of Jey/Yamuna Bridge & SSB in the section of SSE/W/L/DLI under ADEN/DLI. 2. Approx. Cost of work: Rs.96,97,562.23/- (Rupees Ninety Six Lakh Ninety Seven Thousand Five Hundred Sixty Two and Twenty Three paise only)

CORRIGENDUM In partial modification to our advertisement published in the Pioneer regarding the assignment of Expression of Interest for the assignment of NRR of Trans Gulf Frozen Food Containers Private Limited (In Liquidation) (CIN- U15139DL2004PTC124342) on 30.12.2023. The bidders/Stakeholders are advised to take into account the following Corrigendum.

TENDER NOTICE Ref Tender advertised on 31.03.2024 by DGS CGHS, Sector 22, Dwarka for Buying old passenger lifts and carrying out civil and electrical work. The date for submitting the Tender documents in the Society office is extended upto 1400 hrs on 19.04.2024.

PUBLIC NOTICE GENERAL PUBLIC NOTICE FOR NAME CHANGE Be it known to all concerned that My client name Shri Kush Mehra has changed his name from Kush Mehra to Kush Dev Mehra having address at N-111 Greater Kailash -1 New Delhi, 110048. Kush Dev Mehra has already notified his name change to the Gazette notification dated 13 April 2024 and Aadhar. From today onwards wherever name 'Kush Mehra' is used will be used or referred as 'Kush Dev Mehra' for all purposes. Sajal Dhamija (Advocate), S-285, L.G.F., Greater Kailash-1, New Delhi-110018.

PUBLIC NOTICE General public notice is hereby informed that my client Sh. Gurdayal Singh S/o late Kesar Singh and his wife Mrs. Sarabjeet Kaur, both R/O S Block, 22/15D, Gali No.4-5, Vichitra Garden, West Delhi-110018 have served all their relations with their elder daughter Mrs. Kulvinder Kaur and her husband Nasir as well as her legal heirs due to her bad habits. Both of my above-named clients have also disclosed and abared his said daughter and her husband as well as her legal heirs from all their movable and immovable properties. Anyone dealing with Mrs. Kulvinder Kaur and her husband Nasir as well as her legal heirs will do so at his/her own risk and responsibilities and my clients will not be responsible for any act, deed or dealing done by Mrs. Kulvinder Kaur and her husband Nasir as well as her legal heirs. MS. SUKHINDER KAUR, ADVOCATE CH. NO-610, Saket Courts, New Delhi-110001

PUBLIC NOTICE An information is given to general public at large that my client Sh. Shalendra babbar is the exclusive owner of the property bearing No. F-136/F First Floor & Basement of the Property situated in the vicinity known as Laxmi Nagar Delhi and have acquired vide registered Relinquishment deed dated 14-09-2012 bearing Document No. 19542 Vol no. 6763 Book no. 1 registered at Delhi. The said property was acquired Vice Court Decree Dated :-18-02-1999 by late Sh. Surendra pal and thereafter Sh. Surender pal Babbar expired intestate on 18-06-2008 at F-136/F Laxmi Nagar Delhi 110092 leaving behind Sh. Shalendra babbar, Sh. Kanchan Babbar, Sh. Sumit Babbar and Smt. Kamlesh babbar as his only legal heirs left behind and none else. Thereafter Sh. Kanchan Babbar, Sh. Sumit Babbar & Smt. Kamlesh Babbar have relinquished all their rights in favour of Sh. Shalendra Babbar who then had become the exclusive owner of the property F-136/F First Floor & Basement, Laxmi Nagar, Delhi, vide Relinquishment deed referred above. Now that he intends to mortgage this property with Anand Rathi Global Finance Limited. If anybody has any objection regarding title or the ownership of the said property of the above said my client regarding his ownership/mortgage sale/ Litigation and any other objections, kindly inform the undersigned in writing on the mentioned address within seven days of the present publication. (Ajay Kumar) Advocate Office: 9567/12, Multani Dhandra, Pahar Ganj, New Delhi-110055

PUBLIC NOTICE General public notice is hereby informed that We, Swami Rama Tiratha Mission (Regd.) Delhi 1216, Swami Ram Tiratha Nagar (Jhandedwan Extn.) New Delhi-110055, are filing application in L&DO for substitution/mutation of the property bearing No. 21/166, old Rajendra Nagar, New Delhi-110060 Plot 85.9 sq. yard in the name of Swami Rama Tiratha Mission (Regd.) Delhi, on the ground of memorandum of settlement (MOU) of smt. Smt. Devi Chhabra. If any objection/claims from the general public on this application, the same shall be communicated to L&DO. With supporting documents through registered post or by visiting L&DO. At Nirman Bhawan New Delhi or through Email at idnic@nic.in within 30 days of publication of this notice. Secretary Swami Rama Tiratha Mission (Regd.) (Om Parkash Sharma) Contact # 9350866653

SYMBOLIC POSSESSION NOTICE ICICI Bank Branch Office: ICICI Bank Ltd, Landmark Building, 4th Floor, 228A, A/C Bose Road, Kolkata 700020. CIN No: L65190GJ1994PLC021012, www.icicibank.com Whereas The undersigned being the Authorized Officer of ICICI Bank Limited under the Securitisation, Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of the powers conferred under section 13 (12) read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) rules 2002, issued demand notices upon the borrowers mentioned below, to repay the amount mentioned in the notice within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice. As the borrower failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken Symbolic possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him/ her under Section 13(4) of the said Act read with Rule 8 of the said rules of the below-mentioned dates. The borrower in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of ICICI Bank Limited.

Mandaviya files nomination from Porbandar in Gujarat

PTI ■ PORBANDAR

Union Health and Family Welfare minister Mansukh Mandaviya, who is making his debut in the Lok Sabha elections, filed his nomination papers on Monday from the Porbandar constituency after leading a 2-km road show in the historic town. He was accompanied to the district collector's (DC) office by BJP leader Arjun Modhwadia, formerly of the Congress and who also filed his nomination for the byelection of Porbandar assembly constituency.



"The whole world has acknowledged India's management of the Covid crisis and the vaccination programme," said Mandaviya, who also holds the chemical and fertilisers portfolio. People from different communities waving saffron flags thronged the five popular intersections of the city through which his road show passed and felicitated him at regular intervals. Mandaviya and Modhwadia were travelling together in a top open SUV. At Kirti Mandir, Mahatma Gandhi's birth place, Mandaviya said, "I am visiting the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi before filing the nomination. We have to take inspiration from his life." Mandaviya's cavalcade then proceeded to Sudama Chowk, next to Sudama temple, where he addressed a nearly 2,000-strong crowd.

before culminating at Kamla Baug. "We hope that such a high profile candidate will spur Porbandar's development and create employment opportunities and bring industries here," said 27-year-old Deveraj. He along with Modhwadia then went to the DC office where he filed his nomination papers. Modhwadia, who was an MLA from the Porbandar constituency, resigned from the Congress last month and joined the BJP. The proposers on the four nomination forms for Mandaviya, who belong to the government's four priority groups — gareeb, yuva, annadata and nari (GYAN) (poor, youth, farmers and women) — accompanied Mandaviya throughout the road show. These four are beneficiaries of the government's various public welfare schemes including Ayushman Bharat.

PUBLIC NOTICE To be known to all, HAVEN KUMAR S/O SRI. K. DEBENAIL W/O. R. S. SINGH, PIN CODE-812001, RAJENDRA NAGAR, VASANT KUNJ, NEW DELHI-110018 allottee of DDA SFS Flat No. 1523, THIRD FLOOR, POKET-B & C, SECTOR-A, CAT-II, VASANT KUNJ, NEW DELHI-110018 has applied for certified copy & conversion from leasehold to freehold in DDA. The original document i.e. Allocation letter, Demand call allotment, Possession Letter, Site Possession Slip & NOC for Obtaining Water and Electric Connection of the above said flat has been lost. An FIR/INCR/LR No. 1505022/2024 dt. 02/04/2024 in this effect has been lodged in P.S. Crime Branch, Delhi. Any person(s) claiming any right, interest, having any objection or found in possession of original documents, may write/contact with above named person at above Address/Phone:9311005032 with in 15 days from the date of publication of this notice. The person claiming any right, interest, objection with respect to this property, can personally inform or write to Deputy Director (Housing)-SFS or Director (H)-SFS, Delhi Development Authority, Vikas Sadan, New Delhi-110023. Naveen Aggarwal (Advocate) Ch.No. M-7, Near SBI, Western Wing, Tis Hazari Court, Delhi-54

PUBLIC NOTICE This is to inform the general public that Mr. Brijesh is the GPA Holder of Land area measuring 500 sq. yds. out of Kharsa No. 1642/1641, situated at Baghrabad-1, Loni, Panchsara & Khatwa, Sector-22, ROHINI, DELHI, has applied for certified copies in DDA. The original documents i.e. DEMAND-CUM-ALLOTMENT LETTER, POSSESSION LETTER, SUPPLEMENTARY / PERPETUAL LEASE DEED OF MY PROPERTY BEARING NO. 47 BLOCK AND POKET A-6 SECTOR 28 ROHINI DELHI. DATED 15/04/2024. We tried to trace the same a lot but not succeed. Complainant's Details: SO No. 430/2014, Delhi Police PS. Crime Branch, Delhi. LR.No.1644868/2024, Date: 15/04/2024.

PUBLIC NOTICE NOTICE is hereby given to public at large that my client Mrs. Neelkanti Property and Bulcher through their partners Mr. Surinder Singh & Mr. Om Prakash Jhijhria who are the owner of Plot No. 134, area measuring 162.5 sq. yards out of total area measuring 325 sq. Yards, part of Kharsa No.467, situated at Village Ghat, Colony known as Bhagwati Villages Extn. in Block-A, Ullam Nagar, New Delhi vide Sale Deed dated 08/01/2024 registered as doc no. 10328, registered in SRO-I/B Delhi and intend to get the financial assistance from Aditya Birla Housing Finance Ltd. If any person(s)/Institution has/have any objection(s) or claim(s) with respect to the right, title or interest in the said property may please contact us within 07 days from the date of this notice on the address mentioned herein below, failing which my client(s) shall not be held responsible in any manner whatsoever. Khaitan & Khaitan A-38 Kailash Colony, New Delhi-110048, Ph. No: 011-49774545

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PUBLIC NOTICE Notice is hereby given on behalf of Mr. Ram Maher Prasad who is owner of Property area measuring 46/ Kanal 10 Marla comprised in Khewat/Khata No. 1949/1701, Khatori No.2052, Mustaki and Kila No.182/2024 (38-01, 406-01, 57-01, 6113-10), 7114-01, 9114-01, 9114-01 (Kia 8), situated at situated at Village Farukh Nagar, Sub-Tehsil Farukh Nagar, District-Gurgaon, Haryana. Having purchased the same from Mr. Prakash Chand Rishi Kumar (sons) and Mrs. Parvati w/o Man Chand, vide Sale Deed dated 09.06.2004, which is duly registered vide Document No.524 at Sub-Registrar-Farukh Nagar and intend to mortgage against the financial assistance from Protium Finance Limited. That original Sale Deed dated 09.06.2004, which is duly registered vide Document No.524, at Sub-Registrar-Farukh Nagar is Lost/Misplaced/Not available at Registrar's Office. Lost/Misplaced/Not available on this application, the same shall be communicated to L&DO. With supporting documents through registered post or by visiting L&DO. At Nirman Bhawan New Delhi or through Email at idnic@nic.in within 30 days of publication of this notice. Secretary Swami Rama Tiratha Mission (Regd.) (Om Parkash Sharma) Contact # 9350866653



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Damage control

World leaders scramble to soothe tempers after Iran's retaliatory attack on Israel for Damascus

The fragile peace equilibrium in West Asia has been hit once again, with Iran launching a direct attack on Israel and escalating tensions. Fresh apprehensions reverberated globally, prompting swift diplomatic action from President Joe Biden who, besides conveying to Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US will not be part of any retaliatory action, has convened the G7 nations to address the urgent matter. The missiles-and-drones attack, which targeted strategic locations including military installations and civilian areas in Israel, has escalated the situation to a dangerous level. While casualties and damages are still being assessed, the brazenness of this assault has sent shockwaves across the region and beyond. Iran, a key player in the region, has often found itself at odds with Israel, citing ideological differences and regional power struggles. However, the direct military engagement between the countries represents a dangerous escalation that could have far-reaching consequences. Israel, known for its

robust defence capabilities, has vowed to respond to Iran's aggression, raising concerns of a prolonged and devastating conflict. The events of April 1 in Damascus marked the onset of a fresh chapter in the ongoing regional strife between the countries. That assault, resulting in the loss of several high-ranking Iranian military officials, signified a shift from indirect hostilities to confrontation. Subsequently, Iran initiated its long-anticipated reprisal against Israel, deploying numerous drones and ballistic missiles. Despite indications of this impending attack during discreet negotiations between the US and Iran, most of the strikes were intercepted en route Israel.



