



OPINION 6
SHOWDOWN IN
KARNATAKA

WORLD 8
RUSSIAN MISSILES SLAM
INTO UKRAINE KILLING 14

MONEY 10
INDIAN ECONOMY PROJECTED TO
GROW 6.5 PER CENT IN 2024: UNCTAD

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Surya Tilak for Ram Lalla after five centuries



BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
AYODHYA

In an unprecedented event, at precisely 11:58 am today, the divine sunlight delicately graced the forehead of Ram Lalla, marking the commencement of the revered Surya Abhishek ritual. Lasting for four celestial minutes, this enchanting spectacle unfolded amidst joyous celebrations in the sacred city of Ayodhya. “This is an extraordinary moment for all devotees of Lord Ram,” exclaimed Pandit Satyendra Das, a prominent priest at the temple. “The Surya abhishek symbolises the divine blessings showered upon the birthplace of Lord Ram after centuries of longing,” he said. The Surya Tilak, an effulgent mark adorning Ram Lalla’s forehead, serves as a poignant emblem of Lord Ram’s birth and the realisation of a profound spiritual aspiration. According to a senior scientist from the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)-Central Building Research Institute (CBRI), Roorkee, the planned size of the tilak is 58 mm. The precise duration of the tilak on the forehead center was

approximately three to three-and-a-half minutes, with two minutes of full illumination, he noted. Utilising cutting-edge scientific expertise, a 5.8 centimetre beam of light was directed onto the deity’s forehead. To achieve this remarkable phenomenon, a specialised instrument was meticulously crafted. A team of ten esteemed Indian scientists stationed at the Ram Mandir meticulously ensured the success of this auspicious event on Ram Navami. For approximately 3 to 3.5 minutes, starting just before 12 noon, sunlight was precisely focused onto the statue’s forehead using a combination of mirrors and lenses. “This tradition of adorning the Ram Lalla idol’s forehead with the ‘surya tilak’ in Ayodhya on Ram Navami will now become an annual ritual,” stated Abhay Karandikar, secretary of the Department of Science and Technology. “However, due to the ongoing construction of the temple, adjustments will be required in the design of the optical mechanism responsible for creating the ‘surya tilak.”

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Curtains down on campaign for first phase of LS polls

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The campaigning for the first phase of polls covering 102 parliamentary seats of 21 States and Union Territories (UTs), where voting will be held on April 19 ended at 5 pm on Wednesday. Electioneering picked up pace on the final day of campaigning with the parties making last-minute effort to woo voters. Heatwave conditions and untimely rains with thunder and lightning had hit campaigning. Leading the charge, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took whirlwind tours of various constituencies in the past few days, addressing rallies and holding roadshows, and asserting that he went to people with hope in 2014, trust in 2019 and guarantee in 2024. Many times he said there is “Modi’s guarantee across the country and I am giving the guarantee of fulfilling all these guarantees”. Modi held two election rallies in Assam’s Nalbari and Tripura’s Agartala on Wednesday and launched a scathing attack on the Congress during campaigning in the northeastern States saying the party had adopted the ‘loot’ east policy while the BJP turned it into the ‘Act East’ policy.

Continued on Page 2

LOK SABHA ELECTION PHASE 1 SEATS

STATE/UT	CONSTITUENCY
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	Andaman and Nicobar Islands
Arunachal Pradesh	Arunachal Pradesh East, Arunachal Pradesh West
Assam	Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Kaziranga, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur
Bihar	Aurangabad, Gaya, Jamui, Nawada
Chhattisgarh	Bastar
Jammu and Kashmir	Udhampur
Madhya Pradesh	Chhindwara, Balaghat, Jabalpur, Mandla, Sidhi, Shahdol
Maharashtra	Nagpur, Chandrapur, Bhandara-Gondiya, Gadchiroli-Chinur, Ramtek
Manipur	Inner Manipur, Outer Manipur
Meghalaya	Shillong, Tura
Mizoram	Mizoram
Nagaland	Nagaland
Puducherry	Puducherry
Rajasthan	Ganganagar, Bikaner, Churu, Jhunjhunu, Sikar, Jaipur Rural, Jaipur, Alwar, Bharatpur, Karauli-Dholpur, Dausa, Nagaur
Sikkim	Sikkim
Tamil Nadu	Tiruvallur, Chennai North, Chennai South, Chennai Central, Sriperumbudur, Kancheepuram, Arakkonam, Vellore, Krishnagiri, Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai, Arani, Villupuram, Kallakurichi, Salem, Namakkal, Erode, Tiruppur, Nilgiris, Coimbatore, Pollachi, Dindigul, Karur, Tiruchirappalli, Perambalur, Cuddalore, Chidambaram, Mayiladuthurai, Nagapattinam, Thanjavur, Sivaganga, Madurai, Theni, Virudhunagar, Ramanathapuram, Thoothukudi, Tenkasi, Tirunelveli, Kanniyakumari
Tripura	Tripura West
Uttarakhand	Tehri Garhwal, Garhwal, Almora, Nainital-Udhamsingh Nagar, Haridwar
Uttar Pradesh	Pilibhit, Saharanpur, Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Nagina, Moradabad, Rampur
West Bengal	Coochbehar, Alipurduars, Jalpaiguri



Deluge hits Dubai



Vehicles sit abandoned in floodwater covering a major road in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday. Heavy thunderstorms lashed the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday, dumping over a year and a half’s worth of rain on the desert city-State of Dubai in the span of hours as it flooded out portions of major highways and its international airport

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■
KOLKATA

In an apparent view to grab land and pull back the steadily alienating minority voters, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday promised through the Trinamool Congress manifesto that if her party comes to power as a constituent of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) in the Centre then it would ban the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), banish National Register of Citizens (NRC) and put a bar on the Uniform Civil Code (UCC).

Releasing the TMC’s election manifesto, senior leader and former Bengal Finance Minister Amit Mitra quoting from Didi’s shapath (promises) said, “If the TMC is voted to power as a part of the INDIA alliance then it will repeal the CAA, abolish the NRC and see to it that UCC does not take place in the entire country.”



TMC leaders Amit Mitra, Derek O’Brien and Chandrima Bhattacharya release the party’s election manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections in Kolkata on Wednesday

The Chief Minister too said similar things at an election rally in Assam. Alleging that the BJP had “turned the entire country into a detention camp,” she said, “If the INDIA Bloc wins, there will be no NRC, CAA and UCC. We will repeal all discriminatory laws.” She said she had never seen “such a dangerous election in her life.”

There would be “no democracy left and there would be no elections” if Prime Minister Narendra Modi returns to power for the third term, she warned. Back in Kolkata the ten promises christened Didir Sapath by the party, the TMC also held out dangling a whole

range of carrots that ranged from 5 kilogram ration in home delivery mode to ten free LPG cylinders a year for all BPL families. “This is all about Didir Sapath ... we will provide 5 kg ration at the doorstep and give 10 gas cylinders free per year,” Mitra who was flanked by



senior leaders Derek O’Brien and Chandrima Bhattacharya said, adding his party would also get replaced the Ayushman Bharat at the all-India level to a ₹10 lakh medical insurance scheme. Besides, the students would get a credit card up to Rs 10 lakh for higher studies and the OBCs, SCs and STs would be provided separate higher education scholarships. The elderly too were not left out with a monthly old-age pension of ₹1,000 for those who cross 60 years. The party also promised a Minimum Support Price for the farmers which would be 50 per cent higher than the average cost of production of the costs. Besides “Didi’s Sapath also includes an enhanced wage of ₹400 per day for the job card holders who are enlisted in the 100-days’ work scheme,” said Mitra, adding the new Government in the Centre aided by the TMC would also decrease diesel and petrol prices by formulating a price stabilisation mechanism.

On the radar of Bihar’s electorate, litmus test for Nitish Kumar

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ PATNA

The Lok Sabha 2024 elections, like all polls, are considered to be as significant as those in the past. However, Bihar’s seven-phase elections for its 40 Parliamentary seats this time will not only decide between the NDA and the INDIA Bloc but also seal the fate for the future politics of the longest-serving Chief Minister Nitish Kumar now in his seventies, regardless of his alliances. While it is a direct contest between the BJP-led NDA and the RJD-led INDIA Bloc, Nitish is on the ‘radar’ of the people of Bihar, making him the litmus test for his major coalition partner, the BJP, which has long struggled to ‘install’ their own candidate as head of the State Government. As per the estimates of several politicians and parties, amidst the poll

fervour, it is comprehensible that the BJP and the RJD will have a close finish against each other. The June 4 poll result may highlight any political misstep by the BJP in realigning with JD(U), as its tallest leader’s popularity is waning. They also said that Nitish would be able save his skin a bit just in the name of the BJP led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. “Am certain not only Nitish but his party JD(U) too, due to severe internal factionalism pre- and post-Lalan Singh era, is affected. The cadre is facing difficulties in explaining the voters of Bihar due to the lone instance of repeated flip-flops by a sitting Chief Minister in the history of Indian politics. Biharis don’t like to be tagged as ‘paltu’, a more derogatory term than the old ‘aayaa Ram, gayaa Ram’. But I have got feedback that people of the State



Usually a hub of political activity during elections, this is the scene outside the Janata Dal (U) head office in Patna on Wednesday

across the world are facing difficulty in explaining his frequently changing sides. “Nitish Kumar rode over Lalu Raj and people

overwhelmingly voted for him going beyond caste and religion, but things are different now. “He seems to have run out of

ideas for a good last two terms. His last alliance with Tejaswi Yadav’s RJD kindled some hope on the employment front. But such

people-oriented development seems to have taken a back seat while caste and religion-ridden politics is back if you look at the pattern of ticket distribution.” Pushpendra Kumar, former Professor and chairperson of prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Patna Centre and now working full time as a researcher of Bihar’s society and polity, told The Pioneer in a tete-a-tete revolving around the general elections in Bihar.

Even residents of the village of Bihar CM expressed disenchantment towards the son of their soil due to his several political oscillations. “We were so proud that Nitish was so instrumental in bringing back Bihar to life after years of misrule by Lalu Raj but now we are fed up with Nitish’s own decisions. I

can only remember the Bollywood song Is Mod Se Jaate Hai Kuch Sust Kadam Raste Kuch Tej Kadam Rahein...,” said Pradeep Mahto, a villager of Kalyan Bigha near Harnaut in Nalanda district. According to the Bihar Economic Survey (2023-24) the State has over 88 per cent population and 50 per cent of its workforce is engaged in agriculture. The phase 1 polls on April 19 will see elections in Aurangabad, Gaya, Nawada, and Jamui while second phase on April 26 will take place in Kishanganj, Katihar, Purnia, Bhagalpur, and Banka. With 40 Lok Sabha seats, Bihar is considered to be a hotbed for Indian politics as it is the fourth-highest State overall.

While the JD(U) is contesting from 16 seats, the BJP from 17 seats and its partner LJP of Ram Vilas Paswan fighting on five seats and former Bihar CM Jitan Ram Majhi’s HAM and RLP each running for one seat. The Mahagathbandhan also part of INDIA Bloc with the Congress as its partner in Bihar, the largest coalition member the RJD has staked for 26 seats while CPI(ML) on three seats, CPI and CPM one each, and the Congress nine seats. The BJP, JDU, and LJP together formed the NDA, which won 39 of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The third phase May 7 will see polls in Jhanyharpur, Supaul, Araria, Madhepura, and Khagaria, and the fourth will be held in Darbhanga, Ujiarpur, Samastipur, Begusarai, and Munger on May 13.

Continued on Page 2

Azad backs out of LS race from Anantnag

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

In a sudden turn of events, Chairman of the Democratic Progressive Azad Party (DPAP) Ghulam Nabi Azad Wednesday backed out of the Lok Sabha race from the Anantnag-Rajouri Lok Sabha seat. DPAP Treasurer Taj Mohiuddin addressing a press conference in Srinagar announced on April 2, 2024, that the core committee of the party has decided to field Ghulam Nabi Azad from the Anantnag-Rajouri Lok Sabha seat. In his place, the party has decided to field Advocate Mohd Saleem Parray, a member of the District Development Council in Anantnag, to give a tough fight to the National Conference candidate Mian Altaf Ahmad and PDP Chief Mehbooba Mufti. Bharatiya Janta Party is yet to announce its candidate for the seat as well. Briefing media persons in Srinagar DPAP provincial president



Kashmir, Mohammad Amin Bhat said Ghulam Nabi Azad will not contest the Anantnag Rajouri Lok Sabha seat. The party has decided to field Advocate Mohd Saleem Parray. DPAP leader also clarified Azad has decided to withdraw his candidature from the seat for some valid reasons. "He informed the party leadership about the same during a meeting of the core committee" Bhat added. On a day DPAP candidate from the Udhampur-Doda Lok Sabha seat GM Saroori filed his

nomination papers in Kathua Azad had dropped clear hints that he may not file his nomination papers. Ghulam Nabi Azad and Omar Abdullah were trading charges against each other during the campaign meetings in the Chenab Valley region. Azad even labelled Omar a "tourist" to Jammu and Kashmir." Hitting back Omar accused Azad of dividing the secular vote to help a BJP candidate in a close fight on the Udhampur-Doda Lok Sabha seat.

Pawar vs Pawar: Sharad grand nephew attacks Ajit

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In a fresh war of words between the leaders of the feuding factions of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Sharad Pawar's grand nephew Rohit Pawar has taken on deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar for allegedly warning voters on the basis of government development "funds" given to the people. Within days after the NCP (Ajit Pawar) targeted Sharad Pawar over his reported comment suggesting Ajit Pawar's wife and its candidate from Baramati as an "outsider", Rohit Pawar of the rival NCP (Sharad Pawar) took to micro-blogging site "X" to draw the attention of Election Commission of India (ECI) for alleged violation of Model Code of Code by Ajit Pawar through an objectionable statement. Uploading a news video clip of the objectionable statement

made by Ajit Pawar at an election rally at Indapur which is part of Baramati Lok Sabha constituency on his "X" handle, Rohit said: "What is Ajitdada talking? Is talking about funds available with his friends or government development funds? Since the people are not supporting him, he is issuing threats of funds. This is nothing but violation of the Model Code of Conduct. ECI should take serious cognisance of Ajitdada's statement". The video clip showed Ajit Pawar saying: "We are giving you funds. Press the button on EVM machines. Otherwise we will have to take action". A full-fledged Pawar family battle is being waged in Baramati Lok Sabha constituency where Sharad Pawar's daughter and three-time MP Supriya Sule and deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's wife Sunetra Pawar – is taking on each other in Baramati constituency.

While Supriya represents the Sharad Pawar-led NCP which is one of the constituent of the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), Sunetra has been fielded by the NCP (Ajit Pawar) which is one of the parties in the BJP-led ruling MahaYuti. Baramati Lok Sabha constituency has been represented by the Sharad Pawar family for nearly four decades now. While Sharad Pawar was a two-time MP and his nephew Ajit Pawar represented Baramati for one term, sitting MP Supriya Supe has been a three-term Lok Sabha member from Baramati. Sharad Pawar's writ would run in Baramati for nearly four decades. However, political equasions changed in Maharashtra's prestigious Lok Sabha constituency after his nephew Ajit Pawar rebelled against Sr Pawar, walked out of the NCP with a sizeable number of supporters.

Maharashtra Congress moves EC, alleges MCC violations by Gadkari

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ Mumbai



The Maharashtra Congress has demanded cancellation of the nomination of the ruling BJP candidate from Nagpur Lok Sabha constituency Nitin Gadkari for allegedly violating Model Code of Conduct by using Lord Shri Ram's posters to influence voters. In a letter written to State Chief Election Officer (CEO) on Tuesday, Maharashtra Congress chief spokesperson Atul Londe alleged that Mr Gadkari had "utilised" posters featuring Lord Shree Ram in an attempt to influence voters on religious grounds, thereby violating the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). "Such tactics are not only unethical but also deeply divisive, aiming to polarize voters along religious lines," he stated. "The said posters have been used to spread hatred against the Congress party, indicating a clear violation of the MCC's provisions against spreading animosity based on political

affiliations," Londe stated. "In light of the serious infraction, I urge you to take immediate and decisive action, including the cancellation of Mr. Nitin Gadkari's candidature and the imposition of appropriate penalties on the BJP," Londe wrote in his complaint lodged with the State CEO. In a statement issued separately, Londe charged that the Election Commission of India (ECI) "is not taking any action against the ruling BJP" even when its leaders flouted all the rules. "The government machinery has become a puppet of the BJP. The ECI is running away from the responsibility," it said.

NDA will get just 180 seats if EVMs not tampered: Priyanka

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Indian National Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, on Wednesday, attacked the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre, saying that if the country conducts fair elections without any tampering of electronic voting machines (EVMs), then the ruling alliance will not secure more than 180 seats. The Congress leader questioned the basis of BJP's claim of securing more than 400 seats. Talking to a news agency during her roadshow in Saharanpur, Priyanka said, "On what basis are they saying that they will get 400, are they astrologers? Either they have done something from before (polling) and they know that they will secure more than 400 seats, Otherwise, how can they say that they will get 400 seats?... If today in this country, the elections are conducted in

such a way in which there... is no tampering of EVMs, then I can say with full confidence that they will not gain more than 180 seats; in fact, they will win less than 180 seats." Interestingly, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's brother Rahul Gandhi during a joint press conference with Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav claimed that the NDA would get just 150 seats. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also said that she viewed the election from the people's point of view and stressed that the polls should be conducted based on the issues of the people. "I am saying this everywhere to the people, that this election should be the election of the people. It should be conducted on the issues of the people," she said. Attacking Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP leaders, Priyanka alleged that the BJP is not talking about unemployment and inflation. "They are not talking about

the issues of unemployment and inflation. They are not talking about the real issues faced by farmers and the women. All the conversations are happening only to divert the people's mind," she said. Claiming that people want change, the Congress leader asserted that people have not seen any development in their lives for the past 10 years and PM Modi has got disconnected with the people. "People want change. They don't want this type of politics... In the past 10 years, there has not been any development in the life of any common man, or woman... They are not getting jobs; inflation is not coming down... It is the time of festivals. Today is Ram Navami. People don't have money to buy anything... He (Modi) doesn't talk about unemployment and inflation. I feel the people around him are not telling him about this... He is disconnected from people," she said.

Only Modi can ensure strong, prosperous Bharat in third term: Fadnavis

PTI ■ GONDIA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi should be elected for a third term for a strong and prosperous Bharat, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said on Tuesday as he targeted the opposition over the alleged lack of coordination with the analogy of a train. Addressing a poll rally, the senior BJP leader said the people have only two choices in this election- either to elect Modi for development or the alliance led by Rahul Gandhi. "Modiji is the power engine of our Mahayuti alliance. There is ample space for people to board this 'Vikas ki train' of Modiji with coaches of Shiv Sena, NCP, RPI and others. Other alliance doesn't have any coaches and all (constituents) claim themselves to be engines but they lack coordination," he said.



He said it is up to the people to elect the right government and give a third term to Modi for a strong and prosperous Bharat. The Bhandara-Gondiya constituency goes to poll in the first phase on April 19. The BJP has fielded sitting MP Sunil Mendhe from this constituency. "Modiji is working on the agenda of the welfare of the poor, keeping in mind the interest of all sections of the society. He has dreamt of women's empowerment and there will be 33 per cent representation for women in the state assembly and also in parliament after 2026.

Jai Shri Ram fills air in TMC Ram Navami celebrations

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

From announcing a holiday on the occasion of Ram Navami to donning the saffron and staging rallies a la the BJP down the streets of Bengal to chanting Jai Shri Ram slogans the TrinamoolCongress on Wednesday did everything that was required to do two days before the first round of general elections. Two-time MP and TMC's Ghatat candidate Deb was seen shouting Jai Jai Sri Ram slogans donning saffron attire and leading a massive saffron crowd. When asked whether he had lost faith in Mamata Banerjee's alternative call of Jai Bangla, Deb who is also a Bengali superstar said, "Ram belongs to all and I will not have to take permission from anyone to celebrate the festival of my own God," adding how Banerjee's Government respected all religions. Earlier the Bengal

Government had declared a holiday on Wednesday on the occasion of Ram Navami. At Howrah Bengal minister Arup Roy, and TMC MP Prasun Banerjee too were seen competing --- rather leaving the BJP behind --- in celebrating the festival insofar as its din and bustle was concerned. Cut to Jadavpur Sayoni Ghosh the Bangla actor and TMC candidate too jumped into the fray celebrating the Lord's birthday with gusto even as her followers wearing saffron attires thronged the streets apparently making it difficult for the right-wingers to distinguish between the two. At Suri in Birbhum too sitting outgoing TMC MP and candidate Shatabdi Roy hit the streets with her own clan of Ram Bhakts even as their screams of Jai Sri Ram filled the air. Incidentally, Ram Navami had been one of minor festivals in Bengal with

people celebrating it indoors save in the areas where the majority of residents are from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Not to live far behind the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and other similar saffron groups took out long processions carrying weapons in many places. BJP men were seen dancing with swords and spears at Balurghat and Rampurhat where the BJP has fielded State party president Sukanta Majumdar and just-retired IPS officer Debashis Dhar. Senior saffron leader Dilip Ghosh and Suwendu Adhikari celebrated the festival leading long processions at Durgapur and New Town in Kolkata. When asked to comment on the TMC's taking part in the Ram Navami in a big way, Adhikari said, "there is a difference between a Bhakti (reverence) and Bhoy (fear) ... what they are doing is out of fear."

On the radar of Bihar's...

From page 1

Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Saran and Hajipur will go to polls in fifth phase on May 17 the sixth phase will be held in Valmiki Nagar, Paschim Champaran,

Purvi Champaran, Sheohar, Vaishali, Gopalganj, Siwan, and Maharajganj would on May 25. The final phase would see elections in Nalanda, Patna Sahib, Pataliputra, Arrah, Buxar, Sasaram, Karakat, and Jahanabad on June 1.

BJP attacks Mamata over post linking Ram Navami with disharmony

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Wednesday accused West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of linking Ram Navami festival with disharmony, claiming that her comments reflect INDIA bloc leaders' insulting mindset

for the country's culture. Greeting the people on Ram Navami, Banerjee had in a post on X appealed to "maintain peace, prosperity and development for all". Seizing on her post, BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi said her appeal to maintain peace implies that

she is linking the festival to disturbance or disharmony. "This is totally an insult of the festival of Ram Navami," the BJP MP told reporters. He also took a swipe at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Akhilesh Yadav over their joint press

conference for the claim that the INDIA bloc will sweep Uttar Pradesh in the Lok Sabha polls. Yadav had said "winds of change" are blowing from western Uttar Pradesh and INDIA bloc will have a "clean sweep from Ghaziabad to Ghazipur".

Both opposition leaders themselves lack the courage to announce their candidature from Uttar Pradesh but are giving assurances to others, Trivedi said. "Everybody knows that 'aayega to Modi hi'," he said, claiming that the BJP-led

alliance will win over 400 Lok Sabha seats in the national elections. While Rahul Gandhi left Uttar Pradesh after losing the poll from Amethi in 2019, her mother Sonia Gandhi, Lok Sabha MP from Raebareli, has gone to Rajya Sabha, he said.

Surya Tilak for Ram Lalla...

From page 1

The event elicited jubilation across the nation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi shared in a social media post, "After my Nalbari rally, I witnessed the Surya Tilak on Ram Lalla. Like millions of Indians, this is a deeply emotional moment for me. The grand Ram Navami celebration in Ayodhya is historic. May this Surya Tilak infuse our lives with energy and inspire our nation to scale new heights of glory." Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath remarked, "Today, Ayodhya shines with divine grace. May this historic moment herald an era of peace, unity, and prosperity for all." As Vedic chants echoed through the air and the city basked in the golden glow of this celestial occurrence, devotees from far and wide revelled in the fulfillment of a cherished dream - a temple dedicated to the revered Lord Ram, standing tall at his divine birthplace. The significance of this event resonated deeply with the residents of Ayodhya, who have awaited the construction of the temple at Lord Ram's birthplace for over five centuries. "To witness the sunlight adorning Ram Lalla's

forehead is nothing short of a miracle," remarked Anjali Verma, a resident of Ayodhya. "It reaffirms our faith and strengthens our connection to Lord Ram," said Verma. In nearby Kanak Bhawan, women of Ayodhya sang auspicious songs, Sauhar - celebrating the divine moment of birth of Lord Ram. Meticulous Planning for Rituals: The festivities commenced with Mangala Aarti at 3:30 am on Wednesday, coinciding with the Brahma Muhurta. Following this, rituals such as Abhishek, Shringar, and Darshan were seamlessly conducted. Shringar Aarti was held at 5 am, followed by darshan and worship rituals. In preparation for the large gathering, arrangements have been made for prasad distribution post the Shayan Aarti, conveniently located at the temple exit. Pilgrims are advised to securely deposit mobile phones, footwear, and other prohibited items before entering the temple premises. Champat Rai further stated that passes for various services, including Sugam Darshan, VIP Darshan, Mangala Aarti, Shringar Aarti, and Shayan Aarti, will not be issued until April 19 due to the expected crowd.

Curtains down on campaign for first phase of LS polls

From page 1

Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and several of their Cabinet colleagues, leaders of the Congress such as Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi, and other parties also canvassed for their candidates. Rahul and SP chief Akhilesh Yadav addressed a joint Press conference in Ghaziabad on Wednesday, predicting a loss for BJP in the Lok Sabha polls. The Opposition leaders, in turn, have attacked the Government over electoral bonds, alleged misuse of agencies, inflation and unemployment among other issues. The BJP has come out all guns blazing at the INDIA Bloc over corruption, dynasty politics and insulting the Constitution and Hinduism. Eight Union Ministers - Nitin Gadkari, Kiren Rijiju, Sarbanada Sonowal, Sanjeev Balyan, Jitendra Singh, Bhupendra Yadav, Arjun Ram Meghwal and L Murugan, two former Chief Ministers - Biplab Kumar Deb (Tripura) and Nabam Tuki (Arunachal Pradesh), and former Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan (Telangana) are among those in fray. Some high-profile seats going to polls include Chennai South, Coimbatore, Nagpur, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Jamui. The first phase will witness a contest among 1,625 candidates.

In 2019, the UPA had won 45 of these 102 seats and the NDA 41. Six of these seats have been redrawn as part of the delimitation exercise. Polling will be held in all seats of Tamil Nadu (39), Uttarakhand (5), Arunachal Pradesh (2), Meghalaya (2), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (1), Mizoram (1), Nagaland (1), Puducherry (1), Sikkim (1) and Lakshadweep (1). Besides, there will be voting in 12 seats in Rajasthan, 8 in Uttar Pradesh, 6 in Madhya Pradesh, 5 seats each in Assam and Maharashtra, 4 in Bihar, 3 in West Bengal, 2 in Manipur, and one seat each in Tripura, Jammu and Kashmir and Chhattisgarh. In the BJP's South-push, Tamil Nadu BJP president K Annamalai is set to take the ballot test in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore where he is pitted against DMK leader and former Coimbatore Mayor Ganapathy P Rajkumar and AIADMK's Singai Ramachandran. The BJP's decision to field Annamalai prompted the DMK to put up a candidate after 10 years, which would otherwise be left to the Left parties, owing to the cluster of textile industries and its proximity to Kerala. In fact, the textile industry is what makes Coimbatore a hope for the BJP. The seat is more important to the BJP as it was one of the party's earliest Lok Sabha seats in the State.

The hilly Wayanad seat of Kerala, seen as a safe bet for the Congress scion Rahul, might not be that safe after all. The seat which he won by a margin of 4.3 lakh in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, this time would face the Communist Party's Annie Raja and the BJP's Kerala chief K Surendran, among others. Tamilisai Soundararajan, who recently resigned as Governor of Telangana and Lt Governor of Puducherry to return to active politics, is contesting from Chennai South Lok Sabha constituency. Daughter of veteran Congress leader Kumari Ananthan, Soundararajan had contested 2019 Lok Sabha elections against DMK's Kanimozhi, but lost by a huge margin in Thoothukudi. Union Road and Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari is seeking a hat-trick of wins from the Nagpur seat. In 2014, he had defeated seven-time MP Vilas Muttamwar by a margin of 2.84 lakh votes and retained the seat in 2019 by defeating current Maharashtra Congress chief Nana Patole by 2.16 lakh votes. Union Minister Kiren Rijiju is contesting from the Arunachal West seat. The 52-year-old has represented the constituency thrice since 2004. Rijiju's main rival is former Chief Minister and present president of Arunachal Pradesh Congress Nabam Tuki.