Meanwhile, Israeli authorities, particularly Netanyahu, have endeavoured to depict their nation as the target of unwarranted Iranian aggression. President Biden has responded swiftly by convening a meeting of the Group of Seven (G7) nations. The G7, consisting of the world's leading industrialised democracies, serves as a forum for coordinating responses to global challenges, including security threats. Though the US may have fostered conditions conducive to Netanyahu's actions, Israel acted independently to trigger the latest escalation. Therefore, to be fair to Iran, its reaction has not been an unprovoked attack. Lately, Netanyahu has been drawing flak for his misadventures at home and abroad, and the US support for his military campaign is also waning. So he played the Iran card to win brownie points and, with Iran being the West's favourite punching bag, it bolstered Netanyahu's standing whereas a gullible Iran took the bait and allowed itself to be drawn into a war in which it had no role so far. An individual's obstinacy has now put the entire region at heightened risk of volatility. As G7 deliberates on the appropriate response, efforts must be focused on de-escalating tensions and facilitating dialogue between the conflicting parties. Diplomatic channels should be utilised to engage Iran and Israel in constructive dialogue to find a peaceful solution to their grievances.

PICTALK



Devotees perform 'Arghya' ritual on the last day of 'Chaiti Chhath' festival, in Patna

PTI

Avoiding icebergs in troubled times

Amid escalating unease surrounding the credibility of Government agencies, the path to assuaging these concerns and reinstating trust lies in conducting a transparent inquiry



DEEPAK SINHA

Clearly, in these dystopian times reality has come to be stranger than fiction and social mores turned on their head. In an earlier time, actions seen as abhorrent or distasteful, when caught, would be immediately disavowed. Today they are brazenly flaunted as a badge of honour and attempted to be normalised. The blatant misuse of our Central Agencies to hound and arm-twist opposition politicians, journalists, businessmen and corporates being one such. What could be more unconscionable than a politician publicly claiming personal credit for an initiative after our Supreme Court has declared it unconstitutional? That too, because it violates the citizens fundamental right to information.

In fact, not only did he attempt to justify his action using that tired old cliché, "it was for our own good", but also added to good effect that those critical would subsequently regret it. An implied threat perhaps? The reasoning in support was that we would never have come to know the specifics of political donations if not for this initiative, which while accurate, could not be further from the truth. There can be no dispute that was certainly not the intention to begin with, otherwise why the secrecy in the first place? Moreover, it was the Government's top lawyers who made every effort to convince the court that the ordinary citizen had no right to such information. While it may have just been an attempt to brazen through in view of the elections, one cannot help but feel that the Government believes it has not erred and is thus unrepentant and likely to be pushed through again. The Belgian painter and author, Erik Pevenagie, makes a very pertinent point when he writes "politicians are but tantalising storytellers, as they mix facts with fiction, grab our emotion and tell things, they want us to believe. Their factoids are unremittingly reiterated, take a life on their own and in the end become the very truth... until the bubble bursts." Unfortunately for this Government it seems that the



bubble has been pricked, if not burst, as the Supreme Court appears to have finally awakened from its deep slumber. Its actions, though still at a very nascent stage, if followed through, may help in ensuring a level playing field during the forthcoming elections and are therefore exceedingly welcome. More importantly, it has put the bosses of our public institutions, be it public sector companies, the central investigative agencies or the Election Commission on notice. Moreover, details of alleged linkages that are emerging from the Electoral Bonds issues suggest humungous malfeasance and sordid corruption at an unimaginable scale indulged in by the richest and most powerful within the country for their own personal gain. All of this has been at the cost of the ordinary tax payer. Moreover, we have yet to learn whether foreign entities have channelled in funds through domestic players, as is a distinct possibility. Such interference, if it has occurred, should be a matter of great concern given the impact it may have on national security. In this context, the functioning of the Prime Minister's Cares Fund must also be viewed with suspicion,



IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE ONLY CREDIBLE OPTION REMAINING IS FOR THE SUPREME COURT TO ORDER A JUDICIAL INVESTIGATION UNDER ITS OWN AEGIS, WHICH SHOULD BE BROADCAST LIVE TO ENSURE COMPLETE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

given its lack of transparency and the various allegations made against it.

Both these initiatives were conceived and implemented by the present dispensation in power, which in all probability, will return. It is extremely unlikely therefore, that they will undertake a credible or fair investigation of allegations made. Moreover, our premier investigative agencies also find themselves under a cloud for their acts of omission and commission. For example, the Enforcement Directorate has since 2005 registered approximately 5900 cases. It has completed and filed chargesheets in only 1142 cases and disposed of just twenty-five of these, with twenty-four ending in convictions. What is worse is its biased actions in investigating politicians. As media reports show, since 2014 the Directorate has probed 121 prominent politicians of which 115, or 95 per cent, belong to the opposition. As per these same reports the Central Bureau of Investigation mirrored the pattern followed by the ED. In these circumstances, the only credible option remaining is for the Supreme Court to order a judicial investigation under its own aegis, that

should be broadcast live to ensure complete transparency and accountability. One does not need to be a soothsayer to suggest that if such a strict and non-partisan step is not initiated at the earliest, we will always remain at the mercy of leeches who will suck the life blood out of our democratic norms, right to good governance and the rule of law. Finally, from the proceedings in Supreme Court on the Electoral Bonds case one can infer that the manner in which the Chairman, State Bank of India, used the resources entrusted to him by the depositors to defy and hamper the directions of the Court render him patently unfit to hold that appointment. Just because the party in power appoints him and others to head public institutions and agencies, they cannot see themselves as mere factotums of those who appointed them and do their bidding. One expects far more of them, not least to show integrity of character and follow rules without fear or favour.

(The author, a military veteran, is a visiting fellow with the Observer Research Foundation and a senior visiting fellow with The Peninsula Foundation, Chennai, views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICAL CHESSBOARD

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Battle lines drawn in western UP", published on April 13, this is my response. In the heartland of Uttar Pradesh, a political battlefield is shaping up unlike any seen before. With the looming Lok Sabha elections, Western Uttar Pradesh finds itself in the eye of the storm, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vigorous campaigning seeks to consolidate Hindu votes against a backdrop of shifting alliances and historical legacies. The region's intricate social fabric, woven by dominant communities like the Jats, Muslims and Dalits, carries the weight of political dynasties and ideological realignments. From the legacy of Charan Singh's Kisan politics to the emergence of new power centres like the BJP and BSP, each move on this electoral chessboard is strategic, aiming to capture seats and the narrative of Uttar Pradesh's political future.

As the BJP navigates through the complexities of caste dynamics and minority representation, the challenge lies in maintaining its Hindu vote bank while facing the formidable opposition bloc, now bolstered by the BSP's calculated manoeuvres. In this high-stakes game, the fate of Uttar Pradesh hangs in the balance, awaiting the verdict of its diverse electorate.

Abhijeet Nand | Bhopal

EXPLORING HUMAN LEARNING

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Education's cultural impact is profound", published on April 12, this is my response. The enduring belief that "man is a learning animal" has shaped civilizations, but a deeper examination reveals nuances. While youth and adulthood foster comprehensive learning, its impact wanes with age. The persistence of certain knowledge over time underscores the need for continual renewal and tailored educational approaches. In India, where knowledge, behaviour and spirituality form the essence of personality, there's a call to integrate these elements into education. To achieve this, the curriculum must evolve to address lifelong learn-

Urban farming



Apropos the news article, "Cultivating sustainability through urban farming", published on April 11, this is my response. The Pioneer's succinct write-up of urban farming as a climate change solution is commendable. Climate change's urgency demands immediate action and urban farming offers a multifaceted response. It not only addresses food security but also mitigates environmental degradation and fosters com-

munity cohesion. The article rightly emphasises the need for supportive policies to scale up urban farming initiatives. Governments must incentivise and facilitate urban agriculture to make it accessible to all communities. Additionally, community engagement plays a pivotal role in its success, fostering social bonds and economic opportunities.

Urban farming's transformative potential lies in its ability to convert urban spaces into sustainable ecosystems. By repurposing vacant lots and rooftops, cities can combat the urban heat island effect and reduce carbon emissions from food transportation. In essence, urban farming represents a promising pathway towards a more resilient and sustainable future. Its integration into policy frameworks and community initiatives is crucial in tackling the imminent challenges of climate change.

Khirabdi Tanya Nayak | Noida

ing needs, ensuring skills remain relevant amidst life's challenges.

Each subject demands a unique learning approach, suggesting teachers articulate specific methods for effective internalisation. Embracing learning theory in pedagogy promises a more pragmatic education system, resonating with the ethos of a nation aspiring to be a global leader. Ultimately, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of learning enriches our collective understanding, enhancing not only individual lives but also the fabric of society. It's time to imbue education with the wisdom that "man is a learning animal," fostering a culture of continuous growth and adaptation.

Shihaab Khan | Hyderabad

A CHAMPION OF JUSTICE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "A harbinger of justice and equality", published on April 13, this is my response. The legacy of Dr BR Ambedkar, a towering figure in India's history, continues to inspire millions worldwide. His tireless efforts towards social justice, equality and inclusivity have

left an indelible mark on the nation's conscience. Born into poverty, Dr Ambedkar overcame numerous obstacles to become an intellectual powerhouse and a relentless advocate for the oppressed.

His vision of a just society, rooted in education and empowerment, remains as relevant today as ever. Dr Ambedkar's emphasis on dialogue, non-violence and co-existence underscores the path towards societal harmony. His contributions to India's legal framework, particularly in labourrights, are foundational to the country's progress. As we commemorate his birth anniversary, let us not only honour his memory but also recommit ourselves to the ideals he espoused. Let us strive for a nation where every individual, regardless of caste or creed, enjoys equal rights and opportunities. Dr Ambedkar's teachings resonate as a beacon of hope, guiding us towards a democratic, secular and inclusive future.

Priyanka Sharma | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Screenwriters as architects of emotion

They are the true magicians. Their contributions extend far beyond the screen, touching hearts and shaping societal narratives

The magic of cinema is not just seen; it's heard in the echo of words that linger long after the screen goes dark. Screenwriters, the unsung architects of these moments, weave dialogues and scenes that shape our emotional landscapes, often becoming a part of our very identity.

Take the classic scene from 'Deewar', where Amitabh Bachchan, embodying the success and arrogance of his character, delivers the powerful lines, "Aaj mere paas gaadi hai, bungla hai, paisa hai... tumhare paas kya hai?" To this, Shashi Kapoor responds with the iconic, "Mere paas, maa hai." This exchange transcends its cinematic origin, showcasing the screenwriter's ability to capture the essence of human values and emotions in a few, yet profound, words.

This is the essence of screenwriting—not just creating dialogues but sculpting moments that become landmarks in cinematic history. It's about crafting narratives that engage, entertain and evoke a spectrum



of emotions, from the laughter that bubbles up during the light-hearted moments in '3 Idiots' to the tears that unknowingly fall for the poignant scenes in 'Taare Zameen Par'. Screenwriters delve into the depths of the human experience, drawing upon themes of love, loss, victory and defeat to create stories that resonate across cultures and generations.

Through their words, characters come to life, embarking on journeys filled with challenges, joys, sorrows and ultimately, growth. Movies and shows like 'Mohabbatein' and 'Maharani' which challenge the values of "Parampara, Pratishta, Anushasan," not only entertain but also inspire reflections and conversations among audiences. In the realm of cin-

ema, screenwriters are the true magicians, crafting the spells of dialogue and narrative that enchant us, make us reflect and sometimes even change our perspectives. Their contributions go beyond the screen, touching hearts and shaping societal narratives.

As we recount memorable lines or find solace in the cinematic moments that have moved us, let's remember the architects behind these emotions—the screenwriters. Their mastery over words and their deep understanding of the human condition empower them to create stories that entertain, enlighten and endure.

In celebrating their craft, we acknowledge the profound impact of their work, not just on cinema, but on culture and society at large. For in the hands of a skilled screenwriter, words become the bridge between the world of the film and the heart of the viewer, making the cinematic experience truly unforgettable.

(The writer is Co-Chair, Media Sub Committee, SWA; views are personal)



PAWAN SONY



FIRST COLUMN

BALANCING WELLBEING IN WORK AND LIFE

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



SAKSHI SETHI

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

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



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

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Challenges galore for NATO@75



K S TOMAR

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

A call to vote responsibly beyond party lines

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

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



RAVI KOCHHAR

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Israeli military warns Palestinians not to return to Gaza

AP ■ DEIR-AL-BALAH

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

Northern Gaza was an early target of Israel's war against Hamas and vast parts of it have been flattened, forcing much of the area's population to flee south. While around 250,000 people are said to be living in the north, the Israeli military has prevented most displaced people from returning throughout the six-month-long war, saying the area is an active battle zone. The military has reduced the number of troops it has in Gaza and has said it has loosened Hamas' control over the north, but Israel is still carrying out airstrikes and targeted operations in the area against what it says are reor-

ganizing militants, most prominently at Gaza's main hospital, Shifa, which is in ruins after a two-week raid and fighting last month.

Israeli military spokesman Avichay Adrae wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that Palestinians should stay in southern Gaza, where they have been told to shelter, because the north is a "dangerous combat zone."

People appeared to be heeding the new warning, especially after the violence on Sunday. Hospital authorities in Gaza said that five people were killed by Israeli forces while trying to travel north to their homes. Their bodies were taken to the Awda hospital in the urban Nuseirat camp in central Gaza, hospital records showed. A further 54 were wounded in the incident, the records showed.

The Israeli military had no immediate comment and the precise circumstances behind the deaths were not immediately clear.

Anaam Mohammad, who was



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

displaced from the northern city of Beit Hanoun and was trying to return, said the mil-

itary was allowing women and children to cross, but when a group of Palestinians

did not make room for them to pass, two tanks arrived and opened fire. Forces also

threw smoke bombs, dispersing the crowd.

"People started to run away. People were afraid and could not take the risk and enter a dangerous area," she said.

Ahead of the violence Sunday, throngs of people crowded a coastal road and moved north by foot and donkey cart. The returnees said they were prompted to make the dangerous journey because they were fed up with the difficult conditions they are forced to live under while displaced.

"We want our homes. We want our lives. We want to return, whether with a truce or without a truce," said Um Nidhal Khatab, who was displaced from the north.

Northern Gaza and the return of its population is a key sticking point between Israel and Hamas in negotiations underway to try to bring about a cease-fire in exchange for the release of hostages taken by the militant group. Israel wants to try to delay the return to prevent militants from regrouping in the north,

while Hamas says it wants a free flow of returnees.

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

Six months of fighting in Gaza have pushed the tiny Palestinian territory into a humanitarian crisis, leaving more than 1 million people on the brink of starvation.

Famine is said to be imminent in the hard-hit north, where aid has struggled to reach because of the fighting. Israel has opened a new crossing for aid trucks into the north as it ramps up aid deliveries to the besieged enclave. However, the United Nations says the surge of aid is not being felt in Gaza because of persistent distribution difficulties.

The U.N. food agency on Monday said it managed to deliver fuel and wheat flour to a bakery in isolated Gaza City in the north for the first time since the war started.

The conflict started on Oct. 7, when Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, in a surprise attack and incursion into southern Israel. Around 250 people were seized as hostages by the militants and taken to Gaza. A deal in November freed about 100 hostages, leaving about 130 in captivity, although Israel says about a quarter of those are dead. Israeli bombardments and ground offensives in Gaza have killed more than 33,700 Palestinians and wounded over 76,200, the Gaza Health Ministry says.

The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its tally, but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. Israel says it has killed over 12,000 militants during the war, but it has not provided evidence to back up the claim.

PM Sunak's Rwanda bill returns to House of Commons

PTI ■ LONDON

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

The peers want to water down the headline legislation that seeks to deem the East African country safe in law to block legal challenges to migrants being flown out to Rwanda while their asylum claims are assessed. It returns its voting journey as Parliament resumes after an Easter recess and the fresh wrangles over the bill

unfold against the backdrop of small boat crossings by asylum seekers across the English Channel hitting a new daily high for 2024 - at 534 on Sunday.

It will be seen as a fresh blow to Sunak, who has made "stopping the boats" a central plank of his leadership as the UK prepares for a general election later this year.

"We remain committed to building on the successes that saw arrivals drop by more than a third last year, including tougher legislation and agreements with international partners, in order to save lives and stop the boats," said a UK Home Office spokesperson. Flying out these migrants to Rwanda while their asylum claims are assessed is a key aspect of the Sunak-led government's immigration strategy and expected to act as a significant deterrent for migrants making treacherous journeys to arrive at UK shores.

Blinken calls Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi FMs

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

Iran fired more than 300 drones and missiles at Israel, which Tehran said was in response to the April 1 strike on its consulate in Syria. Almost all Iranian drones and missiles were shot down by Israeli, US and allied forces before they reached their targets. The diplomatic overdrive to fight the crisis came soon after US President Joe Biden had a conference call with G-7 leaders and had separate telephonic conversations with King Abdullah of Jordan and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. In all the calls, the American leadership emphasised on the need to avoid further escalation in the region and reaffirmed America's ironclad commitment to the security of Israel.

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

Blinken thanked Fidan for Turkey's ongoing engagement to prevent further escalation in the region, and discussed with Shoukry the importance of ongoing efforts to increase humanitarian assistance to Gaza and protecting Palestinian civilians, as well as achieve an immediate ceasefire that secures the release of all hostages. Blinken thanked Jordan for its leadership in providing life-saving humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians, including through joint US-Jordan airstrikes and overland deliveries, Miller said. In his call with Saudi Arabia

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

Austin underscored the importance of the enduring US defence partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and reiterated the US commitment to working with the Kingdom and other partners to deescalate tensions in the region, Ryder said. "Austin also briefed Gallant on his consultations with partners and allies to reinforce international resolve in the face of Iranian aggression," Ryder said. Meanwhile, Biden reached out to the Congressional leaders on the greatest foreign policy crisis of his presidency. "Biden convened a call this afternoon with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer,

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

At the UN headquarters in New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told members of the Security Council, during an emergency meeting, that it is vital to avoid any action that could lead to major military confrontations on multiple fronts in the Middle East.

"Regional and indeed global peace and security are being undermined by the hour. Neither the region nor the world can afford more war," he said. Schumer told reporters in New York that Iran is becoming more and more isolated due to its "evil" actions.

"The best way to help Israel rebuild its anti-missile and anti-drone capacity is by passing that supplemental immediately. As I said, Israel expended about over a billion dollars in defend-

ing itself and the security supplemental would replenish the kind of anti-missile and anti-drone defences that are in the Arrow, in the David's Sling, and in the Iron Dome," he said.

White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby joined several shows where he asserted that Biden and the US are 'making good on its ironclad commitment to defend Israel. He also made clear that the United States is not seeking a conflict with Iran. "Several hundred drones and missiles launched in the course of several hours and all most every single one of them knocked out of the sky. That's not by accident. That's terrific testament to the superiority of the Israeli military and also to our own military superiority and the effort, the resources President Biden committed to helping defend Israel," Kirby told Fox News.

It's an extraordinary example of military superiority that Israel demonstrated to the whole world and showed that Israel has friends and is not isolated on the world stage," Kirby told NBC News. "Now, whether and how the Israelis will respond, that's going to be up to them."

FBI opens probe into Baltimore bridge collapse

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

The 2.6-km-long, four-lane Francis Scott Key Bridge over the Patapsco River collapsed on March 26 after the 984-foot ship 'Dali' collided against it. The crew onboard the Dali included 20 Indians and one Sri Lankan. Six construction workers who were repairing potholes on the bridge plunged into the Patapsco River and died. Of the six victims killed, the bodies of three have been found.

The Washington Post reported on Monday that the FBI has opened a criminal investigation "focusing on the massive container ship that brought down the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore last month — a probe that will look at least in part at whether the crew left the port knowing the vessel had serious systems problems." The report said that federal agents appeared to board the ship on Monday morning to search.

"Less than an hour after the sun rose at 6:30 a.m., a succession of three boats pulled to the port side of the Dali," it said. "About 6:50 a.m. Monday, people wearing yellow or orange life jackets entered the Dali through a lower door and climbed a ladder to the ship's bow. About a half-hour later, nearly a dozen more people wearing dark clothing pulled up in a smaller boat and climbed aboard," it said.

"The FBI is present aboard the cargo ship Dali conducting court-authorized law enforcement activity," the report said, quoting a statement by the FBI. US attorney for Maryland Erik Barron said in a statement in the Washington Post report that his office will not confirm the existence of or otherwise comment about investigations. "However, the public should know, whether it's gun violence, civil rights abuse, financial fraud, or any other threat to public safety or property, we will seek accountability for anyone who may be responsible," he said.

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

Liverpool (New York) (AP): A police officer and a sheriff's deputy in upstate New York were shot and killed Sunday night in an exchange of gunfire with another person, who also was killed, police said. The shooting took place shortly after 8 pm in Liverpool, about 6 miles (10 kilometres) north of Syracuse. The Syracuse Police Department and Onondaga County Sheriff's Office were tracking a vehicle that had eluded police earlier, Syracuse Police Chief Joseph Cecile said during a news conference.

Two Syracuse police officers unsuccessfully attempted to stop a suspicious vehicle but got the license plate and tracked it to an address on Darien Drive in Liverpool. They requested assistance from the sheriff's office after learning the vehicle's driver might be armed, Cecile said.

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

All three were pronounced dead at the hospital, Cecile said. Their names were not immediately released. "We lost two heroes tonight," Cecile said. The Post-Standard of Syracuse reports the officers were the first law enforcement officers to be killed in the line of duty in Onondaga County since Officer Wallie Howard Jr. was shot to death during an undercover drug operation in October 1990.

Cecile said the Syracuse officer who was killed had been with the department for three years and was ambitious and hard-working.

Man arrested after stabbing at church service in Sydney

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

Members of the congregation are seen screaming and rushing to the bishop's aid. The church website identified the bishop as Mar Mari Emmanuel.

NSW Ambulance service said it had treated a man in his 50s for multiple cuts and taken

him to a hospital, and three others were treated for one or more cuts at the scene.

"A large police response is urged to avoid the area," police said. Crowds gathered outside the church and the hospital. The premier of New South Wales, Chris Minns, described the scenes as "disturbing" on social media and urged the community to remain calm and "stick together." Religious leaders expressed shock and condolences.

Australians are still in shock after a lone assailant stabbed six people to death in a busy Sydney shopping mall on Saturday and injured more than a dozen others.

There was no immediate indication the two stabbings were linked. Christ the Good Shepherd had been preparing for Palm Sunday later this month.

US Prez Biden to host Iraqi leader

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

The sharp rise in security fears has raised further questions about the viability of the two-decade American military presence in Iraq, through which portions of Iran's Saturday drone and missile attack on Israel flew or were launched from. A US Patriot battery in Irbil, Iraq, knocked down at least one Iranian ballistic missile, according to American officials.

In addition, Iranian proxies have initiated attacks against US interests throughout the region from inside Iraq, making Monday's meeting between Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani all the more critical. The talks will include a discussion of regional stability and future US troop deployments but will also focus

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

The US and Iraq began formal talks in January about ending the coalition created to help the Iraqi government fight the Islamic State, with some 2,000 US troops remaining in the country under an agreement with Baghdad. Iraqi officials have periodically called for a withdrawal of those forces.

The two countries have a delicate relationship due in part to Iran's considerable sway in Iraq, where a coalition of Iran-backed groups brought al-Sudani to power in October 2022.

The US in recent months has urged Iraq to do more to prevent attacks on US bases in Iraq and Syria that have further roiled the Middle East in the aftermath of Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel. Iran's weekend attacks on

Iraq through Iraqi airspace have further underscored US concerns, although al-Sudani had already left Baghdad and was en route to Washington when the drones and missiles were launched.

The US has also sought to apply financial pressure over Baghdad's relationship with Tehran, restricting Iraq's access to its own dollars in an effort to stamp out money laundering said to benefit Iran and Syria.

Most previous Iraqi prime ministers have visited Washington earlier in their tenure. Al-Sudani's visit was delayed because of tensions between the US and Iran and regional escalation, including the Gaza war and the killing of three US soldiers in Jordan in a drone attack in late January. That was followed by a US strike that killed a leader in the Kataib Hezbollah militia whom Washington accused of planning and participating in attacks on U.S. troops.

Al-Sudani came to power in late 2022 after a power struggle between prominent Shiite cleric and political leader Muqtada Sadr and opposing Shiite factions that are close to Iran after the

2021 elections. Sadr ultimately withdrew from the political process, giving the opportunity to the remaining Shia politicians to form a government headed by al-Sudani.

Since then, al-Sudani has attempted to maintain a balancing act between Iran and America despite being seen as being close to Tehran and despite several incidents that have put his government in an embarrassing position in relation to Washington. Early in al-Sudani's term, a U.S. citizen, Stephen Edward Troell, was shot and killed by armed men who accosted him as he pulled up to the street where he lived in Baghdad's central Karrada district with his family. An Iraqi criminal court convicted five men last August and sentenced them to life in prison in the case, which officials described as a kidnapping gone wrong.