Sarbanada Sonowal, Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, is seeking a return to the Lok Sabha from Dibrugarh in Assam. Sonowal, a Rajya Sabha member, was fielded from Dibrugarh after Union Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas, Rameswar Teli, was not given a ticket. Muzaffarnagar, known for its intricate caste dynamics, is witnessing a three-cornered electoral battle, with Union Minister Sanjeev Balyan locked in competition against Samajwadi Party's Harindara Malik and BSP candidate Dara Singh Prajapati. Jitendra Singh, a two-time parliamentarian and a junior Minister in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Cabinet, is aiming for a hat-trick in Udhampur. Bhupendra Yadav, Union Minister and Rajya Sabha member who replaced sitting MP Balak Nath, is in a contest with sitting Congress MLA Lalit Yadav, who belongs to Matsya region of Alwar district in Rajasthan and enjoys the support of the Yadav community. Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal is pitted against former Congress Minister Govind Ram Meghwal from Bikaner parliamentary seat in Rajasthan. The Nilgiris Lok Sabha constituency in Tamil Nadu is witnessing one of the keenly watched battles between A Raja, the incumbent DMK MP,

and former Telecom Minister, and L Murugan of the BJP, who is the Union Minister of State for Fisheries. This will be the first time that Murugan, who was elected to the Rajya Sabha from Madhya Pradesh, is contesting from here. Sivaganga MP Karti Chidambaram is aiming for a re-election from a seat his father won seven times, competing against BJP's T Devanathan Yadav and AIADMK's Xavier Dass. This time, Kanimozhi is seeking re-election from the seat. NDA ally Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar) has fielded SDR Vijayaseelan and AIADMK has fielded R Sivasami Velumani from the constituency. Nakul Nath, son of Congress leader and former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath, is seeking re-election Chhindwara. The seat has remained firmly with Kamal Nath, who has won the seat nine times since 1980. In the 2019 polls, the BJP bagged 28 seats out of the State's 29, but missed out on picking Chhindwara, where Nakul beat the BJP's candidate by 37,536 votes to emerge as the lone Congress MP in the State. Of the two Lok Sabha constituencies in Tripura, the seat of West Tripura that votes in the first phase on April 19 will see a high-voltage clash between former Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb and state Congress president Ashish

Kumar Saha. Having won Lok Sabha elections twice since 2014 from Kaliabor constituency in Assam, Gaurav Gogoi, Congress deputy leader in Lok Sabha and son of former Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, finds himself as the new candidate in neighbouring Jorhat, where BJP's Topon Kumar Gogoi won in 2019. Gaurav Gogoi's shift to Jorhat came after the impact of delimitation exercise in his 2019 constituency, Kaliabor. Manipur Law and Education Minister Basanta Kumar Singh is the BJP's nominee for the inner Manipur constituency and is pitted against JNU Professor and Congress candidate Bimal Akojiam. Singh, who belongs to the Meiti community, is the son of Thounaojam Chaoba Singh who served as the Union Minister of State for sports, youth affairs, culture and food processing in the NDA Government-led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The BJP stronghold of Churu, in northern Rajasthan, is readying for an interesting match between BJP candidate Devendra Jhaharia, a two-time Paralympic gold medalist javelin thrower, and Rahul Kaswan from the Congress. Kaswan is a turncoat who has made the fight for Churu interesting. The two-time left the BJP only in March after he was denied a ticket by the party.

AAP to bank on sympathy wave as BJP looking to sweep polls in city

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The upcoming electoral battle for seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi will see the BJP trying to increase its vote share and sweeping Delhi's seven Lok Sabha seats for the third consecutive time. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) contesting the polls in an alliance with the Congress hopes to use the "sympathy wave" for arrested Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to break the saffron party's streak. Delhi will go to polls on May 25.

three constituencies. Both the BJP and the AAP-Congress combine have fielded high-profile candidates, setting the stage for a keen contest to gain electoral supremacy. Virendra Sachdeva, the BJP's Delhi unit chief, has said the challenge for the party this time is to increase the margin of victory. The Northeast Delhi seat, dominated by Purvanchalis and Muslims, will witness a key battle between two candidates who hail from Bihar. The BJP has fielded Manoj Tiwari, who is eyeing a third term in the Lok Sabha while the Congress' Kanhaiya Kumar will make his electoral debut for the grand old party. Kumar had unsuccessfully contested the 2019 Lok Sabha polls on a CPI ticket from the Begusarai seat in Bihar. A BJP leader in Delhi, requesting



anonymity, said Tiwari has a high chance of retaining the seat and asserted that Kumar's past as a student leader and his association with the Left is likely to have a polarising effect. The Congress is looking to capitalise on Kumar's popularity

community in the 12 reserved Assembly segments spread over different Lok Sabha seats. Besides capitalising on a direct contest with the BJP, AAP claims there is an anti-Modi sentiment among Dalit and Muslim voters in East Delhi that will benefit it electorally in the seat. In 2019, Gautam Gambhir won the seat after defeating the Congress' Arvinder Singh Lovely by 3.93 lakh votes. AAP's Atishi was third in the contest. This time, the coming together of AAP and the Congress is likely to consolidate the anti-BJP vote, AAP leaders said. BJP leaders in Delhi, however, are confident of retaining all the seven seats the party has held since 2014. They pointed out that the votes polled by party candidates on each of the seven seats in 2019 were

higher than the total votes secured by the AAP and the Congress candidates. In the 2019 elections, the BJP had secured 56.5 per cent of the polled votes in the national capital, the Congress 22 per cent, and the AAP 18.1 per cent. The saffron party has also sought to balance the caste factor in announcing its candidates — fielding Harsh Malhotra, a Punjabi from East Delhi, Baniya leader Praveen Khandelwal from Chandni Chowk, MLA and Gujjar leader Ramvir Singh Bidhuri from South Delhi, Jat leader Kamaljeet Sehrawat from West Delhi, and Dalit leader Yogendra Chandolia from the reserved North West Delhi seat. It has fielded two women candidates — Sehrawat and Bansuri Swaraj from New Delhi —

and that will help bring more women votes, the BJP leaders said. The AAP is looking to make electoral gains through sympathy in the aftermath of Kejriwal's arrest in a money-laundering case linked to the Delhi government's now-scrapped excise policy. The party's campaign also revolves around Kejriwal's arrest. Its 'Jail Ka Jawab Vote Se' campaign urges people to reply to Kejriwal's arrest with their votes. The AAP has also fielded three-time MLA Somnath Bharti from the New Delhi constituency, Sahiram Pehelwan from South Delhi and Congress ex-MP Mahabul Mishra from West Delhi. The Congress has fielded veteran leader J P Agarwal from Chandni Chowk and former BJP MP Udit Raj from the reserved Northwest Delhi constituency.

AAP unveils AAP Ka RamRajya website to showcase party Ram Rajya concept

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

On a day "Surya Tilak" (Sun's rays) illuminated Lord Ram Lalla idol's forehead at Ayodhya Temple on the occasion of Ram Navami, the Aam Aadmi Party on Wednesday launched its "AAP Ka RamRajya" website for the Lok Sabha polls campaign to showcase the party's concept of "Ram Rajya", saying Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal tried to realise the ideals of Lord Ram in the national capital. The launch of the website — aapkaramrajya.com — came ahead of the first phase of the Lok Sabha polls to be held on Friday. It coincided with the Ram Navami festival being celebrated in several parts of the country on Wednesday. During a joint press conference, Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh said the website will showcase AAP's concept of "Ram Rajya" as well as the work done by the party's governments.

"Chief Minister Kejriwal

accomplished wonderful things — good schools, mohalla clinics, free water and electricity and free bus rides for women — in the last 10 years for realising 'Ram Rajya', Singh said. This is the first time that Kejriwal is not among his people on Ram Navami, Singh said and alleged that the Delhi chief minister was sent to jail in a "baseless" case based on statements from "false" witnesses. "In Arvind Kejriwal's concept of 'Ram Rajya', no one is big or small and the idea is to work in the interest of all. Keeping this in mind, AAP's Lok Sabha campaign website has been launched on Ram Navami," Singh said. The world is learning from the work being done by Kejriwal and the AAP government, he claimed. "Earlier, people used to say 'learn from America' but now the American president's wife comes to India and says she wants to see schools built by Arvind Kejriwal. Now, Americans learn from Kejriwal's work," the senior



leader said, referring to former US First Lady Melania Trump's visit to a Delhi government school in February 2020. Reacting to this, Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva has termed it shameful for the Aam Aadmi Party to name its website Ram Rajya Website. He said that when Aam Aadmi Party and its leaders like Arvind Kejriwal, Sanjay Singh, Saurabh Bhardwaj or Ms. Atishi mention the name of Lord Ram or talk about Ram Rajya, it reminds us of a Hindi song - "Dekho a deewano tum yeh kaam na karo ram ka naam badnaam na karo." Sachdeva said, "Whether it's AAP or its leaders, all of them

openly opposed the construction of Lord Ram temple in Ayodhya until 2022, and Chief Minister Kejriwal continued to oppose temple construction by narrating stories of his grandmothers and said its particularly hurting the feelings of Muslims." AAP leaders Atishi, Saurabh Bhardwaj and Jasmine Shah were also present at the press conference. Atishi, a minister in the Delhi government, said, "We are implementing the concept of 'Ram Rajya' in Delhi and Punjab. We want to spread the public welfare work being done by the AAP in the country and the world through

this website." Reciting a verse from the Ramcharitamanas, she said, "Just like Lord Ram fulfilled all his promises amid hardships, Kejriwal is fighting all the difficulties and working for the people and fulfilling his promises in the same manner." She recited another verse, "Raghukul reet sada chali aayi, pran jaaye par vachan na jaaye (a promise must be kept even at the cost of one's life)" and asserted that Kejriwal worked with dedication to fulfil the promises made to the people of Delhi and Punjab. Lord Shri Ram had to struggle to give real shape to Ram Rajya and went into 14 years of exile but did not break his promise. "Similarly, Arvind Kejriwal has to struggle a lot to fulfil his promises. Despite facing obstacles such as the central government's attempts to hinder the work of the elected Delhi government and efforts to diminish its power through legislation, the CM has remained steadfast," she said.

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva on Wednesday charged that Arvind Kejriwal himself and his Government have an old relationship with scams. Making this claim in a news conference, the BJP also said the Kejriwal Government has set record of maximum corruption in shortest tenure. Between 2015 and 2021, scams involving fake companies and exposed former minister Satyendra Jain's corruption and land scams, which unveiled the first layer of corruption in the Kejriwal government in 2020, it said. Highlighting some of the alleged scandals, the BJP said in 2018, Arvind Kejriwal's associate Surendra Bansal's company was implicated in a fake bill scam of P.W.D. In 2020-21, two companies defrauded the Delhi Jal Board by depositing bills into private company accounts. In 2021-22, Arvind Kejriwal's government formed a cartel of liquor companies, and now



even Arvind Kejriwal himself is in jail for the game they played, BJP charged. Sachdeva said even as Delhiites have not forgotten these scams new scams involving arbitrary allocation of contracts to companies in revolutionary education and health services have come out. When we raised questions about these, Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj attempted to mislead and divert attention, claimed and said "Today, I once again ask questions to the Arvind Kejriwal government and hope that the Kejriwal government and the Aam Aadmi Party will respond directly without diverting the

issue. The education department awarded the contract to establish School of Excellence to Boston Consulting Group, owned by Seema Bansal, who is affiliated with "AAP" in Punjab in 2021, despite their high bid - People want to know why was the contract awarded to the company with the higher bid, and what is the relationship between Seema Bansal and Aam Aadmi Party, Sachdeva said. There are big claims about the health model, but there is corruption here too : the case of counterfeit drugs in Kejriwal government hospitals is well known - People want to know what is the relationship between the certification failed company Tirupati Mediline Pvt. Ltd. and its owners Mudit Gupta and Shubham Gupta with the Aam Aadmi Party, he asked. Sachdeva said Kejriwal and his team should respond to these two questions immediately or our workers will soon go to the Delhi Secretariat to get answers.

CM private secretary Bibhav asked to vacate quarter after termination order

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's private secretary Bibhav Kumar has been asked to vacate his Government quarter in Civil Lines area following the order of Kumar's termination of service passed by Vigilance department's Special Secretary YVVJ Rajshekhar on April 10. In a letter dated Tuesday, the Director of Allotment of Public Works department Ashish Kumar wrote, "As per Sub Rule 2 (1) of Rule 11 of GNCTD Allotment of Government Residences (General Pool) Rules, 1977, the maximum permissible period to retain the government residence in case of "Resignation, dismissal or removal from service, termination of service or unauthorised absence without permission" is one month." Further it said that he is eligible to keep the residence allotted by the government until May 10, a month after his termination orders. The missive stated, "Hence, upon termination of his services,



Kumar is eligible to retain the government accommodation of GNCTD for a maximum period of one month only i.e. up to May 10." "The quarter no. D-II, Type-VI, Chandrawal Water Works II, Civil Lines, Delhi allotted to Bibhav Kumar is hereby cancelled with immediate effect and Sh. Bibhav Kumar is further directed to vacate the said government accommodation on or before May 10 i.e. within a maximum permissible period of retention of one month." The missive also mentioned the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT), which refused to stay the termination of Bibhav Kumar and said, "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." Earlier, the Delhi government vigilance department terminated Kumar from his services. An action in this regard has been taken in connection with a case pending against him for obstruction. The vigilance department order citing a case of 2007 pending against Bibhav Kumar in which he was accused of obstructing government work. "The Competent Authority hereby terminates the engagement of Bibhav Kumar, in terms of the provisions of Rule 5 of the Central Civil Services (Temporary Service) Rules, 1965, with immediate effect," the order said. The directive further noted that a government employee, Mahesh Pal, had alleged that Bibhav Kumar obstructed him from performing his duties and verbally abused him. The order specified that a case had been filed against Bibhav Kumar.