A few months later, Elizabeth Turkov, an Israeli-Russian doctoral student at Princeton, was kidnapped while doing research in Iraq. Al-Sudani's visit will come about a year after Turkov's abduction. She is believed to be held by Kataib Hezbollah.



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

Trump in court for historic hush money trial

AP ■ NEW YORK

Donald Trump arrived Monday at a New York court for the start of jury selection in his hush money trial, marking a singular moment in US history. It's the first criminal trial of any former US commander-in-chief and the first of Trump's four indictments to go to trial. Because he is also the presumptive nominee for this year's Republican ticket, the trial will produce the head-spinning split-screen of a presidential candidate spending his days in court and, he has said, "campaigning during the night."

There could be some legal arguments and housekeeping before jury selection begins. When it does, scores of people are due to be called into the courtroom to start the process of finding 12 jurors, plus six alternates. Judge Juan M. Merchan has written that the key is "whether

the prospective juror can assure us that they will set aside any personal feelings or biases and render a decision that is based on the evidence and the law." Trump has pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records.

Prosecutors say he was trying to conceal an alleged effort to keep salacious — and, he says, bogus — stories about his sex life from emerging during his 2016 campaign.

The charges centre on USD 130,000 in payments that Trump's company made to his then-lawyer, Michael Cohen. He had paid that sum on Trump's behalf to keep porn actor Stormy Daniels from going public, a month before the election, with her claims of a sexual encounter with the married mogul a decade earlier. Prosecutors say the payments to Cohen were falsely logged as legal fees in order to cloak their

actual purpose. Trump's lawyers say the disbursements indeed were legal expenses, not a cover-up.

Trump himself casts the case, and his other indictments elsewhere, as a broad "weaponisation of law enforcement" by Democratic prosecutors and officials. He maintains they are orchestrating sham charges in hopes of impeding his presidential run.

After decades of fielding and initiating lawsuits, the businessman-turned-politician now faces a trial that could result in up to four years in prison if he's convicted, though a no-jail sentence also would be possible.

Regardless of the eventual outcome, the trial of an ex-president and current candidate is a moment of extraordinary gravity for the American political system, as well as for Trump himself. Such a scenario would have once seemed unthinkable

to many Americans, even for a president whose tenure left a trail of shattered norms, including twice being impeached and acquitted by the Senate.

The scene inside the courtroom may be greeted with a spectacle outside. When Trump was arraigned last year, police broke up small skirmishes between his supporters and protesters near the courthouse in a tiny park, where a local Republican group has planned a pro-Trump rally Monday.

Trump's attorneys lost a bid to get the hush money case dismissed and have since repeatedly sought to delay it, prompting a flurry of last-minute appeals court hearings last week. Among other things, Trump's lawyers maintain that the jury pool in overwhelmingly Democratic Manhattan has been tainted by negative publicity about Trump and that the case should be moved elsewhere.

Israel response to Iranian attack shows what Kyiv needs: Kuleba

AP ■ KYIV

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

A recent Russian aerial campaign targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure and other targets has wrought extensive damage, and Ukrainian officials have pleaded with the country's Western allies to provide more air defence systems as the war stretches into its third year. Israel's defence system, with assistance from the US and Britain — countries that are also supporting Ukraine's war effort — is credited with preventing serious

damage or casualties in Sunday's attack by Iran using more than 300 drones and missiles.

Kuleba, speaking to reporters in Kyiv, urged Ukraine's allies to "give us what we need and we will do the rest of the job." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made the same point late Sunday, referring to the Iranian attack. "The whole world sees what real defense is. It sees that it is feasible," he wrote on Telegram. Russia last week fired nearly 130 exploding drones, more than 80 Russian missiles and nearly 700 guided aerial bombs at Ukraine, Zelenskyy said Sunday on the social platform X. He has pleaded with allies to send more Patriot systems. However, the Institute for the Study of War noted there are key differences between the challenges faced by Israel and

Ukraine. "Russian forces launch drones and missiles from throughout occupied Ukraine and in close proximity to Ukraine from within Russia, affording Ukrainian air defenders a fraction of the time that Israel and its allies leveraged to successfully blunt the mass Iranian missile and drone strike," the Washington think tank said in an assessment late Sunday. The scale and improved accuracy of recent Russian attacks have unnerved Ukraine's defenders. They say Kremlin forces now have better intelligence and fresh tactics in their campaign to destroy Ukraine's power grid and crush its economy. Moscow has also apparently learned how to exploit gaps in air defences across the huge country. That development has added to Ukraine's problems, as the Kremlin's forces seize the bat-

tlefield advantage. At the same time, Ukraine is struggling with shortages of ammunition and troops. Ukraine's military chief on Saturday warned that the battlefield situation in the industrial east has recently significantly worsened. A crucial hurdle to receiving more air defense supplies is the hold-up in Washington of House approval for a US aid package that includes roughly \$60 billion for Ukraine. House Speaker Mike Johnson said Sunday he will try to move the package forward this week.

"The exhaustion of US-provided air defences resulting from delays in the resumption of US military assistance to Ukraine combined with improvements in Russian strike tactics have led to increasing effectiveness of the Russian strike campaign in Ukraine," the Institute for the Study of War said.



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

AP/PTI

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

AP ■ PARIS

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

Sudan descended into conflict in April last year when simmering tensions between the military and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces exploded into open fighting in the capital, Khartoum and elsewhere across the country. Members of Sudan's civil society and local NGOs are involved in the Paris meeting, but neither the Sudanese army nor its rival the RSF have been represented.

The UN humanitarian campaign needs some USD 2.7 billion this year to get food, health care and other supplies to 24 million people in Sudan — nearly half its population of 51 million. So far, funders have given only USD 145 million, about 5 per cent, according to the UN's humanitarian office, known as OCHA.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged the international community to donate generously and support the UN's life-saving efforts to help Sudanese

people, trapped in the "nightmare of bloodshed". More than 14,000 people have been killed and at least 33,000 have been injured in a yearlong war. Nearly 9 million people have been forced to flee their homes either to safer areas inside Sudan or to neighbouring countries, according to the United Nations. Hunger and continued displacement are rampant and much of the country's infrastructure — homes, hospitals and schools — has been reduced to rubble.

"We cannot let this nightmare slide from view," Guterres said in a video message to the Paris conference. He added: "It's time to support the Sudanese people. It's time to silence the guns." French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne said the aim of Monday's conference is to mobilise humanitarian funding to help Sudanese people, who have been victims of both a "terrible war" and "international indifference."

"It's a colossal task," Sejourne said. "It's a war the Sudanese people did not want, a war that only produces chaos and suffering," he added. The European Union's crisis management commissioner, Janez Lenarcic, said the 27-member bloc seeks to ensure that Sudan is not forgotten as wars in Gaza and Ukraine dominate the international news.

Review says Abbey Gate bombing wasn't preventable

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

The findings, released on Monday, refute assertions by some service members who believed they had a chance to take out the would-be bomber but did not get approval. And, for the first time, the US military is confirming that the bomber was Abdul Rahman al-Logari, an Islamic State militant who had been in an Afghan prison but was released by the Taliban as the group took control of the country that summer. The Abbey Gate bombing during the final chaotic days of the Afghanistan withdrawal killed 13 US service members and 170 Afghans, and wounded scores more. It triggered widespread debate and congressional criticism, fuelled by emotional testimony from a Marine injured in the blast, who said snipers believe they saw the possible bomber but couldn't get approval to take him out.

Former Marine Sgt Tyler Vargas-Andrews told the House Foreign Affairs Committee last March that Marines and others aiding in the evacuation were given descriptions of men believed to

be plotting an attack. Vargas-Andrews, who was injured in the blast but not interviewed in the initial investigation, said he and others saw a man matching the description and might have been able to stop the attack, but requests to take action were denied.

In a detailed briefing to a small number of reporters, members of the team that did the review released photos of the bald man identified by military snipers as a potential threat and compared it with photos of al-Logari. The team members, who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity to provide details not yet made public, described facial recognition and other analysis they used that they said confirmed those were not the same man.

"For the past two years, some service members have claimed that they had the bomber in their sights and they could have prevented the attack. We now know that is not correct," said a team member. They said they also showed the photo of the bald man to service members during the latest interviews, and that the troops again confirmed that was the suspicious man they had targeted.

The review notes that the bald man was first seen around 7 am and that troops lost sight of him by 10 am. The bombing was more than seven hours later, and the US says al-Logari didn't get to Abbey Gate until "very shortly" before the blast took place. They declined to be

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

"For me, personally, we are still not clear. I believe Tyler saw what Tyler saw and he knows what he saw. And it was not the guy that they were claiming was the man in black," Jim McCollum, the father of Marine Lance Cpl Rylee McCollum, told The Associated Press.

He said the team went into "pretty good detail, not trying to discredit Tyler, but effectively saying he was wrong. However, that ended up being as clear as mud to us".

And Mark Schmitz, the father of Marine Lance Cpl Jared Schmitz, questioned the photo itself. "They kept saying this is who Tyler Vargas-Andrews was looking at and we were thinking to ourselves, well, that's interesting. Why is this a picture of a picture from a Canon camera?" he said. "To me it felt like they were trying to find the guy in those cameras that may have come close to looking like somebody of interest that they can try to sell to us".

The families, however, also said they were relieved to get more details about their loved ones' deaths, saying the initial briefings were not as good. Schmitz said that Army Gen Eric Kurilla, head of US Central Command, was part of the lat-

est briefing and apologised for how the families were treated during the initial probe. This time around officials were able to share with Schmitz for the first time exactly where his son was when the bomb went off and that he was unconscious almost immediately, and therefore did not feel the impact of the shrapnel that went through his left torso, hitting a primary artery.

"That to me was, first and foremost, the best news I could have gotten," Schmitz said. "That gave me a little bit of closure that my son didn't suffer, which made me feel really good."

Team members said they also are planning to speak with the troops who were interviewed this time, to share the results of the report. They said the review also could not completely rule out claims that militants did a test run of the bombing several days earlier. But after reviewing photos and other intelligence, the team concluded it was unlikely that three men seen carrying a large bag — which troops deemed suspicious — were doing a trial run. More broadly, the team said the review brought some new details to light, including more discussion about the possible bombing test run. But they said overall it confirmed the findings of US Central Command's initial investigation into the bombing: that it was not preventable and that reports of threats prior to the bombing were too vague.

As an example, the new review noted that threat reports talked about a possible bomber with groomed hair, wearing loose clothes, and carrying a black bag. That description, the review said, could have matched anyone in the enormous crowd desperately trying to get into the airport.

The team said they conducted 52 interviews for the review — adding up to a total of 190 when the previous investigation is included. Service members were asked about 64 questions, and the sessions lasted between one hour and seven hours long.

A number of those questioned weren't included in the original investigation, many because they were severely wounded in the attack. The new review was ordered last September by Kurilla, largely due to criticism of the initial investigation and assertions that the deadly assault could have been stopped.

Members of the team said the Islamic State group put out the bomber's name on social media, but US intelligence was later able to independently confirm that report.

US Central Command's initial investigation concluded in November 2021 that given the worsening security situation at the airport's Abbey Gate as Afghans became increasingly desperate to flee, "the attack was not preventable at the tactical level without degrading the mission to maximize the number of evacuees".

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

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

Lee is handing over the reins later than intended, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and after a hiccup in succession plans. Lee, 72, was sworn in as Singapore's third Prime Minister on August 12, 2004.

In a Facebook post, Lee said leadership transition is a significant moment for any country. "Last November, I announced my intention to step down as Prime Minister this year. I will relinquish my role as Prime Minister on May 15, 2024, and DPM (Deputy Prime Minister) Lawrence Wong will be sworn in as the next Prime Minister on the same day.

"For any country, a leadership transition is a significant moment. Lawrence and the 4G team (fourth generation) have worked hard to gain the people's trust, notably during the pandemic. Through the Forward Singapore exercise, they have worked with many Singaporeans to refresh our social compact and develop the national agenda for a new generation," he said. "The 4G team are committed to keeping Singapore working well and moving ahead. These will always be top priorities for the government. I ask all Singaporeans to give Lawrence and his team your full support, and work with them to create a brighter future for Singapore," Lee said. The political succession in Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) appeared to be taking shape from 2018 when Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat was tipped to be the next Prime Minister.

But in April 2021, Heng, then 60 years old, stepped aside as a candidate for the top job, citing his age as the reason. PAP has ruled the city-state ever since independence.