Fresh notices on favouring tenders during Covid

SAMAR PANDEY ■ NEW DELHI

After Dr RN Dass, the Delhi Government's Vigilance Department has issued notices to Central Procurement Agency's (CPA) Head of Office (HOO) Dr Nitin Kumar and (SO) Urmila and Department of Consumers' (DCA) District Health Society (DHS) SK Verma regarding 'the management of the tenders in favour of a particular family in different company names'. In a show-cause notice issued on Monday by the Vigilance Department, it said, Nitin Kumar, Urmila, and SK Verma were in the forefront in managing the tenders in favour of a particular family in different company names, and the conspiracy was hatched in the backdrop of COVID crisis. The COVID crisis was used as a reason and basis to swindle crores of

Rupees from public exchequer, the notice alleged. "Out of the 24 participants only 3 were technically qualified by the committees headed by R.N. Das (who was OSD to the then Health Minister Satyender Jain and Presently OSD to Health Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj). Qualified participants were, Pharma Surge Impex, Pharmatek India, and Tirupati Medilines Pvt Ltd, and the committee rejected bids of remaining 21 companies," the show cause notice stated. The vigilance department has sought a response from all of them within seven days and it said the conspiracy was hatched in the backdrop of Covid crisis. 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, adding that Das chaired three committees for procurement of single use gloves, sterilised gloves and N-95 masks. This tender was awarded based upon the circular of ICMR dated August 26, 2020 as per the supply order dated June 16, 2020 and June 6, 2020 for approximately Rs 49.50 crore. The logic that was given for SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd is that it was recognised as a valid supplier for the RAT Kit. According to the notice, this was for procurement of Rs 50,64,450 single use examination gloves. It is observed that the technical evaluation committee, the

bid opening committee, financial approving committee and scrutiny of complaint committee are one and same under the Chairmanship of R.N. Das. Nitin Kumar, Urmila, and S.K. Verma were member of this committee. The notice said that there is a cartelisation of medical procurement and supply by one family including brothers, wife, and son. All other companies who have participated in the tender were rejected for one or other reasons. There is no justification to mention OEM criteria for a product like gloves, non-sterilized gloves, N-95 mask, it said. "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.

Congress, INLD yet to announce candidates for Gurugram seat

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Jannayak Janta Party have fielded their candidates from the Gurugram seat, while the Opposition parties Congress and Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) are yet to finalize their candidates. Rao Inderjeet Singh will fight from the BJP seat while Haryanvi Singer Rahul Yadav alias Fazzailpuria will fight on the JJP seat. The Gurugram seat comprises nine Assembly segments including Bawal, Rewari, Pataudi, Badshahpur, Gurugram, Sohna, Nuh, Ferozepur Jhirka and Punahana. The constituency is a general seat and not reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The BJP, the Congress and the INLD are the main parties in the constituency. Rao Inderjit Singh represented the constituency three times in a row in 2009, 2014 and 2019. Political observers said that the BJP has already taken advantage of the early announcement of the candidate. "The Congress should not delay in announcing the party candidate for the Gurugram seat, which is set to be a direct contest," said an expert. The Congress and INLD have a good presence in the segment and the potential to influence the outcome of the election," it added.

Meanwhile, the Congress sources said suggestions are undergoing within the central party leadership, which held a meeting in Delhi recently to finalize their candidates. The sources revealed that the party leadership discussed the weaknesses and strengths of all the candidates in the meeting. Likewise, The INLD seems to be taking a longer time to finalise its nominee. As per data from the Election Commission, there are 25,21,332 voters in the Gurugram constituency at present. In the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, BJP leader Rao Inderjit Singh won the seat with a margin of 3,86,256 votes. He was polled 8,81,546 votes. He defeated Congress candidate Captain Ajay Singh who got 4,95,290 votes. Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) candidate Chaudhary Rais Ahmad stood third with 26,756 votes in the constituency. Apart from this, a BJP candidate from Gurugram Lok Sabha seat, Rao Inderjit Singh said that the public mood ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections is in favour of BJP. He said that there is massive support among the farmers and the working class for the BJP. Rao made this statement while inaugurating his Lok Sabha election office in Sector-15 in Gurugram on Wednesday. "BJP's aim is the development of

every section. There has been tremendous development in every sector in the last 10 years under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi," Singh said. Speaking on BJP's election manifesto, Rao Inderjit Singh said that it has been made keeping in mind every section and every person of the country. Prime Minister Modi has promised in the BJP's manifesto to make all four classes, poor, youth, food givers and women, he said. "Roads, highways and railway networks are getting strengthened in the country and the state as well. Basic facilities are easily available to the people. Under the leadership of PM Modi, India's economy has moved from 11th to fifth place in ten years and in the next five years, India will be the third largest economy in the world," Rao said. Taking a dig at the opposition he said opposition governments did caste politics in Haryana but now the BJP's slogan of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas and Prayas' is being practised. He said that there is no challenge for him in Gurugram Lok Sabha. The Ahir stalwart said that the people of Gurugram Lok Sabha love Prime Minister Modi and believe in Modi's guarantees. People want development, hence the voters have made up their minds unilaterally in favour of BJP in the elections, he added.

Secretaries misled Government, Assembly on availability of medicines: AAP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Minister and senior AAP leader Saurabh Bhardwaj on Wednesday alleged that the Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar and Health Secretary Dr SB Deepak Kumar blatantly misled both the Government and the Legislative Assembly regarding the availability of medicines. The Health Minister asserted that during the Legislative Assembly discussion, numerous MLAs vehemently refuted the false claims made by Kumar regarding the availability of medicines. "The Chief Secretary was asked to ensure supply of medicines, while he is trying to take shelter of Rules of Business of Delhi Legislative Assembly. He could have spent those efforts in working for the people of Delhi," Bhardwaj said. Taking potshots at Kumar, he said that instead of looking for new frivolous excuses every time, the Chief Secretary should do positive work as directed by the government. Bhardwaj said, "As an afterthought, he made a frivolous excuse that all routine files of departments are not routed through Chief Secretary so he cannot supervise the availability of medicines & consumables." The Minister mandated that specific directions to Kumar regarding availability of medicines need to be compiled without any excuses. "Historically, routine files of departments were never routed through Chief Secretary during the tenure of earlier Chief Secretaries from the tenure of SK Srivastava to Vijay Dev.



Woman among three arrested for murder of cab driver

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police has arrested three people, including a woman, in the murder of a 34 year old cab driver in North Delhi's Chhatta Rail Red light area near Red Fort on Wednesday. The accused had also shot at a passerby, who witnessed the whole incident. The accused have been identified as Anita alias Ruksar, aged 28 years old, Sajid, aged 19 years old, and Salman, aged 24 years old. Police said that a piece of information was received from LNJP hospital on Monday at 1:50 a.m. that Mohammad Shaqib, a resident of Zakir Nagar, had been admitted after receiving gunshot wounds, along with one Luv Khush, aged 15 years old, a resident of Palwal. "The joint team of Police Station Kotwali & Special Staff

have worked out a murder case of an Uber Cab Driver committed while helping the victim during a minor accident and subsequent road rage with driver of Cab occurred on an intervening night of 14th-15th April," DCP North M.K. Meena. During the probe, it was revealed that around 12:00 a.m., a Maruti Wagon-R collided with an e-rickshaw at the Chhatta Rail Red light. "The e-rickshaw overturned, leading to an altercation between the Wagon-R driver and the rickshaw driver. Bystanders intervene, resulting in three men assaulting the Wagon-R driver, stealing his mobile phone, and pickpocketing cash from the rickshaw driver," said the DCP. According to the police, amidst the commotion when the accused were caught by the public for pickpocketing, a

scooty rider shot Shaqib, the cab driver, and fired towards the gathered public, injuring a bystander in a bid to flee the scene. "The assailants fled, with two individuals and a woman on the scooty heading towards Old Delhi Railway Station, while the third person escaped in the crowd. Both victims were taken to LNJP Hospital following the incident," DCP said. During treatment, Shaqib, who had suffered a gunshot injury in his upper abdomen, had succumbed to his injuries and the minor is undergoing treatment at the hospital. "Through CCTV analysis, the scooty's number used by the assailant was identified, but upon verification, it was discovered that the assailant had equipped the scooty with a duplicate number," said the DCP.

Government determined to free country of Maoists: Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has reaffirmed the government's commitment to making Chattisgarh and the entire country, "completely free of Maoists," He also labeled them "the biggest enemy of development, peace, and (the) bright future of youth". Shah's comments come a day after Chhattisgarh security forces killed 29 Maoists, including a senior rebel leader - Shankar Rao, on whom there was a bounty of Rs 25 lakh — in a gunfight in Kanker district. The Home Minister also congratulated the joint District Reserve Guard and Border Security Force team, which suffered three non-

fatal injuries. He said the Modi government is determined to free the country from the scourge. Shah said due to the offensive policy of the government and the efforts of security forces, Maoism has been confined to a small area now and soon Chhattisgarh and the entire country will be completely Maoist-free. "Today, a large number of Naxalites have been killed in the operation of security forces in Chhattisgarh. I congratulate all the security personnel who made this operation successful with their bravery and wish for the speedy recovery of the brave policemen who have been injured," Shah wrote on 'X' in Hindi. Apart from the 29 rebels killed, the DRG-BSF team



also recovered a huge quantity of weapons, including Ak-47 and INSAS rifles, as well as .303

carbines and pistols. The Narendra Modi government will eliminate Naxals from the country in a very short period of time, Union Home Minister Amit Shah asserted on Wednesday, according to PTI from Ahmedabad. The central government has been conducting incessant operations against terrorism and Naxals, he said in a statement, a day after security forces gunned down 29 Maoists in Chhattisgarh. "I can say with conviction that operations against Naxals will continue in the times to come, and under the leadership of Modi, we will uproot Naxalism from our nation in a very short period of time," Shah said. The home minister said since the formation of a BJP government in Chhattisgarh

three months ago, more than 80 Naxals have been eliminated, more than 125 arrested and more than 150 have surrendered. Shah said a large number of camps of security forces have been set up in Maoist-affected areas since 2014. Since 2019, as many as 250 such camps have been set up, ending the security vacuum, he said. Since the start of 2024, as many as 79 Naxalites have been killed in separate gunbattles with security forces in the Bastar region, a Maoist stronghold. The violence in Kanker comes days before the Lok Sabha election begins; the Bastar seat will vote in the first phase on Friday, while Kanker will vote in the second round on April 26.



Modi greets people on Ram Navami

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted people on the occasion of Ram Navami on Wednesday and said Ayodhya is incomparable bliss as this is the first time the festival is being celebrated there after the consecration of the Ram temple. He also watched online the ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya following his Lok Sabha poll rally in Nalbari in Assam. In a post on X, the Prime Minister said, "After my Nalbari rally, I watched the Surya Tilak on Ram Lalla. Like crores of Indians, this is a very emotional moment for me. The grand Ram Navami in Ayodhya is historic. May this Surya Tilak bring energy to our lives and may it inspire our nation to scale new heights of glory." Greeting people, the prime minister said "The first Ram Navami after the Pran Pratishtha in Ayodhya is a generational milestone, weaving together centuries of devotion with a new era of hope and progress. This is a day crores of Indians waited for," Modi said in a series of posts on X. This is the fruit of the hardwork and sacrifices made by the people of the country over many years, he said. Ram Navami celebrates the birth of Lord Ram and the temple was recently consecrated at the place where he was born in Ayodhya. Modi said, "May the blessings of Prabhu Shri Ram always remain upon us and guide our paths towards righteousness and peace, illuminating our lives with wisdom and courage." He said he feels overwhelmed and grateful on this occasion as he along with a large number of people in the country witnessed the consecration ceremony in Ayodhya. Modi said the memories of that moment continue to pulsate within him with the same energy. Lord Ram is deeply embedded in the hearts of Indians. Ram Navami is also a time to remember and respect those saints and devotees who dedicated their lives to the construction of the temple in Ayodhya, Modi said. "I am confident that Maryada Purushottam Bhagwan Ram's life and ideals will become a strong basis for constructing 'Viksit Bharat'. His blessings will provide new energy to the resolve of 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'," the prime minister said.

Modi pays tribute to former PM Chandra Shekhar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday paid tribute to former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar on his birth anniversary, lauding him as an exemplary leader who rose from the grassroots and made rich contributions to national progress. In a post on X, Modi said, "He is remembered for his emphasis on serving the poor and downtrodden. He was also at the forefront of resisting the Emergency and safeguarding our democratic ideals." Born in the Ballia district of Uttar Pradesh in 1927, Chandra Shekhar was a stalwart socialist leader who briefly headed a minority government. His son Neeraj Shekhar is a BJP MP and is contesting from the Ballia.

Congress questions EC order to delete bonds post from X

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Wednesday questioned the Election Commission's move to get a post on electoral bonds scheme deleted from social media platform X and said the issue raised in the post makes the government extremely uncomfortable". The opposition party's remarks came after the social media platform X said the Election Commission (EC) ordered it to take down select posts of YSR Congress, AAP, N Chandrababu Naidu and Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary for violation of the model code of conduct. The orders were issued on April 2 and April 3 and a follow-up email was sent by the poll panel on April 10 in which it cited a violation of the "voluntary code of ethics"

if 'X' fails to remove the four posts reported to it. Congress spokesperson and party's social media department head Supriya Shrinat said the Election Commission had asked platform X, formerly known as Twitter, to delete some posts, one of which was about electoral bonds. She said it is incumbent upon the poll watchdog to ensure that free and fair elections happen and that whenever someone breaches the model code of conduct, they are hauled up, including those making hate speeches, religious references and crass and vulgar statements. "So that is why it is very surprising that the EC chose to get a tweet deleted which raised the issue of electoral bonds. Why would they do that? "One does not understand but obviously electoral bonds is



an issue which makes the government extremely uncomfortable," Shrinat told reporters at the AICC headquarters here. She claimed Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried his best to give an explanation on the electoral bonds issue and "not just sounded defensive but stopped making sense". "Those donating to the BJP were the ones winning the big contracts. People being raided by ED and Income Tax

department were donating so this was an extortion racket that was happening and the country now knows about it," she claimed. Citing Rahul Gandhi's remarks at a press conference earlier in the day, Shrinat alleged that the prime minister is a "champion of corruption" as he was "breeding graft through the electoral bonds scheme". "I do want to raise that there is a pattern as far as social media platforms are concerned. This government is very uncomfortable with social media platforms, digital platforms and YouTube channels because it has been able to convert large sections of mainstream media into cheerleaders of the government that do not ask it about jobs, price rise, justice for the girl in Hathras or our athletes," Shrinat said. There is a pattern of how

social media platforms and independent media are being "systematically attacked", she alleged. Shrinat cited how multiple social media accounts of farmer leaders, associations and independent journalists were all "restricted" during the farmers' movement. "I would like to say that social media platforms are being curbed at a time when IT rules of 2021 are under contention across courts in India," she said. The government of the day must do some soul-searching about "suppressing these voices," Shrinat added. On Tuesday, social media platform 'X' said the Election Commission has issued takedown orders requiring the microblogging site to act on posts containing political speech shared from elected politicians, political parties and candidates for office.