After a year of deliberation, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong was named the successor and, shortly after, he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. The 51-year-old will be appointed Prime Minister when Lee steps down. The transition comes 12 years after Lee pronounced in 2012 that he did not want to be Prime Minister beyond the age of 70, according to a report by Channel News Asia.

Iran Prez to visit Pak on April 22

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

The 63-year-old leader's expected visit will take place days after Tehran launched more than 300 drones and missiles at Israel in retaliation to an alleged Israeli airstrike on its Damascus consulate in Syria that killed several people, including two senior commanders of Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Geo News reported.

The visit also assumes significance as it comes amidst ongoing efforts by Pakistan and Iran to deepen their cooperation which received a temporary setback earlier this year. In January, Pakistan, in retaliation to Iran's cross-border strikes, carried out precision strikes using killer drones and rockets to target terrorists inside Iranian territory, the report said.

Two bases of the Sunni Baloch militant group 'Jaish al-Adl' in Pakistan's unruly Balochistan province were targeted by missiles and drones, Iranian state media reported. Jaish al-Adl, or the "Army of Justice", is a Baloch Sunni militant group founded in 2012 that largely operates in Pakistan. Pakistan had even withdrawn its ambassador from Iran and announced that it would not allow the Iranian envoy, who was visiting his home country at that time, to return as a gesture of protest against the breach of its sovereignty by Iran, Geo News reported.

Bilawal urges politicians to unite around 'Charter of Reconciliation'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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

Bilawal, a former foreign minister, was speaking at a public gathering on Sunday in the Larkana district of the Sindh province of Pakistan to mark the 45th death anniversary of PPP founder and his grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Former Pakistan prime minister Bhutto, 51, was executed by the military regime in 1979. Bilawal emphasised the necessity for political figures to unite around a 'Charter of Reconciliation', as he urged them to engage in constructive

political dialogue at the table. The Business Recorder newspaper reported. He urged politicians to have a political dialogue to improve the country's system, democracy, and institutions through amendments. Asserting that political stability can only be achieved through the 'Charter of Democracy' and 'Charter of Reconciliation', he said that the PPP will be at its forefront, the Dawn newspaper reported.

"Rather than playing dharna-dharna, we should sit on the table and have a political dialogue to bring improvement in our system, democracy, and institutions through amendments," he said.

Bilawal also said certain politicians are driven by personal ego and are willing to jeopardise the nation for their own gain, in an apparent reference to jailed former prime minister Imran

Khan, who has been accusing the current government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of stealing the mandate of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in the February 8 general elections. Warning of the looming threat of military intervention if politicians failed to prioritise national reconciliation and persisted in trading insults, he cautioned against the detrimental consequences, according to The Express Tribune newspaper. "It won't foster Pakistan's development or strengthen its economy; rather, it will only undermine democracy and harm the people," Bilawal was quoted as saying. Underlining the necessity for judicial reforms, he noted that 90 per cent of the Charter of Democracy points had been accomplished, with only the remaining 10 per cent about the judiciary.

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

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

The plea was filed in Islamabad High Court (IHC) by Shoaib Shaheen on behalf of Bushra Bibi, seeking the former first lady's medical examination in the Shaukat Khanum Hospital, which is owned by Khan's charitable organisation, ARY news channel reported. It stated that Bushra, 49, was poisoned in sub-jail Bani Gala (Imran Khan's home in Islamabad), and therefore, her medical examination should be conducted, the report said. Earlier this month, during the hearing of a corruption case in the Adiala jail, the

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party founder Khan informed the judge that there had been an attempt to poison his wife and said that she had marks on her skin and tongue as a side effect of the "poisoning". However, Bushra Bibi's personal physician conducted a medical checkup and ascertained that she had not been given any poisonous substance.

In a statement, PTI leader Barrister Gohar Ali Khan said they would only accept the medical reports issued by a personal physician, demanding a medical examination at Shaukat Khanum Hospital. Khan, 71, has been lodged at the Adiala Jail since August last year, while Bushra Bibi, was imprisoned at Khan's Bani Gala residence that had been turned into a sub-jail since she was sentenced in the 'um-Islamic nikah' case in February.

ASEEFA TAKES OATH AS PAKISTAN MP

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

She was elected unopposed as a member of the National Assembly last month from NA-207 Shaheed Benazirabad (formerly Nawabshah) area of her native Sindh province. The seat was vacated by her father Asif Ali Zardari after he was elected as the President.

In a related development, her victory was challenged in the Sindh High Court by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-backed independent candidate Ghulam Mustafa Rind who named the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and Aseefa as respondents.

18 killed in landslides at Indonesia island

AP ■ TARA TORAJA

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

Rescuers found about 14 bodies in Makale village on Sunday afternoon and four in South Makale, said Mexianus Bekabel, the chief of Makassar Search and Rescue.

"We are still looking for two more victims, but fog and drizzle made the search difficult and officers in the field were overwhelmed," Sulaiman Malia, chief of the Tana Toraja district Disaster Management Agency, said on Monday.

Loosened by torrential rain, mud poured from surrounding



In this photo released by the Indonesian National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS), rescuers search for survivors at a village hit by a landslide in Tana Toraja district of South Sulawesi province, Indonesia, on Monday



In this photo released by the Indonesian National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS), rescuers search for survivors at a village hit by a landslide in Tana Toraja district of South Sulawesi province, said local police chief Gunardi Mundu. He said a family gathering was being held in one of the houses when the landslide hit.

Dozens of soldiers, police and volunteers joined the search in the remote hillside villages of Makale and South Makale, Mundu said. Rescuers early Sunday managed to pull out two injured people, including an 8-year-old girl, and rushed them to a nearby hospital. Downed communications lines, bad weather and unstable soil were hampering the rescue efforts, Muhari said.

Tana Toraja has many popular tourist attractions, including a traditional houses and wooden statues of bodies buried in caves, known as tau-tau. Seasonal downpours cause frequent landslides and floods in Indonesia, a chain of 17,000 islands where millions of people live in mountainous areas or fertile flood plains.

Germany's Scholz warns against dumping during China visit

AP ■ BEIJING

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

Scholz is visiting China against the background of looming EU tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles and other trade-related tensions. The two countries are also split over how to handle Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"The one thing that must always be clear is that competition must be fair," Scholz told students at Tongji University in Shanghai, according to German

news agency dpa. "Of course we would like our companies to have no restrictions, but conversely we behave exactly how we are demanding here," he said, adding there must be no dumping or overproduction. The European Union is mulling tariffs to protect its producers against cheaper Chinese electrical vehicle imports, which some fear will flood the European market. The head of Germany's auto industry association, the VDA, expressed opposition to such tariffs ahead of Scholz's visit. Hildgard Müller told the Welt am Sonntag newspaper in comments published Saturday the tariffs would not help the European and German auto

industries and instead "could quickly have a negative effect in a trade conflict."

"Current business with China secures a large number of jobs here in Germany," Müller said. Scholz made comparisons to reservations years ago when Japanese and Korean automakers entered the German market. "There was great agitation in the newspapers: Now the Japanese cars will come and clean up' — nonsense," he told the Tongji University students. He said there are German cars in China that were made with Chinese manufacturers, and at some point there would also be Chinese cars in Germany and Europe.

Sensex, Nifty tank over one per cent

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Stock markets took a beating on Monday with benchmark Sensex and Nifty tumbling over 1 per cent as escalating conflict in the Middle East and weak trends from global markets unnerved investors. Extending losses to the second session, the 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 845.12 points or 1.14 per cent to settle at a more than two-week low of 73,399.78. During the day, it plunged 929.74 points or 1.25 per cent to 73,315.16. The NSE Nifty declined 246.90 points or 1.10 per cent to finish at 22,272.50. Key indices had plunged by over 1 per cent in the previous session on Friday due to profit taking by investors at record high levels. Sensex lost 1,638 points or 2.19 per cent while Nifty plunged 481 points or 2.13 per cent to slip below the 22,300 level in two straight sessions. Foreign fund outflows and hotter-than-expected US inflation data also played spoilsport for the markets. Analysts said the renewed



conflict in the Middle East, proposed changes in the India-Mauritius tax treaty and the hotter-than-expected US inflation proved to be major drags. From the Sensex basket, Wipro, ICICI Bank, Bajaj Finserv, Bajaj Finance, Tata Motors, Larsen & Toubro, Tech Mahindra and HDFC Bank were the major laggards. Nestle, Maruti and Bharti Airtel were the gainers. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong settled lower while Shanghai ended in the positive territory. European markets were trading on a mixed note. Wall Street ended significantly lower on Friday. "Geopolitical tensions and

higher-than-expected US inflation impacted investor sentiment and dragged the indices to a lower note. The major casualties were the mid-and small-cap indices due to their rich valuation and expectation of moderation in earnings growth in Q4FY24. "On the other hand, the European market opened on a positive note while oil prices inched lower as market participants expected that the diplomatic efforts were likely to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 1.04 per cent to

USD 89.51 a barrel. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 8,027 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. "The escalating geopolitical tensions in West Asia prompted a decline in the 30-share BSE Sensex and the NSE Nifty. Market indices traded lower, influenced by the heightened tensions between Iran and Israel, leading to losses across major sectors. Notably, the broader small and midcap segments also saw declines," said Suman Banerjee, CIO of hedge fund Hedonova. Official data released on Monday showed that wholesale inflation rose

marginally to 0.53 per cent in March compared to 0.20 per cent in the preceding month due to an increase in prices of vegetables, potato, onion and crude oil. Retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85 per cent in March, inching towards the Reserve Bank's target of 4 per cent, according to official data released on Friday. India's industrial production growth accelerated to a four-month high of 5.7 per cent in February 2024, mainly due to the good performance of the mining sector, according to official data released on Friday. The Income Tax Department on Friday said the amended India-Mauritius protocol on double taxation avoidance agreement (DTAA) is yet to be ratified and notified by the department. India and Mauritius on March 7, 2024, signed an amendment to the DTAA and included a principal purpose test (PPT) in the pact which aims to curtail tax avoidance by ensuring that treaty benefits are granted only for transactions with a bona fide purpose.

Wholesale inflation inches up marginally to 0.53 per cent in March

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Wholesale inflation in the country rose marginally to 0.53 per cent in March compared to 0.20 per cent in the preceding month due to increase in prices of vegetables, potato, onion and crude oil. The Wholesale Price Index (WPI)-based inflation was in the negative zone from April to October and had turned positive in November at 0.26 per cent. The inflation in March 2023 was 1.41 per cent. "The annual rate of inflation based on all-India Wholesale Price Index (WPI) number is 0.53 per cent (provisional) for the month of March, 2024 (over March, 2023)," the commerce and industry ministry said in a statement on Monday. Food inflation moved up marginally to 6.88 per cent in March from 5.42 per cent in the same month a year ago, data showed. Inflation in vegetables was 19.52 per cent, up from (-2.39) per cent in the same month a year ago. WPI for potato witnessed a



jump of 52.96 per cent against a deflation of 25.59 per cent, while for onion 56.99 per cent as compared to (-) 36.83 per cent in March 2023. The data showed that inflation in the crude petroleum segment rose by 10.26 per cent in March this year against a deflation of 23.53 per cent in March 2023 due to hardening of crude prices globally. However, retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85 per cent in March mainly

due to cooling food prices. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) based retail inflation was 5.09 per cent in February and 5.66 per cent in March 2023. Previously, CPI-based inflation was the lowest at 4.87 per cent in October 2023. The inflation in the food basket was at 8.52 per cent in March, down from 8.66 per cent in February, according to the data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) last week.



Report: Flexi staffing industry grows 3.6 per cent in December quarter

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The staffing industry grew 3.6 per cent in October-December 2023 as compared to the previous quarter, the Indian Staffing Federation (ISF) said on Monday. ISF, the apex industry body representing manpower outsourcing industry, released the Flexi Staffing Industry Employment growth report for Q3 FY2024 (October-December 2023). The staffing industry witnessed a 3.6 per cent growth in December quarter FY24 in comparison to July-September period, recording a robust demand for flexi (contract) workforce, ISF said in a statement. The staffing industry grew at 16.4 per cent year-on-year in the period January-December 2023. The rise in employment was particularly notable in key sectors such as e-commerce, retail, FMCG, logistics, manufacturing, hospitality, tourism, aviation, energy etc, it stated. The report highlighted that as of December 2023, the total

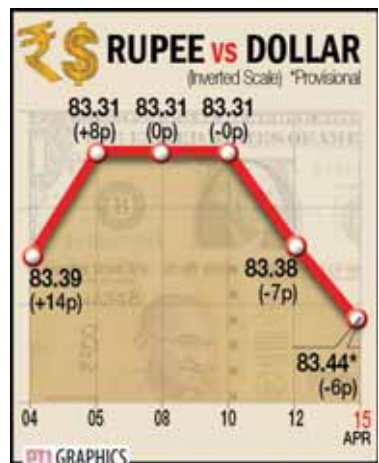
formal flexi workforce employed by members of ISF reached 1.62 million. The reported figures for new flexi jobs by ISF represent the combined contribution of both General Flexi Staffing and IT Flexi Staffing industries. General Flexi Staffing (i.e. Excluding IT Flexi Staffing) contributed with new employment growth at 3.8 per cent quarter-on-quarter in Q3 FY24. However, the IT staffing witnessed a decline from past quarters in Q3 at (-)0.4 per cent QoQ. Lohit Bhatia, President, ISF said, the flexi staffing industry continued a double-digit new employment growth trend at 16.4 per cent YoY, reflecting its strong performance. The industry is currently at Rs 1.34 lakh crore. ISF is the apex body representing flexi staffing companies, formed to provide a platform for recognized employment, work choice, even compensation, social security and health benefits for the temporary workforce; that constitutes a sizeable segment of India's total workforce.