Indian fishing boat involved in diesel smuggling seized

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Indian Coast Guard (ICG) has apprehended an Indian fishing boat allegedly involved in smuggling of diesel and carrying unauthorised amount of currency totaling about Rs 11, 46,000. The boat was brought to Mumbai on Wednesday for further investigation. Giving details here, officials said Coast Guard Regional Headquarters (West) launched an operation based on tip off from customs and apprehended an Indian fishing boat 83 nautical miles northwest off

Mumbai on Monday. The operation involved a sustained search during challenging night conditions amidst considerable fishing and merchant traffic covering an area of 200 square miles including offshore development areas off Maharashtra coast. In a seamlessly coordinated operation which involved search by 02 ICG Fast Patrol Vessel (FPVs) and one Interceptor Boat, the suspected boat was finally located and boarded on Monday night. The vessel was brought to Mumbai anchorage in the early hours of Wednesday.

Pande inaugurates cybersecurity lab in Uzbekistan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Army Chief General Manoj Pande on Wednesday inaugurated a state-of-the-art IT laboratory facility that also boasts a cutting-edge cybersecurity lab at the Uzbek Academy of Armed Forces during his ongoing visit to Uzbekistan, sources said. The development signifies a milestone in defence cooperation between the two nations, following a commitment made during the Defence Ministers' meeting in September 2018, Indian Army sources said. Pande is visiting Uzbekistan from April 15-18 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 had earlier said in a statement. In a significant step toward strengthening bilateral ties between India and Uzbekistan, the Army chief inaugurated a high-tech IT laboratory at the Uzbek Academy of Armed Forces, sources said. The laboratory is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, including nine rooms that house two lecture halls, a cutting-edge cybersecurity lab, a hardware programming lab, an object-



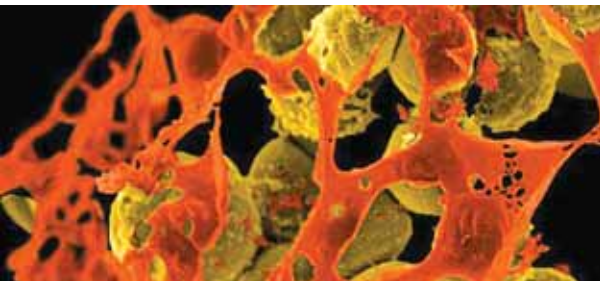
oriented programming lab, a web programming lab, a server room, a multimedia room, and a virtual reality room, they said. Additional facilities include video conferencing terminals, interactive panels,

networking devices, and an assortment of computing equipment comprising a large number of high-end PCs, workstations and laptops, alongside essential peripherals such as printers, cameras, scanners, and

storage devices. The request to establish an IT lab was initially made during the Defence Ministers' meeting in September 2018, and the project gained momentum with the approval in 2019, funded through the Ministry of External Affairs' Aid to Eurasia initiative, the army sources added. It has been learnt that the bids exceeded the envisaged budget of Rs 6.5 crore. As a result, Rs 8.5 crore was allotted for the project. An Indian company won the contract and made the lab fully operational well in time, they said. This collaborative initiative is not just a "leap in technological advancement"

for Uzbekistan's defence academy but also a bridge "reinforcing the expanding partnership" between the two nations, promising a future of cooperation in defence and technology, a source said. The establishment of the IT lab is expected to enrich the training resources available to the Uzbek armed forces and foster a deeper understanding and cooperation between India and Uzbekistan in the years to come, they said. The defence ministry on Monday described the Army chief's visit to Uzbekistan as a "significant step" in bolstering defence cooperation between the two countries.

Amid scare of antimicrobial resistance experts call for surveillance of pathogens



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In view of the escalating threat of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) in India, microbiologists have called for Unified Data Systems and Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) for surveillance of the pathogens. "AMR is a global threat that requires people who have historically not worked together to cooperate and work towards a common goal..." said Prof. Anurag Agrawal, Dean, Biosciences at Trivedi School of Biosciences, Ashoka University at a workshop titled, "Environmental Surveillance of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR): Strategies and Implications." The workshop which was held recently also saw involvement of key organizations such as the Indian Council of Medical

Research (ICMR), World Health Organisation (WHO), National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), and partners of Alliance for Pathogen Surveillance and Innovation (APSI), among others. They underscored the seriousness of the issue and the need for collaborative efforts to address it effectively. "The APSI consortium is a unique initiative involving public and private academia, public and private hospitals, R&D labs, and government departments trying to address the AMR problem in four different regions of the country," said Prof. LS NChsidhara, Director of the NCBS about the consortium. It is working with a vision that the data generated and the outcome of its efforts will provide additional evidence to frame public health policies and strategies at the national and state levels, he

said. During a panel discussion, integrating surveillance data into healthcare and environmental systems emerged as a crucial recommendation for better decision-making and policy development. Addressing challenges in real-time AMR surveillance, like data sharing and operator training, was a key focus. Additionally, there was an emphasis on digital systems to empower stakeholders, especially research labs, by ensuring smooth data generation and proper credit allocation. The emphasis on integrating surveillance data into healthcare and environmental systems, along with the use of digital systems for smooth data generation and analysis, reflects a forward-thinking approach to addressing the challenges of AMR surveillance, said a statement from the organiser. Some of the prominent attendees were - Dr Kamini Walia, Senior Scientist at ICMR; Dr Anuj Sharma, NPO - Technical focal point for AMR, Labs and IPC, WHO; Dr Rakesh Mishra, Director, Tata Institute of Genetics Society; Dr (Brig.) Rakesh Kumar Gupta, Director, Government Institute of Medical Sciences (GIMS), among others.

Testing, evaluation hub for sonar systems SPACE launched

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

A state-of-the-art Submersible Platform for Acoustic Characterisation and Evaluation (SPACE) was inaugurated by Secretary, Department of Defence (R&D) and Chairman Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) Dr Samir V Kamat at Underwater Acoustic Research Facility, Kulamavu in Idukki, Kerala on Wednesday, defence ministry said here. The SPACE, set up by the Naval Physical and Oceanographic Laboratory of DRDO, has been designed as a premier testing and evaluation hub for sonar systems destined for Indian Navy onboard various platforms including ships, submarines and helicopters. The SPACE marks a milestone in naval technology advancement. It will consist of two distinct assemblages - a platform which floats on the water surface, and a submersible platform which can be lowered to any depth up to 100 m using winch systems.



Upon completion of operations, the submersible platform can be winched up and docked with the floating platform. The SPACE will mainly be utilised for evaluation of complete sonar system, allowing for quick deployment and easy recovery of scientific packages such as sensors and transducers. It will be suitable for survey, sampling, and data collection of air, surface, mid-water, and reservoir floor parameters using modern scientific instrumentation.

Parties climate concerns in manifestos hollow amid no concrete steps: Experts

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Amidst the looming Aspector of climate change, political parties such as BJP and Congress are acknowledging the severity of the crisis and integrating it into their manifestoes as a commitment to addressing it through policy action and international cooperation. However, experts are not impressed. They caution that while these commitments are a step in the right direction, they may fall short of meaningful action if not accompanied by concrete and substantive measures. The BJP, which released its 69-page election manifesto recently, has dedicated three pages to environment and climate issues under the section Modi Ki Guarantee for Sustainable Bharat , coming a long way from just a paragraph on environment in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. The word climate change did not even figure in the 1999 and 2004 manifestos of the BJP, currently the world's largest political party. The Congress has allotted two pages for environment, climate, disaster management, and water and sanitation-related issues in its 2024 election manifesto. A review of its previous Lok



Sabha election manifestos shows a strong emphasis on climate change and environmental sustainability issues. A 2022 study by the Centre for Policy Research noted that the Congress has consistently emphasized climate change and environmental sustainability over the last three elections and has discussed specific steps for environmental protection, like green budgeting and the creation of an independent authority to work on it. According to the study, while the BJP dedicates about 11 per cent of its manifesto to environmental issues, left-leaning parties generally highlight water conservation, dedicating around 12 per cent of their content to environmental protection and sustainability. Key commitments in the BJP's latest manifesto include achieving net-zero emissions by 2070, transitioning to non-

fossil fuel energy sources, improving river health, achieving national air quality standards in 60 cities, expanding tree cover, and boosting disaster resilience. The Congress has proposed setting up a fund for a green transition and achieving the net-zero goal. However, critics highlight that some promises made in these manifestos might be symbolic rather than substantive. "There have been several cases where the government's approach to issues like forest and wildlife conservation, where policies and actions may not align with the stated commitments to address climate change. For instance, while there may be pledges to protect forests and wildlife habitats in manifestos, actual policies or actions may prioritize economic interests over environmental conservation," said a climate change expert.

Congress adopted loot east policy, BJP turned it into Act East policy: Modi

PTI ■ AGARTALA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday slammed the Congress, saying the party had adopted the 'loot' east policy while the BJP had turned it into the 'Act East' policy.

Addressing a rally here, the Prime Minister said Tripura has witnessed pioneering transformations under the BJP government.

Modi said the birth celebrations of Lord Ram is being held in his own temple in Ayodhya after 500 years.

"The Congress had adopted the 'loot' east policy while the BJP has turned it into the Act East policy," Modi told an election rally in the Tripura capital.

Modi said his government has decided to construct three crore new houses in India for the poor. "Tripura's people are going to benefit a great deal from it," he added.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being felicitated by Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha, BJP candidate and former Chief Minister Biplob Kumar Deb and others during a public meeting ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in Agartala on Wednesday

"After a long wait of 500 years, Ram Lalla is finally in a grand temple in Ayodhya instead of a tent," he added.

The Prime Minister said his government is focusing on enhancing connectivity in the Northeast.

Modi said Rs 3,000 crore will be spent for the facelift of highways in the state.

"Earlier, mobile towers didn't work properly in the state, but now work is on to improve 5G connectivity. It is the Modi government which has reduced mobile bills to around Rs 400-Rs 500 per month. Had the Congress been in power, your mobile bills would have been Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,000," he said.

Taking a dig at the Congress and the CPI(M), the PM said, "The Congress Yuvraj, who is critical over the use of investigative agencies, is now demanding the arrest of Kerala Chief Minister on corruption charges."

JMM leader apologies for making derogatory statement against PM



PTI ■ RANCHI

Senior Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Nazrul Islam on Wednesday apologised for making a derogatory statement against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and said that his remark was not intended to hurt anyone.

His apology came a day after the state BJP demanded Islam's arrest for the comment that the prime minister "would be

buried 400-foot below" in the election, instead of winning 400 seats.

"During a political speech, I was speaking against the prime minister's claim of winning 400 seats. I intended to say that they (BJP-led NDA) would not get 400 seats and they will be out of power," Islam said in a video statement.

The JMM central committee member said, "I am an educated person and a professor. I cannot speak such words against the prime minister. But if, for some reason, my words have accidentally hurt anyone, I sincerely apologise."

He made the remarks against Modi at a public meeting in Sahibganj on Sunday.

The BJP's Sahibganj unit lodged a complaint with the police against Islam on Wednesday.

The JMM said that the party does not support such remarks by any leader.



Modi and CM Vijayan one and the same: Congress

PTI ■ KANNUR (KERALA)

The political ripples created by the recent visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi are yet to die down in Kerala, with the Congress on Wednesday alleging that the BJP leader and Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan were trying to convince people that they were not similar.

But the people of the state are well aware that they are one and the same, the Leader of Opposition in the State Assembly, V D Satheesan, told reporters here in Panur near Kannur. Hitting hard at CM Vijayan, the leader said that for the past one month, he had been constantly criticising the Congress and senior leader Rahul Gandhi without uttering a word against Modi.

Satheesan alleged that the CM was humble and careful even while replying to Modi's allegations against the state government during his recent election rallies in Kerala.

"Both the PM and the CM are now speaking to convince the people that they are not the same. But the people of the state know very well that they are one and the same," he said. Vijayan is trying to please the BJP by making allegations against Rahul Gandhi and the Congress, Satheesan alleged. The LoP claimed that there is a wave in favour of the Congress and the UDF in the state and in favour of the INDIA bloc at the national level. He further said the CPI (M) and the BJP won't win even a single seat in Kerala and exuded confidence that the UDF could win all 20 Lok Sabha segments in the state.

Satheesan's statements came in the wake of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address at two election rallies in Kerala on Monday and the replies given by CM Vijayan to the allegations he raised against the CPI (M)-led LDF government. On Tuesday, Vijayan countered all the charges raised by the PM and urged him to self-introspect about the development index of BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh.

Rajnath seeks Congress stand on CPI(M) manifesto

PTI ■ KASARAGOD (KERALA)

Senior BJP leader Rajnath Singh on Wednesday questioned the intention behind the CPI(M)'s poll manifesto promise to dismantle nuclear weapons in the country and demanded to know the stand of the Congress on this issue.

Singh alleged talk of dismantling India's nuclear weapons amounted to playing with national security and that there was a "deep-rooted conspiracy to weaken the country".

He accused the Left and the Congress, both allies in the anti-BJP INDIA bloc, of apparently trying to weaken the country.

Speaking at a public meeting in Kasaragod Lok Sabha seat seeking votes for BJP candidate M L Ashwini, Singh demanded that the Congress should clarify its stand on the CPI(M)'s promise in the manifesto to dismantle nuclear weapons as it was the Indira Gandhi government which kicked off the country's nuclear programme in 1974.

He said India worked hard to become one of the 11 nuclear power

nations in the world and dismantling its nuclear weapons will weaken the country whose neighbours Pakistan and China are nuclear powers.

The CPI(M) in its manifesto has said there will be "complete elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological weapons."

During his speech, he also said whoever in India has opposed Lord Ram has faced downfall, which is what has happened to the Congress and CPI(M).

Singh alleged that both the parties, which are allies in the INDIA bloc, do not understand the importance of Lord Ram or the festival of Ram Navami.

"Lord Ram and Indian culture unite the country from the south to the north. Lord Ram is our God and our cultural icon. But the Congress and the CPI(M) do not understand that. They have created hurdles in celebration of Ram Navami."