Rupee falls 6 paise to settle at 83.44 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee declined 6 paise to settle at 83.44 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, in line with deep losses in equity markets and an elevated dollar against major rivals overseas amid geopolitical tensions. However, weakening crude oil prices in the international markets and positive domestic macroeconomic data restricted the rupee's fall, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.46 and traded between 83.42 and 83.47 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 83.44 (provisional), registering a loss of 6 paise from its previous close. On Friday, the rupee declined 7 paise to settle at 83.38 against the US dollar. Anuj Choudhary Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the Indian rupee weakened on a strong US dollar and a decline in domestic

markets. However, the sharp downside in the rupee was contained amid upbeat domestic macroeconomic data and possible intervention by the central bank. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on heightened global tensions in the Middle East, which could impact global equities and strengthen the dollar further," Choudhary said, adding that "traders will take cues from India's trade deficit and US retail sales data. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.20 to Rs 83.80". Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.15 per cent lower at 105.68. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, declined 0.94 per cent to USD 89.60 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex declined 845.12 points, or 1.14 per cent, to settle at 73,399.78. The



Nifty fell 246.90 points, or 1.10 per cent, to close at 22,272.50. According to the latest government data released on Monday, the wholesale price index-based inflation in the

country rose marginally to 0.53 per cent in March compared to 0.20 per cent in the preceding month due to increased prices of vegetables, potatoes, onion and crude oil. Another data released on Friday showed retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85 per cent in March mainly due to cooling food prices, inching towards the Reserve Bank's target of 4 per cent. The country's industrial production growth accelerated to a four-month high of 5.7 per cent in February 2024, mainly due to the good performance of the mining sector, according to official data released on Friday. India's forex reserves jumped by USD 2.98 billion to a fresh peak of USD 648.562 billion for the week ended April 5. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Friday as they sold shares worth Rs 8,027 crore, according to exchange data.



Private equity investment in real estate dips 16 per cent last fiscal: Anarock

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Private equity funding in the real estate sector fell 16 per cent last fiscal to USD 3.67 billion on lower interest from foreign investors, according to Anarock. In its report, Capital FLUX, real estate consultant Anarock pointed out that the private equity (PE) deals in Indian real estate have declined to USD 3,674 million in 2023-24 from USD 4,358 million in the previous year. The PE inflow in real estate stood at USD 5,138 million in 2019-20, USD 6,377 million in 2020-21, USD 4,236 million in 2021-22 financial year. "The decline in PE investments in Indian real estate has been due to lower activity by foreign investors, due to global macro-economic factors and geopolitical instability," said Shobhit Agarwal, MD & CEO of Anarock Capital. The share of foreign capital in total investments declined to 65 per cent in FY24, against 76 per cent in the previous year. As per the report, PE investments by domestic investors have increased to 29 per cent of the total capital inflows into Indian real estate during the last fiscal as compared to 24 per cent in the previous year. Out of the total PE inflow in FY24, Anarock said the share of pure equity deals stood at 73 per cent while debt 24 per cent. In the previous year, the share of equity deals was 66 per cent and debt 32 per cent. The office segment dominated PE transactions in FY24 with a 57 per cent value share. This was largely due to the GIC-Brookfield REIT deal, which accounted for about 40 per cent of the total transaction value last fiscal, the consultant said. "While there has been a consistent share of PE investments in residential real estate at 28 per cent, there is a yearly decline of 17 per cent in the same by value," said Agarwal. "This is due to a very high base in FY23, when investments had doubled over the previous years," he explained. While the number of deals in FY24 is largely constant, the aggregate deal value has reduced due to a sharply lower average deal size. The average ticket sizes have reduced to USD 75 million in FY24 from USD 79.2 million in FY20.

Ola Electric cuts prices of entry level e scooter

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Ola Electric on Monday slashed prices of its entry-level scooter S1 X by Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000 across variants, bringing it at par with conventional scooters. The new S1 X was launched in February this year with a price range of Rs 79,999 to Rs 1,09,999 across three variants. In a virtual address, Ola Electric Chief Marketing Officer Anshul Khandelwal said the prices of the company's entry-level scooter have been reduced with immediate effect and deliveries would start next week. Under the new prices, S1 X with 4kWh battery will now cost Rs 99,999, down from Rs 1,09,999 announced earlier. Similarly, S1 X with 3kWh battery has been priced at Rs 84,999 instead of Rs 89,999 earlier. The S1 X 2kWh battery variant will cost Rs 69,999 (introductory price), reduced from Rs 79,999 earlier, he said.



"We feel that India needs much more. India needs a price at which they (consumers) can truly adopt EVs," Khandelwal said. An average scooter is priced at Rs 1

lakh, he said adding consumers have given feedback that they would think about electric scooters when prices are at the price of petrol scooters. "We thought why not do that. Let's just

ensure that we give you everything and much more than a petrol scooter," he asserted. Ola Electric's announcement comes just over a week after rival Ather Energy introduced a range of family electric scooter 'Rizta' priced between Rs 1,09,999 lakh and Rs 1,44,999 (ex-showroom Bengaluru). The company said the S1 X range marks its entry into the mass market segment. It comes with an 8-year/80,000 km complimentary battery warranty. The entry-level electric scooter offers an IDC-certified range of 190 km, 143 km, and 95 km in 4 kWh, 3 kWh, and 2 kWh variants, respectively. It has a top speed of 90 kmph in 4kWh and 3kWh variants, and 4.1 seconds and 85 kmph in the 2 kWh variant, Ola Electric said. Khandelwal said electric scooter adoption in India as of March 31, 2024, stood at 25 per cent and 9 per cent in the overall electric two-wheeler market, adding the "future is truly electric".

Power Ministry asks imported coal based plants to run full capacity till October 15

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Power has asked all thermal plants using imported coal to operate at full capacity for another three and a half months till October 15 to avoid electricity shortage amid rising demand in the country. The ministry has projected peak power demand of 260 GW during the summer season (April to June) in view of longer heat wave duration. Peak power demand had touched all-time higher of 243 GW in September 2023. The India Meteorological

Department (IMD) has predicted above-normal maximum temperatures in most parts of the country during summer this year. A power ministry notice to 15 imported coal-based thermal power projects on April 12 stated, "It has now been decided to extend the time period for Section 11 directive to generating companies having imported coal-based plants, up to October 15, 2024." In October 2023, the ministry extended the deadline for these imported coal-based plants to operate at full capacity from



November 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. In February 2023, the ministry had invoked Section 11 of the Electricity Act 2003 to avoid any outage due to a sudden rise in power demand. The direction was for three

months from March 16 to June 15, 2023, which was extended till September 30, 2023 and later till October 31, 2023. In October, the duration for running these imported coal based power plants at full capacity was further extended till June 30, 2024. Peak power demand was estimated to touch a record high of 229 GW during summer in 2023. However, unseasonal rains affected demand as people used fewer cooling appliances like air conditioners which guzzle electricity.

International Youth Economic Forum to be held on June 8

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The International Youth Economic Forum, organised by the Roscongress Foundation, will be held on the last day of Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum 2024 (SPIEF) on June 8. It will bring together young entrepreneurs, managers, students, postgraduates and scientists, including those awarded scholarships, grants and prizes of the president of the Russian Federation, said the SPIEF. The agenda of the (SPIEF 2024) Youth Day is to cover all areas of self-fulfilment of the younger generation including business support measures, development of youth professional communities, international scientific and technological projects, tourism, environmental protection and much more. "This year, the format of the SPIEF 2024 Youth Programme will be conceptually changed in favour of practice-oriented

content at the Forum venue and it will contain new formats aimed at creating opportunities for self-fulfilment of young talented leaders, developing the institute of mentorship and involving young people in addressing issues on the global socio-economic agenda," said Anton Kobayakov, adviser to the president of the Russian Federation and Executive Secretary of the SPIEF Organising Committee. He said the main goal will be to create a permanent, innovative and inspiring platform for talented young people and a talent pool will be formed for the leading Russian companies. In order to ensure that SPIEF functions as an effective mechanism for interaction, business communications and fruitful dialogue between the youth community, representatives of the authorities and world-class experts, the SPIEF Organising Committee will accredit Youth Day participants without a registration fee.

Mahindra to invest ₹1,200 crore to set up 150 MW hybrid project

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mahindra Susten on Monday said it will foray into the hybrid renewable energy segment by setting up a Rs 1,200-crore 150-megawatt solar wind energy project in Maharashtra. The project includes installation of a 101 megawatt (MW) wind and 52 MW solar capacity, Mahindra Group said in a statement. The

facility is expected to generate 460 million kilowatt-hour (kWh) of clean energy, offsetting 420,000 tonne of CO2 emissions. Mahindra Group will develop a 150 MW hybrid RE (Renewable Energy solar + wind) project at a total project cost of about Rs 1,200 crore, said Mahindra Susten, a part of Mahindra Group and a leader in renewable Independent Power Producer

(IPP) business. The project also marks Mahindra Susten's foray into the 'hybrid RE' segment and will be one of the largest co-located solar + wind hybrid projects in Maharashtra to deliver clean energy to commercial and Industrial (C&I) customers, the statement said. The company aims to commission the project within the next two years. It

will have more than 80 per cent locally manufactured components, the company said. Anish Shah, CEO & MD, Mahindra Group, said, "Energy transition is a key global and national priority to address climate change. This project is a tangible example of our commitment to sustainability, as a consumer of green power, and building 'Planet Positive'

businesses, as the developer of the project." Deepak Thakur, CEO & MD, Mahindra Susten, added, "We announce our foray into the hybrid RE space and deliver clean, green power at competitive rates to large C&I consumers. This project will showcase the immense potential of hybrid RE solutions in helping companies transition towards green operations."

BAYER LEVERKUSEN WINS FIRST BUNDESLIGA TITLE

AP ■ LEVERKUSEN (GERMANY)

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

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

The fifth goal in the 90th brought more fans onto the field - hundreds this time - and the referee ended the game amid confusion and jubilation. Thousands of supporters crowded the field waving flags, flares and cardboard copies of the Bundesliga trophy. Leverkusen finally shed its reputation as perennial runner-up after five second-place finishes in the league and one in the Champions League.

Alonso, who took over as coach when Leverkusen was in the relegation zone in October 2022, reflected on ending Bayern's dominance. "Perhaps it's healthy for the Bundesliga, also for German football, for another team to win," said Alonso, who won three Bundesliga titles with Bayern as a player from 2015-17.

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

ENDING BAYERN MUNICH'S 11 YEARS REIGN



time to realize what we've achieved. But it's a super moment and yes, we'll see what happens next," Alonso said, referring to the other trophies that his team can win this season. "But now is the time to celebrate."

Victor Boniface — starting a Bundesliga game for the first time since December because of injury — settled Leverkusen's nerves with the opening goal from the penalty spot before Granit Xhaka hit an audacious long-range shot to make it 2-0 with half an hour to go.

Bremen folded after that with substitute Wirtz scoring a goal very similar to Xhakas, then another on the counter in the 83rd and a third to end the game, his first career hat trick. Leverkusen is aiming for a historic treble of trophies. Alonso's team will play second-division Kaiserslautern in the German Cup final in Berlin on May 25 and has a 2-0 lead over West Ham after their Europa League quarterfinal first leg. The title puts the spotlight firmly on an industrial city of just under 170,000, which has been overshadowed by larger,

more famous neighbors. "Not in Cologne and Duesseldorf, no, we're at home here," is the third line of the club song played just before kickoff. Soccer is how Leverkusen stands out.

The club started as a workers' team for the Bayer pharmaceutical giant 120 years ago and is a rare exception in Germany, where most clubs are majority-controlled by members under the so-called 50+1 rule.