"We all know that, in our nation's history, whosoever has ever opposed Lord Ram faced downfall in the



country. That is what has happened to Congress and the CPI(M)," he alleged.

Singh claimed that the Congress was opposed to the building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and "today look at its condition in the country."

"The Left parties are there only in a few pockets in India," he added.

He also claimed there was no difference in words and deeds of the BJP which was the most credible and trustworthy political party in the country.

However, the words and deeds of the Congress and Communist parties were different and therefore, it resulted in a "crisis of credibility" in Indian politics, Singh claimed.

He said this crisis was taken as a challenge by the BJP which has followed through on its poll promises made in the past.

Singh said the NDA government has followed through with its past promises to abrogate Article 370, do away with triple talaq and build the Ram Temple during its 10-year rule.

He said that if the BJP is voted to power again, then all of Modi's guarantees — of India becoming a top world economy, welfare of farmers, making huge strides in the space sector and the development of the nation — would be fulfilled.

"We are also committed to implementing the Uniform Civil Code in the next five years," he asserted.

Singh also raked up the Karuvannur Cooperative bank scam and the allegations of receipt of monthly payments by Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan's daughter and her firm from a private company, to attack the Left government and promised an unbiased probe into both matters.

The BJP leader also reached out to rubber farmers and the Christian community in the state.

He said the UDF and LDF will not do anything to resolve the problems being faced by rubber farmers in the state.

"Only the BJP will be able to help the rubber farmers," he said.

Singh alleged that the law and order situation was in shambles in the state as a Christian priest was attacked

within church grounds, educational institutions were turning into centres of Communist workers, people were living in fear and those in power in the state were sleeping peacefully.

He said that the BJP does politics not to form government, but for nation-building.

The BJP leader urged the people of Kerala to oust the UDF and LDF from the state if they wanted the situation to improve.

He alleged both fronts show a "dual character" of fighting with each other in Kerala, but outside it they are campaigning together.

"They have harmed Kerala," he alleged.

Singh also said that both the Congress and the Left have a backward and outdated thinking, while the people of Kerala are forward-thinking and progressive.

Singh also expressed confidence that the BJP will win seats in double digits from Kerala in the Lok Sabha polls.

The Lok Sabha elections will be held in Kerala on April 26 and the results will be declared on June 4.

Rampur heads for elections in absence of Azam Khan

PTI ■ RAMPUR (UP)

Asubdued atmosphere prevailed throughout the election campaign in Rampur, which has over close to five decades become used to electrifying speeches by Azam Khan, a Samajwadi Party leader who has been removed from the fray because of his imprisonment.

After almost five decades, Lok Sabha elections are going to be held in the complete absence of Rampur's 'Khan,' who held the sway over its voters all these years.

Famous for its cultural and historical heritage, Rampur was the political stronghold of the Nawabs in the early decades after Independence.

After that, the political rise of Azam Khan in the 80s eclipsed all his rivals ever since.

Khan, who had a stronghold on the politics of Rampur from 1978 to 2022, is currently serving seven years of imprisonment in the case of a fake birth certificate of his son Abdullah Azam.

Sardar Mannohan Singh, who runs a medicine business in Rampur Sadar area, said, "This time the enthusiasm of election is missing in Rampur. The biggest reason for this is that a charismatic leader like Azam Khan is in jail. We remember Khan Saheb's electrifying speeches." SP has fielded Imam Mohibullah Nadvi, a cleric of a mosque located on Parliament Street in Delhi, as its candidate.

An SP leader supporting Khan said the party decision made little sense to him and he would have preferred the party fielded someone close to Khan.

"I do not understand why party president Akhilesh Yadav chose Mohibullah Nadvi as the candidate. When Akhilesh ji met Khan Saheb in jail last month, I thought



that a representative of Khan Saheb would be given the ticket from Rampur. I could not understand what happened after that," the person said.

Khan's absence has sent his supporters, somewhat, in a mood of apathy. Many have distanced themselves from Nadvi's election campaign.

Khan's close aide Asim Raja had filed nomination calling himself a SP candidate despite the party giving ticket to Mohibullah Nadvi. His nomination was rejected after scrutiny.

Khan has been an MLA from Rampur Sadar seat 10 times and an MP from Rampur Lok Sabha seat once.

He reached the Assembly for the first time in June 1980 from Rampur on Janata Party (Secular) ticket.

He was elected MP from Rampur seat in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

He last won an MLA election in 2022 from Rampur Sadar, but had to vacate the seat after being sentenced by the court.

The void he left behind has undermined any talk about issues such as inflation or unemployment.

Faizan, a businessman from Suar area under the Rampur Lok Sabha constituency, said, "The issue here is only about

defeating Modi or making him win. Generally, the Muslim community here votes for Azam Khan's cycle (SP's election symbol). But this time the handle of the cycle is in the hands of someone else. I Don't know what will happen this time."

Madan Lal, who runs a paan shop in Suar, said, "Inflation and unemployment are not an issue for the people here. They are the same today as they were before. Any leader, be it BJP or SP, never comes even to peep after winning the election."

Vedram, a native of Donkri Tanda village of Chamraua assembly, said, "Along with the Muslims here, Hindus have also been voting for Azam Khan. There is no way of telling where the voters will go this time."

Lodhi said Rampur got freedom from the clutches of Azam Khan and is now moving on the path of development.

He said he is determined for the progress of Rampur Lok Sabha constituency, which has been deprived of development for decades.

SP's Nadvi, who has been

fielded under a pact with the opposition's Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), is confident of his victory.

Nadvi, a resident of Swar in the district, says he has got a chance to make it his political workplace after a long time.

Nadvi claimed that being the candidate of INDIA bloc, he is getting the support of SP, as well as Congress, voters and he is hopeful that with everyone's support he will win.

Other major candidates contesting from the seat are Bahujan Samaj Party's Zeeshan Khan and senior advocate Mahmood Pracha, an Independent candidate, who has challenged the use of electronic voting machines in the court.

There are approximately 17.31 lakh voters in Rampur Lok Sabha constituency.

According to the latest figures, about 50.10 per cent of these are Muslims and 49.90 per cent are non-Muslims. Sheikh, Ansari and Pasmanda Muslims constitute 27 per cent of the Muslim voters.

Apart from this, Turks are 9.5 per cent, Pathans are nine per cent and others are 4.5 per cent.

Among Hindu voters, Dalit and Saini voters constitute nine per cent each, Lodhs eight per cent, Thakurs five per cent, Yadavs and Brahmins four per cent each, Sikhs three per cent and Jains and Christians a total of 0.5 per cent.

Voting for Rampur seat will be held in the first phase of Lok Sabha elections on April 19.

Rampur Lok Sabha constituency has five assembly constituencies, out of which Bilaspur, Rampur Sadar and Milak seats are held by BJP and Suar Tanda seat is held by BJP's ally Apna Dal (Sonelal).

People of State will not believe Modi poll promises: Kerala CM Vijayan



PTI ■ PALAKKAD (KERALA)

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Wednesday said that the people of the state won't believe the heap of promises showered upon them by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the recent election rallies.

He accused the BJP government at the Centre of implementing RSS' agenda in the country and also hit out at the Congress for remaining silent on the controversial CAA in its manifesto.

"People may be cheated once, but not repeatedly," he said while addressing an election meeting in Pattambi in Palakkad.

"Narendra Modi came here (to Kerala) and showered several promises. But will any person ever believe this? They may be cheated once, but not repeatedly," Vijayan said.

The Left veteran said the Modi government had come to power for the first time in 2014 following the discontent and anti-incumbency prevailing in the country against the then Congress-led UPA II government.

"Modi and the BJP had then showered several promises before the people of the country who were unhappy under the UPA rule," he alleged.

As the people had been fed up with the UPA rule, they believed the promises of BJP and voted it to power, the CM

further charged.

But the BJP had continued to implement Congress's financial policies, and the people of the country realised it, he added.

Vijayan accused the BJP government of implementing the RSS agenda in the country and said the CAA was part of this.

The Left veteran also charged that the saffron party's attempt was to turn India into a religious nation.

Criticising the Congress party over the CAA, he alleged that it was maintaining silence about the controversial law in its election manifesto.

However, the Left parties clearly said in their election manifesto that the CAA wouldn't be implemented in the country.

PUBLIC NOTICE

By this Notice General public is hereby informed that our Clients, Manoj Verma and Manju Verma resident of 60, First Floor, Gali No.12, Sarojini Park, Shastri Nagar, East Delhi-110031 disowned/disenfranchised their son Ankur Verma from all their assets and properties, movable as also immovable wherever situated because of the various acts done by him and wife Shivangee Verma @ Priya which have deeply hurt them. Any person dealing with Ankur Verma and/or his wife shall be doing so at their own risk and that our Clients shall not be responsible for any of his acts in any manner whatsoever.

Maneesh Kumar, (Advocate).
Ch. No. E-314, Karkardooma Courts, Delhi-110032.

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PUBLIC NOTICE

It is to inform to the public at large that Mr. Jagat Singh is the owner/POA holder of the Property No. 55, area measuring 70 sq. yds. i.e. 58.52 sq. mtrs., Part of Khasra No. 502/348, area of Village Pitampura, Delhi-110043 having acquired the same from Mr. Gulab Singh, vide notarized General Power of Attorney, Agreement to sell & WILL dated 05.06.2001 and now intends to gift the aforesaid property to her wife Mrs. Sunita by way registered Gift Deed, and further the same to be finance & mortgage by Fedbank Financial Services Limited. To comply the requirements of BANK/NBFC, we give this public notice that if any Person having any type of claim / right / title of title / interest / creating mortgage over the said property, may inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 07 days from today, failing which it shall be presumed that the said property is free from all type of Encumbrances, lien etc.

Lucem Legal LLP
Plot No.136, (Basement) Uday Park, New Delhi-110049, Contact @ 011-40046316

PUBLIC NOTICE

It is to inform to the public at large that Mrs. Vinita Devi who is purchasing the A residential plot situated at Plot area measuring 119 sq. yds., out of Khasra No. 439, at Dwarka Dham, Shanti Road Village situated in the revenue area of Village Sadiq Nagar, Pargana Loni, Tensil & District Ghaziabad (U.P.), from Mr. Narendra Tyagi s/o Mr. Mool Chand, who is one of the co-owner of the land measuring 0.2780 Hectare, carved out of Khasra No.439 vide Khatoni starting from Fasil year 1427-1432 as per records of revenue; and same to be finance & mortgage by Ummeed Housing Finance Private Limited. To comply the requirements of BANK/NBFC, we give this public notice that if any Person having any type of claim / right / title / interest / creating mortgage over the said property, may inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 7 days from today, failing which it shall be presumed that the said property is free from all type of Encumbrances, lien etc.

Lucem Legal LLP
Plot No.136, (Basement) Uday Park, New Delhi-110049, Contact @ 011-40046316

SALE NOTICE

The under mentioned Assets will be sold through auction on "AS IS WHERE IS BASIS" and "AS IS WHAT IS BASIS" for recovery of dues as per court orders, in the following cases:-

Case Details	Asset Details
ICICI BANK LTD. Vs. JAI BHAGWAN, Ex No. 86/22	Vehicle No. DL 1LV8587, Make and Model- Ashok Leyland DOST, Manu Year- 2015

Auction Date: May 04, 2024 From 11:00 AM to 02:00 PM.
Auction Type: Online Auction
Auction Portal Name & URL Link: Bid Karo and https://bidkaro.net
Contact Person- Swapnil Upadhyay (8126013708)/ Rohit Shrivastava (8657476284)

Terms of Sale
The particulars of the said asset specified herein above have been stated to the best of the information and knowledge of the undersigned, who shall however not be responsible for any error, misstatement or omission in the said particulars. The interested participant/s are therefore requested, in their own interest, to satisfy himself / themselves / itself with regard to the said asset and other relevant details pertaining to it before submitting the bids.

Successful bidder shall have to deposit sale amount within 5 days from the approval date by the way of pay order/demand draft/RTGS/NEFT.

The intending bidders may visit at **ICICI Bank Ltd, Shal Tower Plot No. 23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005** for details and inspection of the said hypothecated vehicles.

SALE NOTICE

The under mentioned Assets will be sold through auction on "AS IS WHERE IS BASIS" and "AS IS WHAT IS BASIS" for recovery of dues as per court orders, in the following case:

ICICI Bank Vs Sandeep Kumar, RC NO. 90/2019, IN OA /43/2017	Vehicle No.- UP16BE5195, Make and Model- RENAULT FLUENCE, Manf. Year- 2015
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Auction Date: May 4, 2024 From 11:00 am to 2:00 pm.
Auction Type: Online Auction
Auction Portal Name & URL Link: Car Dekho and https://auctions.cardekho.com/#/
Contact Person- Swapnil Upadhyay (8126013708)/ Rohit Shrivastava (8657476284)

Terms of Sale
The particulars of the said asset specified herein above have been stated to the best of the information and knowledge of the undersigned, who shall however not be responsible for any error, misstatement or omission in the said particulars. The interested participant/s are therefore requested, in their own interest, to satisfy himself / themselves / itself with regard to the said asset and other relevant details pertaining to it before submitting the bids.

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SC votes for EVMs

The apex court has summarily rejected the idea of reverting to ballot papers for registering votes

General elections would be held through Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) as the Supreme Court has voiced its disapproval of criticism directed towards them; it has summarily dismissed the idea of reverting to ballot papers. This statement comes amid debates regarding the reliability of EVMs. Many Opposition leaders have publicly expressed scepticism regarding the accuracy of EVM results, citing concerns of tampering and the potential undermining of the democratic process. The Supreme Court's stance underscores the need for a pragmatic approach towards electoral reforms, demanding concerns of transparency and efficiency in democratic practices. The use of EVMs in elections has been a subject of contention since its introduction in India in the 1990s by the Congress Government. While proponents argue for its efficiency, accuracy and ability to streamline the voting process, critics raise concerns over potential vulnerabilities to tampering, hacking and manipulation. These concerns have fuelled



calls for a return to traditional paper ballots, perceived by some as a more secure and transparent method of voting. However, the Supreme Court's recent remarks shed light on the practical challenges associated with such a regression. The transition from paper ballots to EVMs was a significant leap forward in the electoral process. Reverting to paper ballots would not only be a step back in terms of technology but also pose logistical challenges in managing large-scale elections in a country as populous as India. The Supreme Court is right in its stand as replacing EVMs with paper ballots will be a humongous exercise. However, there is a middle ground called VVPAT — the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT). A tangible link between electronic voting and the traditional paper ballot system, it provides voters with the opportunity to verify their vote by displaying a paper slip containing the chosen candidate's name and symbol. A little tweaking of the system to collect paper slips with the candidate's name the voter voted for and counted along with the electronic votes would go a long way in making the system transparent. Critics of EVMs have often pointed to instances of alleged tampering and discrepancies in election results. While these concerns merit attention, it is essential to distinguish between genuine issues and unsubstantiated claims driven by political agendas. The integrity of the electoral process is paramount, and any allegations of malpractice should be thoroughly investigated and addressed. Perception plays a crucial role in shaping the legitimacy of election outcomes, and measures to strengthen transparency and accountability are essential. Rather than advocating for a wholesale rejection of technological advancements, the focus should be on enhancing the security, transparency and accountability of the electoral process. Making VVPAT counting and matching mandatory would indeed go a long way in clearing the doubts about the EVMs.

PICTALK



National Cadet Corps perform a drill during their 10-day summer season camp at Nagrota, in Jammu

Showdown in Karnataka

As Karnataka braces for the Lok Sabha elections, the political arena is set for a fierce clash between the Congress and the BJP-JD(S) alliance

The Lok Sabha elections are coming up in Karnataka and will be held in 28 constituencies on April 26 and May 7. The Congress party and the BJP-JD(S) alliance will compete to win voters' support. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited the State multiple times to campaign for BJP candidates. BJP has the support of former chief minister Yediyurappa, who is widespread among the Lingayat community and is a significant vote bank in the State. These elections are crucial for Karnataka's future and mark a pivotal moment in its history.

Karnataka has been a stronghold of Congress for many years. It supported Prime Minister Indira Gandhi even after the Emergency, is a testament to its political significance. This historical significance is evident from the victories of Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, who both won seats in Karnataka for the Congress party.

These elections are not just a contest but a high-stakes battle between Congress, BJP and the Bharatiya Janata Party-Janata Dal (Secular) alliance. They symbolise the BJP's re-entry into Karnataka's political landscape. The election could shift policy priorities and governance style, potentially impacting various sectors of the State's economy and society. The results will have significant consequences for people's lives, making their participation and understanding of the process crucial.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seeks to emerge victorious in the upcoming Karnataka elections to solidify its regional dominance in the South, enhance its standing in national politics and extend its sphere of influence in southern India. In contrast, the Indian National Congress is committed to protecting its Government in the State. At the same time, the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] endeavours to survive in a highly competitive political climate. In essence, JD(S) is striving to attain political longevity. The BJP's campaign in Karnataka centres around PM Modi's achievements and Congress's fail-



ures. It targets two influential communities, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, who are crucial to its electoral strategy. The Lingayats, being a dominant community in the State, have traditionally supported the BJP.

In contrast, the Vokkaligas, another influential community, has been a JD (S) stronghold. Winning over these communities is crucial for the BJP's electoral success. The BJP faces some local conflicts. For the first time since 2014, the party has had an open rebellion. The reason for this is the BJP-JDS alliance, which has yet to be well received. The Congress, too, has its rebel candidates. Congress is targeting SCs, STs and Muslims in Karnataka. The Congress Government implemented five essential poll guarantees promised last year, which included free bus rides for women, increased funding for education and job creation. These promises were designed to address specific concerns of the region's voters and reflect the party's commitment to social welfare and economic development.

Three pre-poll surveys by Edina, News 18 and India Today Group predict con-

flicting results for Karnataka's upcoming elections. Edina predicts Congress will win 17 seats and the BJP-JDS alliance will bag 11. News 18 forecasts NDA will win 25 seats, Congress only 3. India Today Group predicts NDA will win 24 seats with a 53 per cent vote share. The INDIA alliance, a regional party alliance, is expected to secure only four seats with a 42 per cent vote share. These surveys provide a snapshot of the current political landscape.

They can help readers gauge the potential outcomes of the election. There is a significant shift from the 2019 polls when Congress and JD(S) were allies. The BJP aims to secure the Vokkaliga vote in Old Mysore and tilt the election in their favour. The Vokkaligas, a dominant community in the Old Mysore region, have traditionally supported the JD (S). The BJP's strategy to win over this community involves a combination of caste-based outreach, promises of development and highlighting the failures of the JD (S) Government. If successful, this strategy could significantly impact the election outcome and the State's political landscape.

The BJP has fielded a top cardiologist, a member of the Mysuru royal family and an ex-chief Minister among its candidates. It has also fielded some new faces. The Congress has many ministers' relatives and these candidates can impact the result.

Since the BJP formed its first Government in 2008, the 'toppling game has been ongoing. Money and positions often play a significant role in luring legislators to shift loyalties, adding another layer of complexity to the State's political landscape. Both parties are willing to spend money. The upcoming election in the State poses a decision for voters. They must choose between supporting the Congress party they previously elected in the Assembly polls or the BJP, which had held power earlier. While some may prefer the Congress, the BJP still has a loyal following. Suppose the voters choose to reject the BJP. In that case, it'll signify that the political party's access to the South has been closed, at least temporarily and the return of Congress is on the right track.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)



THE CONGRESS GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTED FIVE ESSENTIAL POLL GUARANTEES PROMISED LAST YEAR, WHICH INCLUDED FREE BUS RIDES FOR WOMEN, INCREASED FUNDING FOR EDUCATION AND JOB CREATION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MEDICAL SUPPLIES SCANDAL

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Delhi Government's Vigilance Department Exposes Kejriwal", published on April 16, this is my response. Recent revelations concerning irregularities in medical procurement by the AAP-led Delhi Government raise serious concerns. The findings of the Vigilance Department indicate a pattern of favouritism towards specific individuals and companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant losses for the Government. The involvement of high-ranking officials, including the Health Minister's OSD RN Das, in managing tenders to benefit particular entities is troubling.

The exploitation of the pandemic crisis to swindle funds from the public exchequer is deplorable. The notice's assertion that procurement procedures were blatantly ignored, coupled with allegations of cartelisation among suppliers, paints a grim picture of corruption within the health department. The revelation that certain companies, allegedly linked to influential individuals, secured lucrative contracts further deepens suspicions of foul play. While the AAP-led Delhi Government dismisses the allegations as baseless, the call for accountability is paramount. Swift and transparent investigations are necessary to restore public trust and ensure such egregious malpractices are rooted out effectively.

Vishwajeet Apartha | Jaipur

NATO'S EVOLVING CHALLENGES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Challenges galore for NATO@75", published on April 16, this is my response. NATO, an alliance born in the aftermath of World War II, faces a multitude of challenges as it marks its 75th anniversary. Criticism from within Europe, coupled with the rise of right-wing nationalism, underscores the need for NATO to adapt. Its traditional focus on military might must now contend with non-traditional threats like cyber warfare and terrorism. Moreover, NATO's credibility is under

The power of young citizens



Apropos the news article, "A call to vote responsibly beyond party lines", published on April 16, this is my response. India's youthful population wields immense power through their vote, a power intrinsically tied to responsibility. As we step into adulthood, we're not just celebrating a milestone but embracing a civic duty to shape the nation's

future. The call is clear: transcend party lines and scrutinise progress objectively. Our nation's trajectory demands introspection—are we advancing equitably? Are policies benefiting all strata of society?

The electoral process is our mechanism for accountability, a tool to measure leadership against promises made. Infrastructure, industry, healthcare, education—these sectors reflect our collective welfare. As citizens, we must assess policies impartially, ensuring transparency and inclusivity. Our vote signifies unity, transcending divisive lines for the greater good. Informed decision-making isn't just a privilege but a necessity. Our diverse nation thrives when every voice is heard and every concern addressed. Let's harness the power of our vote to pave the path towards a stronger, more inclusive India.

Keerti Punia | Chandigarh

scrutiny due to perceptions of American hegemony and its military interventions worldwide. The proposed aid package to Ukraine highlights NATO's role in geopolitical tensions, particularly concerning Russia. However, India's rejection of a US offer to join NATO signals a broader reluctance among nations to align too closely with Western military alliances. As NATO faces an uncertain future, navigating the complexities of global power dynamics will require strategic reforms and a renewed commitment to its founding principles of security and cooperation.

Aryan Kant | Sonipat

MENTAL IMPACT OF NUTRITION

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Mangoes are nature's antidepressants", published on April 15, this is my response. Poor nutrition doesn't just affect our bodies—it deeply impacts our mental well-being too. In an insightful exploration by Rajdeep Joshi, the link between nutrition and mental health is emphasised, with a focus on the often overlooked benefits of mango consumption. Nutrition is the

cornerstone of good health and its deficiency is intertwined with mental health issues like depression and anxiety. While various factors contribute to depression, nutritional imbalances are often sidelined. Key vitamins and minerals play pivotal roles in managing psychological well-being, influencing optimal brain function and stress levels.

Mangoes emerge as natural mood enhancers, packed with serotonin-boosting tryptophan and vital minerals like potassium and magnesium. Incorporating mangoes into our diet not only promotes physical health but also aids in relieving nervous tension and improving mood. The recipe provided, a nutritious mango salad, offers a delicious way to harness the mental wellness benefits of mangoes, blending their goodness with other wholesome ingredients. It's a flavorful reminder that what we eat profoundly impacts not just our bodies, but our minds too.

Jitu Majumdar | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The new age of quantum technology

The scientific community celebrated April 14 as World Quantum Day to raise awareness of quantum science's impact across diverse fields

The world of science is on the cusp of a transformative era driven by the burgeoning field of quantum technology. Quantum science is founded on several key principles that underpin the behaviour of particles and systems at the quantum scale.

The term "quantum scale" refers to the realm of physics that deals with phenomena occurring at very small scales, typically at the level of atoms, subatomic particles and fundamental particles. It encompasses the principles of quantum mechanics, which govern the behaviour of particles and systems at these tiny dimensions. At the heart of quantum technology lies the principles of quantum mechanics, a branch of physics that describes the behaviour of particles at the smallest scales. Quantum mechanics introduces uncertainty and the notion of superposition, where particles can exist in multiple States simultaneously. Furthermore, entanglement, another fundamental quantum phenomenon, links the properties of particles regardless of distance, enabling instantaneous



communication between them. These counterintuitive phenomena, once relegated to the realm of theory, are now being harnessed to create groundbreaking technologies with the potential to revolutionise numerous fields. India has a long and rich history in quantum science. Pioneering work by Satyendra Nath Bose on quantum statistics laid the groundwork for many modern quantum technologies, including Bose-Einstein condensation, quantum superconductivity and quantum information theory.

Over the past few decades, advancements in quantum science have surged, laying the groundwork for a new era characterised by unparalleled computational power, secure communication and transformative applications across various sectors. One of the most captivating applications of quantum mechanics is the

development of quantum computers. These machines leverage the power of superposition to perform calculations exponentially faster than traditional computers. By manipulating qubits (quantum bits) that can be 0, 1, or both simultaneously, quantum computers can explore a vast array of possibilities concurrently. This unparalleled processing power holds immense promise for drug discovery, where simulating complex molecules can accelerate the development of life-saving medications.

Another revolutionary application of quantum technology is in secure communication. Quantum key distribution (QKD) utilises the principles of quantum mechanics to establish secure cryptographic keys between parties. By encoding information into the quantum States of particles and leveraging entanglement properties, QKD ensures that any attempt to intercept or eavesdrop on the communication would disturb the quantum State, thereby alerting the parties involved.

Quantum cryptography safeguards sensitive information

in critical areas like financial transactions, national security communications and protecting intellectual property. By exploiting the extreme sensitivity of quantum systems to minute changes, scientists are developing sensors capable of detecting the subtlest variations in magnetic fields, gravity and temperature. This has profound implications for medical imaging, where ultra-high-resolution MRIs can provide detailed analyses of tissues and organs, aiding in early disease detection and personalised medicine. In navigation, quantum sensors can lead to more precise GPS and navigation systems, which are crucial for autonomous vehicles and various scientific endeavours. The Government of India, under the Department of Science and Technology, has initiated the National Quantum Mission (NQM), which aims to harness the transformative potential of quantum technology to address national challenges and foster innovation.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)




BIJU DHARMAPALAN

FIRST COLUMN

SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO CLIMATE CHANGE

To return to a life of harmony with nature, we need to realise our spiritual identity



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

A few centuries ago no one worried about climate change, because there was no reason to do so. But as humans extracted more from nature and dumped an increasing amount of waste, including highly toxic substances, on it, the ecological balance began to get disrupted. This process has accelerated over the centuries and brought us to the present situation where, according to some experts, the entire human race faces extinction shortly.

Climate change and global warming are sometimes thought of as things that will happen in the future. But scientists are finding increasing evidence that the planet is changing now - and that people must take a large share of the blame for this phenomenon. They further explain that excessive carbon emissions through industrial and vehicular pollution, use of CFCs and plundering of forests and natural resources have depleted the ozone layer. This has trapped more and more solar radiation inside the earth's atmosphere. As a result, the earth is heating up which has begun to trigger a chain of natural upheavals like floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and landslides in recent times.

To prevent such an eventuality, humans need to work on themselves. Man does not need to master nature. The human soul is the master of all that is material. It is when the soul begins to identify itself with the body that it comes under the influence of matter and vices. In the Golden and Silver Ages, when all human souls had self-awareness and divine qualities, nature was their obedient servant. The elements of nature made life pleasant in that era, which is remembered in religious texts as paradise or heaven.



Because the divine beings of that world were free of vices, they never exploited or despoiled nature. Instead of having to be environment-friendly, they had a truly friendly environment. They were friends not only to their fellow beings but also to all matter. This State of affairs continued till the beginning of the Copper Age when the souls forgot who they were and began to come under the influence of the body and the vices. They then began to exploit natural resources, gradually harming the environment. In return, nature too ceased to obey souls who had lost mastery over themselves. As the influence of the vices grew, so did the plunder of nature and what was once a harmonious relationship turned more into one between an exploiter and the exploited.

The Prime Minister of India in his speech at the UN said “We can achieve the same level of development, prosperity and well-being without necessarily going down the path of reckless consumption. It doesn't mean that economies will suffer; it will mean that our economies will take on a different character. For us in India, respect for nature is an integral part of spiritualism. We treat nature's bounties as sacred. Yoga is an invaluable gift of our ancient tradition. Yoga embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; and a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change.”