Twelfth-place Bremen was in difficulties even before kickoff as the club accused midfielder Naby Keita of walking out on the squad after he was disappointed not to be in the starting lineup. Leverkusen goalkeeper Lukas Hradecky dealt with the few chances Bremen created.

In the early game, Ritsu Doan's first-half strike was enough for Freiburg to win 1-0 at last-place Darmstadt, which moved closer to automatic relegation. Darmstadt, with 14 points, was 12 points from the relegation playoff spot with five matches to play. No team in the Bundesliga has ever overcome such a deficit at this stage of the season to survive.



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

AP ■ PARIS

Fans will be seeing purple at the Olympics when athletes try to set records at this summer's Paris Games.

In a move away from a more traditional red-brick clay color, an Olympic track is going purple for the first time.

The pieces of vulcanized rubber track were produced at a factory in northern Italy and workers have been laying them down at Stade de France, the national stadium hosting track events.

Workers even appeared to be doing an event of their own. Call it track rolling.

Getting down on their hands and knees, and with their hard hats on, they patiently and meticulously unfurl each strip before hammering a nail in to keep it in position. More than 1,000 such rolls will be used for the track, which requires about one month's work and 2,800 pots of glue in total.

Three years ago, three world records and 12 Olympic marks were set on the red-brick track in Tokyo.

Mondo has provided the track at every Summer Games since

Montreal in 1976, and the company hopes to do even better in Paris. New generation granules are more elastic and cohesive, while multiple algorithms create a more optimal shape and dimension for the air cells inside the track, reducing energy loss and thereby improving performance.

Expect more records to fall at the Stade de France, said Alain Blondel, the sports manager overseeing athletics events at the July 26-Aug. 11 Paris Games and the Aug. 28-Sept. 8 Paralympics.

"The first indications are that it will be a very, very good track," said Blondel, a former Olympic decathlete. "If we see athletes with personal bests on the scoreboard, it means we did a good job. They will come into their best form, best shape of their life."

But why choose purple? "That's one of the colors of the Games that we have (along) with, blue (and) green," Blondel said. "The rubber itself is a perfect quality, the best quality. I'm pretty confident that we will have something exceptional in this stadium."

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

PTI ■ MISANO (ITALY)

India's Jehan Daruvala has scored his first points in Formula E after enduring a troubled start to his rookie season in the all-electric racing series.

Daruvala, who came to Formula E after four mixed seasons in Formula 2, finished ninth in race two here of the Misano E-Prix on Sunday to collect two points for Maserati MSG Racing. His previous results in the FIA World Championship status series included two retirements besides a 16th, 20th, 15th and 17th place finish. The team entered the second race of the weekend after

finishing on the podium on Saturday, with driver Maximilian Günther gaining third following the disqualification of Antonio Felix de Costa after a technical breach.

In Qualifying for Race Two, the 26-year-old narrowly missed out on the duels and started from 12th while Daruvala lined up 21st after failing to set a representative lap time in the session.

By securing a strong getaway, Max moved up to seventh on lap one while Daruvala lost ground after struggling for traction off the line.

After activating his first Attack Mode on lap five, Max danced between fifth and ninth before a Safety Car, caused by an



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

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

negotiate his way into the top 10 on the final lap.

"It feels good to score my first points in Formula E. We were starting from the back row, but as a team, we decided on a strategy which we executed very well."

"We stuck to our plans, our communication was clear, and it resulted in my first top 10 finish of the season. I'm very happy, and from here, the goal is to fight for more in the future."

"Even after six races, I'm learning all of the time, and I know that there's still scope for me to learn from today's race. Monaco is up next and it's a circuit that I've had some success at before," said Daruvala.

Another ankle injury rules Dortmund forward Haller out of Champions League

AP ■ DORTMUND (GERMANY)

Borussia Dortmund forward Sébastien Haller has been ruled out of Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal second leg against Atlético Madrid by a recurrence of his left ankle injury.

Dortmund coach Edin Terzic said Monday that Haller "injured his ankle again unfortunately. He will now have complete rest for a week. There will be a final diagnosis on Saturday to determine the downtime a little more precisely. We assume he won't be available for two to three weeks."

Haller scored a late goal in Dortmund's 2-1 loss at Atlético in the first leg on Wednesday, but got injured early in the team's Bundesliga win at Borussia Mönchengladbach on Saturday.

He recovered from a left ankle injury to play for Ivory Coast at Africa Cup of Nations - scoring in the final to win the title - but returned with a recurrence of the injury and made only substitute appearances for Dortmund until getting his first league start since mid-September on Saturday. He had to go off in the ninth minute.

English forward Jamie Bynoe-Gittens also went off with a back problem but Terzic said he "already feels better and we hope he can take part in training with us." Jadon Sancho missed the trip to Mönchengladbach with illness but was back with his teammates on Sunday and looked set to return to the squad for Atlético.

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

AP ■ DUESSELDORF (GERMANY)

Three of Bayern Munich's senior figures did something Sunday that no one at the club had done since 2012. They congratulated another team on winning the Bundesliga.

President Herbert Hainer, CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen and sporting director Max Eberl each offered praise for new champion Bayer Leverkusen and coach Xabi Alonso - who Bayern had been keen to sign - and each vowed Bayern would fight to reclaim the trophy it held for 11 long years.

"The goal for FC Bayern now is: the trophy must come back to Munich!" Hainer wrote.

The question is how. Bayern didn't just lose the Bundesliga title to Leverkusen, it lost it by 16 points with five games to go. Bayern wrapped up the

crown that early only three times in its 11-year reign. That means a comprehensive rebuild is looming.

Bayern's 2023-24 season isn't over yet, and coach Thomas Tuchel could yet salvage some pride in the Champions League before he leaves. It's not impossible that Wednesday's quarterfinal second leg against Arsenal, poised at 2-2, could be Bayern's next step to the June 1 final and a first trophy for Harry Kane.

Despite the jibes on social media about how the England captain managed to join Germany's perennial champion team and still not win a league title, Kane has been a resounding success in Munich with 39 goals in the Bundesliga and Champions League.

A year ago, Bayern's need for a striker was clear when the team held onto the Bundesliga on goal difference as a strong Borussia Dortmund challenge crumbled.



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

Kane deal in August for over \$100 million, Bayern switched focus to Fulham defensive midfielder Joao Palhinha and even got him to Munich for a medical before the deal broke down.

With Eberl heading into his first transfer window in overall charge of Bayern's sporting approach, he will have to decide how to fix the problem Tuchel identified a year ago, and how much to allow the club's new coach - whoever that may be - to shape the team.

Eberl may also need to replace left back Alphonso Davies, whose contract is due to expire at the end of next season amid reported interest from Real Madrid. He's one of seven starters from Bayern's 2020 Champions League final win who are still at the club and whose places in the lineup - with the exception of goalkeeper Manuel Neuer - no longer seem quite as secure.

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

PTI ■ AUGUSTA

Indian American golfers, Akshay Bhatia and Sahith Theegala finished Tied 35th and Tied 45th respectively even as World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler secured a four-shot win at Augusta National to claim his second Masters in three years.

Bhatia (72,75,74), who was making his debut, carded a one-over 73 in the final round, while Theegala, who was playing for the second time after being in the Top-10 last year, stumbled to a three-over 75 after three successive 74.

Bhatia, who has had a whirlwind fortnight including a win and a spot into the Masters, said, "I haven't truly understood what's happened the last couple weeks. Everything about it is amazing. Volunteers, all the green jackets, they were so kind, so welcoming, so congratulating."

"I think being my first Masters, it's pretty cool kind of being the last person in. All in

all, it was an awesome week. Had a lot of family out there, and it was a special week for a lot of us."

Theegala said he made few "mental mistakes."

"I was just so happy last year with how I played. I played great all week last year. My game feels better than it did last year. I just made so many mental mistakes."

"Just got a little antsy and tried to push things, and my short game was off. I putted probably four or five three-putts today."

Scheffler lived up to his billing to win a second Green Jacket in three years at Augusta National Golf Club.

Scheffler, who started as a big favourite, opened the week with a 66 and had rounds of 72 and 71 in the tougher windy conditions. He entered the final day with a one-shot advantage.

Scheffler pulled away to sign for a 68 and finish at 11-under, while Swede Ludvig Aberg carded 69 to be the nearest challenger at seven-under on



his Major Championship debut.

Aberg was three shots clear of Ryder Cup team-mate Tommy Fleetwood and American duo Max Homa and Collin Morikawa.

Korea's Byeong Hun An

posted his best Masters Tournament finish with a tied 16th but was left ruing a cold putter which saw him miss out on an automatic return to Augusta National by a single stroke.

The 32-year-old signed off on

his fifth appearance at the year's opening major with a 3-over 75 where his scorecard included a mix of five birdies, six bogeys and a double bogey. The top-12 finishers and ties earn invitations back to next year's Masters.

Tom Kim fired the day's lowest of 66, highlighted by eight birdies, to share 30th place with amongst others, compatriot Si Woo Kim, who signed off with a 70 in what was his eighth successive Masters appearance. Japan's Hideki Matsuyama, the lone Asian to win the Masters in 2021, closed with a 74 for tied 38th. For some time, Scheffler did have to share the lead. Yet, a hat-trick of birdies from the eighth steadied him and there was no scare after that. He survived Amen Corner in level par while his challengers faced a lot of problems.

Scheffler arrived at Augusta on the back of finishing first, first and second in his last three starts, with top 20s in each of his four Masters appearances, including his win in 2022.

As well as the favourite's tag, he also had the possibility of having to withdraw mid-event with wife Meredith expecting the couple's first child imminently but he took it all in his stride and produced one of the most dominant Masters performances of recent years.

"It's a very special time for both of us. I can't put into words what it means to win this tournament again. I really can't put into words what it's going to be like to be a father for the first time. I'm looking forward to getting home and celebrating with Meredith," he said.

"It's been a long week here without her but I'm just looking forward to getting home. I will definitely enjoy the birth of my first child but with that being said, I still love competing. My priorities will change here very soon. "My son or daughter will now be the main priority, along with my wife, so golf will now be probably fourth in line. But I still love competing. I don't plan on taking my eye off the ball anytime soon, that's for sure."

Fleetwood made birdies on the first, seventh and 13th in a bogey-free 69 to finish two shots clear of Bryson DeChambeau and Cameron Smith, with Xander Schauffele the only other player in red numbers at one under.

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

PTI ■ FARIDABAD

A 28-strong Indian contingent, comprising both men and women, left for Dhaka on Monday to participate in the Special Olympics South Asia Unified seven-a-side football tournament.

The contingent includes 22 players, and five coaches representing eight different states and was given a sendoff here on Monday.

"We are assured of bagging one medal from the female team of SOB for sure, the men's team however has to improve their skills a bit more, the important thing is to defend the goal, but we are hoping for the best," Harpreet Singh, the sports director of Special Olympics Bharat, said at the ceremony.

Special Olympics Bharat is a National Sports Federation for people with intellectual disabilities. It is recognised by the sports ministry. Intellectual disability is

characterised by significantly below-average intellectual functioning (generally regarded as IQ below 70) combined with impairment in carrying out varying aspects of daily life and adapting to the normal social environment. "This is my first time working with SOB, and it has transformed me very much. I have become more understandable, compassionate and hardworking," said captain of the women's football team, Ankita.

"I want to make India and my parents proud. They (the team) are performing well and from the first camp to the last camp, we have developed more skills. We will give our hundred percent to get the gold" she added.

The players underwent a training camp here as part of their preparations for the tournament which will also feature Indonesia, Hong Kong and Maldives.



RR BRACE FOR NARINE SPIN TREAT AS KKR EYE TOP SPOT

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Rajasthan Royals' star-studded batting will face the serious challenge of decoding Sunil Narine's mystery at Eden Gardens when they take on two-time champions Kolkata Knight Riders in a top-of-the-table IPL clash here on Tuesday.

Narine, who is one month shy of turning 36, had played a pivotal role in KKR's twin triumphs under former skipper Gautam Gambhir in 2012 and 2014.

Ever since joining the side way back in 2012, Narine has sizzled at Eden Gardens with his crafty bowling, proving to a big threat to opposition batters.

Now after reuniting with Gambhir, who returned to the team as their mentor, Narine dished out an allround show, reigniting their title hopes again and a win against RR will hand them the pole position in the 10-team standings ahead of the halfway stage of the season.

His 1/19 against the Sunrisers Hyderabad or 1/17 against Lucknow Super Giants may have

failed to grab attention but those eight overs where he did not concede a single boundary made all the difference in the end for KKR.

Phil Salt may have walked away with the player-of-the-match award in their solid eight-wicket win over LSG here on Sunday, but it was Narine, who choked LSG in the middle overs to limit them to a below-par 161 for 7.

Come Tuesday, the likes of Sanju Samson, Riyan Parag and Shimron Hetmyer -- who all have struck at the rate of more than 155 this season -- will be up against the Narine challenge.

It remains to be seen if Jos Buttler is fit to be included in the playing XI after missing their last fixture against Punjab Kings.

With his ability to express himself at the top, Narine, who has a strike-rate of 183.51 and averages 33-plus this season, has a Rashid Khan-like aura at KKR.

Their IPL record buy Mitchell Starc has also shut all the noise to return to his elements, claiming two wickets in the last over for his



3/28 against LSG.

In such a scenario, the top-of-the-table contest may well boil down to KKR's bowling versus RR's batting.

KKR's only weaklink could be their skipper Shreyas Iyer's poor form with the bat.

Even though he remained unbeaten on a run-a-ball 38 in their 162-run chase against LSG, Shreyas looked tentative both against the pacers and spinners and KKR's batting may well get exposed if RR manage to give early breakthroughs.

KKR's batting has largely depended this season on Salt-Narine's fireworks at the top and Andre Russell's blitz at the death, as their Indian batters have not been tested much.

Rinku Singh has had a quiet season with 63 runs from four innings and has not got much opportunity, while team vice-captain Nitish Rana is sidelined with an injury.

RR have a formidable bowling lineup in Trent Boult, Avesh Khan, Yuzvendra Chahal and Keshav

Maharaj, while it remains to be seen if Ravichandran Ashwin is fit for the match.

TEAMS (FROM):

Kolkata Knight Riders: Shreyas Iyer (c), KS Bharat, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Rinku Singh, Angkrish Raghuvanshi, Sherfane Rutherford, Manish Pandey, Andre Russell, Nitish Rana, Venkatesh Iyer, Anukul Roy, Ramandeep Singh, Varun Chakravarthy, Sunil Narine, Vaibhav Arora, Chetan Sakariya, Harshit Rana, Suyash Sharma, Mitchell Starc, Dushmantha Chameera, Sakib Hussain and Mujeeb Ur Rahman.

Rajasthan Royals: Sanju Samson (c), Jos Buttler, Shimron Hetmyer, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel, Riyan Parag, Donovan Ferreira, Kunal Rathore, Ravichandran Ashwin, Kuldeep Sen, Navdeep Saini, Sandeep Sharma, Trent Boult, Yuzvendra Chahal, Avesh Khan, Rovman Powell, Shubham Dubey, Tom Kohler-Cadmore, Abid Mushtaq, Nandre Burger, Tanush Kotian, Keshav Maharaj.

Absolutely ordinary bowling, ordinary captaincy: Gavaskar slams Hardik

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Star India all-rounder Hardik Pandya faced scathing criticism from prominent former players after Mumbai Indians' fourth loss in the ongoing IPL with the great Sunil Gavaskar slamming him for his "absolutely ordinary bowling and ordinary captaincy" so far.

Booed and heckled by fans ever since he took over MI's captaincy, Pandya found himself in the line of fire of the legendary Gavaskar and former England captain Kevin Pietersen after his team slumped to yet another defeat, this time to Chennai Super Kings, here on Sunday night.

It was the 26 runs that Pandya conceded in the final over with Mahendra Singh Dhoni going hammer and tongs,

which proved to be decisive as Chennai Super Kings notched up a 20-run win over MI.

"Oh, absolutely ordinary bowling, ordinary captaincy. They should have been restricted despite the fact that Rituraj Gaikwad had batted so well along with Shivam Dube. I do believe that they should have been restricted to 185-190," Gavaskar said.

"Probably the worst kind of bowling that I've seen for a long, long time," Gavaskar said on Star Sports during the innings break after CSK posted 206 for 4.

"It almost looks like I've had this embrace with my hero. I've got the kind of deliveries that he's gonna hit for sixes. One six is fine. The next one is a length ball when you know this batter is hunting for a length ball that he wants to hit.



"Third ball is again a full toss on the legs when you know he (Dhoni) is looking for a six." Pandya finished with figures of 2 for 43 from his four overs and also had a tough time with the bat, managing a mere two runs off six balls at a crucial juncture of the game as MI ended at 186 for six despite a fine 63-ball 105 by

Pietersen feels the outside noise is taking a toll on the flamboyant all-rounder.

"I actually think, with Hardik Pandya, everything away from the game is affecting him so much. He's smiling too much when he does the toss. He's trying to act like he is so happy. He is not happy. I have been there. I have been in the firing line. And I can tell you now, it affects you.

"The boos we have been hearing just now and I know they are happy to see former CSK captain (Dhoni), the lion, smacking him (Hardik) all over the park, it hurts you. Because he has emotions. And he is an Indian player and he doesn't want to be treated like this. So when this is happening, it's affecting him, it's affecting his cricket and something needs to happen."

CSK have a man behind stumps telling them what is working: Pandya pats Dhoni

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya could not hide his appreciation for Mahendra Singh Dhoni's tactical acumen following his team's 20-run loss to Chennai Super Kings at the Wankhede Stadium here on Sunday.

While Dhoni's barrage of three sixes and a hurriedly-completed two runs off the fourth and last delivery was something that gave CSK the winning cushion, it was the former India skipper's reading of the game from behind the stumps that Pandya felt made the difference on a belter of a track.

"They (CSK) were smart with their plans and used the longer boundary well. They got the hang of it and they have a man behind the stumps telling them what's working," said Pandya after his side failed to chase 206 despite Rohit Sharma smashing his second IPL

century and batting from start to finish.

CSK skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad gave Dhoni a huge compliment, saying his power-hitting with just four balls remaining made the difference between victory and defeat.

Dhoni, 42, scored 20 off four deliveries, which in the end made the difference to the match's outcome.

"Our young wicketkeeper (MSD) scoring three sixes down the order helped a lot and I think that was the difference. To start off, on this kind of ground, you need 10-15 extra runs. We were looking at 215-220, but Bumrah bowled well," said Gaikwad, who took over the captaincy duties from Dhoni this season.

"Bowling-wise, we were spot-on with our execution. Even in powerplay, I would have taken six overs for 60. These kinds of venues demand both skills: batting and bowling. Our (Lasith) Malinga (Matheesha Pathirana)

bowled exceptionally well and nailed those yorkers," he said.

On why he did not open the innings and instead sent Ajinkya Rahane with Rachin Ravindra, Gaikwad said, "Nothing, Jinks (Rahane) was carrying a bit of a niggle. Thought it was better for him to open and get away quick runs. I'm fine batting anywhere."

Player of the Match, Pathirana, who grabbed his best IPL figures of 4/28, said he was a bit nervous as he was coming back into the side after recovering from a niggle.

"When we bowled in powerplay, I was nervous. I don't think about results and I just think about execution. First of all, I was having a niggle before two weeks and all support staff and players helped me.

"That's the main thing to have my form," said the Sri Lankan, who has modelled his action on the lines of the legendary Malinga.

Pollard defends Pandya, says sick & fed up of people pinpointing individuals for team losses

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Mumbai Indians batting coach Kieron Pollard is "sick and fed up" of people pinpointing particular individuals for the team's losses as he urged fans not to "nitpick" struggling captain Hardik Pandya after MI lost to Chennai Super Kings by 20 runs in their Indian Premier League match here.

CSK legend MS Dhoni took 26 runs off Pandya's final over with the help of three consecutive sixes as the MI skipper struggled for right line and length while also bowling two wides at a crucial time.

Pandya finished with figures of 2 for 43 from his three overs and also had a tough time with the bat, managing a mere two runs off six balls at a crucial juncture of the game.

"You're going to have those days. I'm sick and fed up of just looking to pinpoint at individuals. Cricket is a team sport at the end of the day," Pollard said at the post-match press conference Sunday night.

"He (Pandya) is a confident guy. He has been great around the group. In cricket, you have good days and you have bad days. I'm seeing an individual who's working bloody hard to continue his skill and to ply his trade."

Pollard reminded fans about the possibility of Pandya being picked for India's T20 World Cup campaign, saying if that happens everyone would be 'singing his praises'.

"This is an individual that's going to represent the country in less than six weeks' time. We're all going to be cheering for him and want him to do well," said



the West Indian who himself is a MI legend. "It's about high time that we try to encourage and try to stop nitpick. See if we can get the best out of one of the great all-rounders India could ever produce.

"He can bat, he can bowl, he can field. He has an X factor about him. I hope very well deep

MI skipper has been 'smiling too much'. Pollard said he is seeing Pandya evolving and backed him to turn things around.

"As an individual, you have to evolve as well. When you're young and there's that youthful exuberance, you go out and you do things in a certain manner. But the older that you get, at times, responsibility sort of kicks in, accountability to teams sort of kicks in," he said.

"What I'm seeing is a guy that is evolving. Obviously, we as individuals, we want to see certain things, but sometimes the game does not demand certain things," Pollard said while Mumbai Indians would revisit their plans on Dhoni but added that anyone could have been at the receiving end of the former CSK skipper's onslaught, like Pandya experienced Sunday night.

Cricket brings happiness for Afghan public but cannot help if Australia refuses to play us: Rashid

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

"You can't do anything about it," Rashid Khan conceded as he tried to make sense of Australia's refusal to play bilateral cricket with Afghanistan men's team, which he believes, achieves nothing beyond denying happiness to his people.

Cricket Australia cancelled an ODI series Down Under in 2023 and as recent as last month, refused to play a T20 series scheduled in the UAE later this year due to its government's concerns over "marked deterioration" of treatment of women in the Taliban-ruled state.

But Afghan players, including Rashid, continue to be welcome in the Big Bash League.

"I want, all the players want, to play cricket because that is the only source of happiness for people back home in Afghanistan and if you take that away, there is nothing that people could celebrate or enjoy," Rashid told PTI during an exclusive interview on Monday.

In 2023, Rashid had threatened to pull out of the Big Bash League over Australia's refusal to play bilateral cricket with them. The 25-year-old has many Australian friends but he hasn't actually spoken to any of them about the issue.

"Well, I have never discussed it with anybody (Australian cricketers) as I haven't had that opportunity to discuss all those things with them, something which is not in your hands or you have no control over, you

can't do anything about it.

"It's not a cricketer's reason or matter that you think about it, it is about two governments and as a player you can't do anything about it. What we can do is whenever we get an opportunity to play cricket, we go with full pride while representing our country."

Having played over 400 T20 games and being the most sought after freelancer in the T20 universe, Rashid feels privileged about being the face of Afghanistan cricket.

"Before 2017, we never thought about playing the IPL. It was hard (far-fetched) thought for us to even think of playing in the biggest T20 league in the world.

"The hardest part is to get into the system and when I (first



got the opportunity, I knew okay, I got that opportunity now I have to do the best where it helps me promote my cricket and also help my country where youngsters can get inspired to get into cricket more and more," the eloquent Pathan said.

Apart from Rashid, Noor

Ahmed and Azmatullah Omrzai are playing for Gujarat Titans in the ongoing IPL. Mohammed Nabi is representing Mumbai Indians and Rahmanullah Gurbaz is part of the KKR squad.

"Back in 2017, it was only me and (Mohd) Nabi, who were there and now we have 7-8

players who are with different franchises, and it is so good to see them not just being a part of the team but also performing," he said. "At the end of the day, it is helping Afghanistan cricket and youngsters back home. So I am quite happy, and blessed to be one of those who brought about this change in mindset of people about cricket in Afghanistan."

DIFFICULT TO HIT RHYTHM IMMEDIATELY AFTER SURGERY: Rashid had undergone a major back surgery last year, which didn't allow him to play the India series in January. It was a hard time but now he feels he is back in rhythm.

"For me, those three to four months were hard but I tried to make sure that I am relaxed and

when I get back on field, I am fully ready and prepared for it," the champion spinner said.

"The main focus for first four months was on getting back on track, it is hard when you are not playing but these are things which are attached to your career, and it is important as a player that you take (accept) that process, you make sure that you look after yourself.

"I made sure that I spent time with my family and looked after my body."

MISSING SHAMI BUT HAPPY WITH GT BOWLING UNIT: Gujarat Titans have had a bumpy ride with three wins and an equal number of defeats in the season thus far. While the absence of a game-changer like Mohammed Shami is being felt massively,

Rashid stood by the bowling unit.

"Shami played a main role for us in last two seasons, both with new ball and old ball, and the way he has delivered for the team actually made mine and others job easier, especially in the middle overs," he had no hesitation in admitting.

"We have started the season with a positive mindset and everyone is taking responsibility and delivering best for team but sometimes result doesn't go your way but we are quite happy with bowling unit.

"T20 is all about making right decisions at the right time. Spencer Johnson, Darshan Nalkande, Azmat, Umesh have all delivered and most importantly, Mohit (Sharma) bhai as well."