Now, if we wish to go back from the brink and return to a life of harmony with nature, we need to realise our spiritual identity and values. Such awareness will make us naturally eco-friendly and send out a positive energy that will bring the elements of nature into harmony with us again. If a critical mass of humans begin to live with this spiritual awareness, nature will by itself become our friend and humanity will look at a golden instead of a doubtful future.

(The writer is a spiritual educator and a popular columnist; views are personal)

The roots of Wahhabi extremism



HASAN KHURSHID

The world reels under the grip of Wahhabi terrorism, orchestrated by Saudi rulers with Zionist affiliations, masquerading behind a façade of Islam



Today entire world is gripped in the clutches of Wahhabi terrorism spearheaded by Zionist Saudi rulers, wearing the cloak of pseudo-Islam, who are hiding their faith in Judaism. All terrorist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Lashkar e Taiyaba, Lashkar e Jhangvi, etc; follow the ideology of Wahhabism, a newly created cult of Saudi rulers, the pseudo-Muslims.

The activities of this cult can be best explained through the words of renowned British historian Charles Allen, who in his book, God's Terrorists -The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad, writes, “Wahhabi is a guiding ideology behind modern Islamist terrorism. In the 18th century, a violently intolerant re-interpretation of Islam took root in the Arabian desert. Its followers became known after their founder (Sheikh Muhammad Najdi ibn Abd-al Wahhab), as Wahhabi. The creed was then exported to India and its north-west frontier Afghanistan.”

Sheikh Najdi was born in 1702, in the desert of Najd, a rocky plateau of the Arabian Peninsula. About Najd, Charles Allen writes, “Indeed for many Arabs, Najd had only negative associations. There was a popular saying that ‘Nothing good never came out of Najd’ and it was related in the Hadith that the Prophet had three times been called upon to ask God to bless Najd and had three times been called upon to ask God to bless Najd and had three times refused, answering on the third occasion, ‘Earthquakes and dissension are there and there shall arise the horn of Satan.’ In the years following the ministry of Al-Wahhab, there were many who argued that this prophecy had been confirmed.” In 1744, Najdi ibn Wahhab, sidelining the preaching of true Islam by Prophet Mohammed, created a new version of

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WAHHABISM IS NOTHING BUT PSEUDO-ISLAM. HOWEVER, WHEN OPPOSITION MOUNTED AGAINST HIS IDEOLOGY, NAJDI WAS SHREWD ENOUGH TO FIND A PATRON IN MUHAMMED-IBN-SAUD, A BEDOUIN TRIBAL CHIEF, WHO MADE USE OF HIS NEW VITRIOLIC VERSION OF ISLAM FOR POLITICAL CONSOLIDATION

Islam called Wahhabism. His ideology is enshrined in Kitab-al Tawhid (book of unity), which prescribes the forceful conversion of Muslims and non-Muslims to his Salafi or Wahhabi ideology, wherein he manifestly says, “Follow my ideology, else get ready to be killed.” His ideology was strongly opposed by Muslim masses, including his father and uncle.

So, Wahhabism is nothing but pseudo-Islam. However, when the opposition mounted against his ideology, Najdi was shrewd enough to find a patron in Muhammed-ibn-Saud, a Bedouin tribal chief, who made use of his new vitriolic version of Islam for political consolidation. Ibn Saud belonged to the Jewish tribe of Anza Ben Wael.

Islam is not the original religion of Saudi Arab rulers. Sheikh Najdi, also belonging to Jewish ancestry, not only made an alliance with Ibn Saud but also got his daughter married to Ibn Saud's son Abd-al-Aziz ibn Saud. Thereafter, the faith was of Sheikh Najdi and the sword was of Ibn Saud. A dynastic government was established as a result of this partnership, which is continuing in the name of Saudi Arabia.

In 1766, Muhammed ibn Saud was killed and his son Abd-al-Aziz took over as Emir (temporal leader). He introduced firearms in the holy war or jihad, replacing conventional weaponry. He accelerated his attacks in a spectacular bid to extend his territory and as Allen says, “He issued every holy warrior a ‘firman’ or written order addressed to gate-keeper of heaven, requir-

ing him to be admitted forth-with should he die on battle.” Since then it has been the common schismatic, fraudulent practice of terror operators to misguide and exploit the youth for recruitment with the promise of paradise.

The history of Wahhabism has been written with the blood of innocent people. On June 2, 1792, Sheikh Muhammad Najdi-ibn-Abd-al Wahhab died, leaving his 24 wives and 18 children and his son-in-law Abd-al-Aziz speeded up his violent actions and conversions. In 1802, he attacked Karbala in Iraq, desecrating the holy shrine of Hazrat Imam Husain. Lieutenant Francis Warden wrote, “They pillaged the whole of it and plundered the tomb of Hazrat Imam Husain, slaying in the course of the day, with circumstances of peculiar cruelty, killing about 5,000 of the inhabitants. A huge amount of booty was seized.”

In 1803, Abd-al-Aziz ibn Saud obtained a visit permit from the Shareef of Mecca on the pretext of performing Hajj; whereupon his Wahhabi fighters laid waste in Islam's holiest shrine (Kaaba), like the accused Yazid had desecrated it in 682 AD. According to T.E Ravenshaw, author of A Memorandum on the Sect of Wahhabis, “They robbed the splendid tombs of the Mahomedan saints, who were interred there; and their fanatical zeal did not even spare the Prophet's Mosque (in Medina) which they robbed of the immense treasures and costly furniture to which each Mahomedan Prince of Europe, Asia and Africa had contributed his share.”

In 1804, a Wahhabi gang again crossed the great desert in the Hijaz and destroyed tombs of the Prophet's family members at Jannat-ul-Baqi, the ancient century of Medina and even despoiled the grave of Prophet Mohammed. In 1925, Wahhabis demolished the holy shrines of Hazrat Fatima Zehra, daughter of Prophet Mohammed and his grandsons, as well as the birth-place of Prophet Mohammad.

In India, the 500-year-old Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was demolished on December 6, 1992, by a radical Hindu mob led by Sangh Parivar leaders. Intellectuals across the globe, irrespective of caste, creed, religion or region, condemned the demolition. Muslims across the world protested. Several lives were lost. In its landmark judgement of 2019, the Supreme Court held that the demolition was illegal and directed the authorities to allot an alternative plot for a mosque as compensation.


On the other hand, the more heinous crime of multiple demolitions of holy shrines, relics and heritage sites together with massacres took place in Saudi Arabia at the behest of Saudi Arab's Wahhabi/Salafi rulers of Zionist ancestry, on 8th Shawwal 1344 Hijri (1925 A.D), but surprisingly no Muslim of any sect reacts or protests against the pseudo-Muslim Saudi rulers. Is it because those perpetrators are Muslim for name sake?

(The writer is a legal journalist and author. The views expressed are personal)

Temperature soars as our ignorance threatens Earth's future

The relentless rise in global temperatures paints a stark portrait of humanity's disregard for the environment, echoing a dire warning for the planet's future


The temperature in the world is increasing day by day, due to the ignorance and carelessness of the people. The problem of rising temperatures is seen all over the world. The world's Climate changes day by day. The rising temperature is a bell of danger for the living world. If we are not aware, then we will not be able to deal with the problems of the future. All living beings need water, air and heat to survive. The changes in the quality and quantity of water and air will give birth to uncountable problems. When the atmosphere or the climate changes the changes are also seen in the living world, as we see now. The desert's biome is different from Iceland's biome. In Australia we can see its national animal kangaroo, In Iceland we can see polar bears and penguins. Fruits, vegetables, flowers and forests also differ due to climate change. When the temperature of the earth is increasing, it poses a big threat to everyone. We don't know whether we will get the same fruits and vegetables tomorrow that we get now. Today the animals, birds or insects that we see all around us will they extinct or survive we don't know. We don't have any information about living beings, how many species of them have already extinct every year is not known doubt they enrich our lives. We don't account for how much our lives have been affected since they disappeared. If our outer is affected then our inner is also affected. It is worth considering. We are destroying our environment because of our greed. Inhumanity is seen in humans today. There are two reasons behind the increase in global temperature, one is man-made and the other one is natural. Man-made causes are deforestation, cutting of trees, use of vehicles and excessive use of fossil fuels. Natural causes where earthquakes, Storms, forest fires, gas accidents coal burning etc. The main cause of global warming is the greenhouse effect. A greenhouse is a glass house for keeping trees, which does not allow the heat to go away from the glass house. It is used to save the trees. The greenhouse effect is seen in the increase of carbon dioxide and methane gas. When the temperature increases by one degree, it greatly affects our environment. The ice accumulated in the South Pole and the North Pole of the Earth is starting to melt. The glaciers in the Himalayas of India are also starting to melt and the water from these glaciers is causing floods in the rivers coming out of the glaciers. Nowadays days Shiv ling in Amarnath is melting within in few days. In the future, as the heat increases, the rivers will cause flood and they will join the sea with the flood water. Many intellectuals of the world are concerned about the increase in global temperature. The solution to these problems is only by planting trees The only way we can save our planet is by plantation and forest protection. Trees give us oxygen and reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. So planting trees is only one solution to the problem. The tree planting program should be carried out regularly. When the Seawater rises it enters nearby cities and villages. In the fourth chapter of the twelfth skanda of the Bhagavatam, there is a description of the flood or the pralaya where the matter of Prithibi becomes hot and causes a flood or pralaya. It is also said that the rays of the sun will destroy the living world. How to save the living world should be the main subject of our course of studies in educational institutions. As long as the world is standing at the door of destruction we should not count the numbers of profit and loss but the message of collective development and collective happiness and peace should be spread. The intellectual people of India always sent messages of peace and goodwill to the world. Today let India be the guide of the world to protect the planet.



KALI DAS

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(The writer is a columnist, poet and social worker; views are personal)



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(The writer is a columnist, poet and social worker; views are personal)

Israel ‘making decision to act’ as Iran vows to respond

AP ■ JERUSALEM

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said Wednesday that Israel “is making a decision to act” in response to Iran’s missile and drone attack over the weekend, while Iran warned that even the “tiniest” invasion of its territory would bring a “massive and harsh” response.

srael has vowed to respond to Iran’s unprecedented attack without saying when or how, leaving the region bracing for further escalation after months of unrest linked to the ongoing war in Gaza. Israel’s closest allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom — which helped it repel the Iranian attack — are trying to limit any further escalation.

Israel’s President Ebrahim Raisi meanwhile warned Israel against any retaliation as he addressed an annual army parade, which had been relocated to a barracks from its usual route and was not carried live on state TV — possibly because of fears that it could be targeted.



Palestinians search for survivors after an Israeli airstrike on a residential building of the abo al Hanoud family after an Israeli airstrike in Rafah refugee camp, southern Gaza Strip, Wednesday.

AP/PTI

In remarks carried by Iran’s official IRNA news agency, Raisi said Saturday’s attack was a limited one, and that if Iran had wanted to carry out a bigger attack, “nothing would remain from the Zionist regime.”

Adding to the already high tensions, a rocket attack by Lebanon’s Hezbollah on a northern Israeli border town on Wednesday wounded 13 people, four of them seriously, according to the Israeli rescue service

Magen David Adom. The Iran-backed militant group said it was a response to the killing of a number of its fighters, including a commander, in Israeli strikes on Lebanon the day before.

Both Cameron and Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock were in Israel on separate visits to meet with top officials on Wednesday. The two European countries, which are among Israel’s closest allies, have urged restraint.

Cameron said “it’s clear the Israelis are making a decision to act” against Iran, but he hoped they would do so “in a way that is smart as well as tough and also does as little as possible to escalate this conflict.” He spoke after meeting with Israel’s President Isaac Herzog, whose office is mainly ceremonial.

Cameron said the main aim of his visit was to refocus attention on the ongoing war in Gaza and the need for a cease-fire and the release of hostages held by Hamas.

Baerbock said Germany stands “in full solidarity with Israel” but

called on it to exercise restraint. “Everyone must now act prudently and responsibly. I’m not talking about giving in. I’m talking about prudent restraint, which is nothing less than strength,” she told reporters.

“Because Israel has already shown strength with its defensive victory at the weekend.”

The ministers said they would push for further international sanctions on Iran.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he met with both ministers and thanked them for their countries’ support.

“They have all sorts of suggestions and advice. I appreciate that. But I want to be clear: Our decisions we will make ourselves, and the state of Israel will do whatever it needs to defend itself,” Netanyahu said in a statement. Iran launched hundreds of missiles and drones at Israel over the weekend in response to an apparent Israeli strike on Iran’s embassy compound in Syria on April 1 that killed 12 people, including two Iranian generals.

Sunak tells Netanyahu to exercise restraint in wake of Iran attack

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called on his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu to exercise restraint and let “calm heads” prevail in the wake of Iran’s missile attacks as his Foreign Secretary David Cameron landed in Tel Aviv for talks on Wednesday.

On a phone call, Sunak reiterated the UK’s “steadfast support” for regional stability and told the Israeli leader that Iran had miscalculated its move, being isolated on the global stage as a result.

Netanyahu is said to have thanked Britain for its “rapid and robust” support in the face of Iran’s unprecedented direct attack on Israel on Saturday.

“The Prime Minister [Sunak] said Iran had badly miscalculated and was increasingly

isolated on the global stage, with the G7 coordinating a diplomatic response,” Downing Street said in a read-out of the call on Tuesday evening.

“He stressed that significant escalation was in no one’s interest and would only deepen insecurity in the Middle East. This was a moment for calm heads to prevail,” the statement said.

On the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza, Sunak told Netanyahu that he remained gravely concerned about the deepening humanitarian crisis.

“The UK wanted to see a massive step change in aid access to flood Gaza with vital supplies, including Israel opening up new aid routes as quickly as possible. The Prime Minister said it was deeply disappointing that Hamas

blocked a deal at the weekend that would have saved Palestinian lives and secured the safe release of hostages,” Downing Street added.

The call will form the backdrop for Cameron’s discussions in Israel, where he is expected to meet Netanyahu and senior Israeli officials and attempt to talk the country out of retaliating to Iran’s assault.

The visit will include meetings in the occupied West Bank, after which Cameron will travel to a gathering of Group of Seven (G7) ministers in Italy to discuss further sanctions on Iran.

The UK has condemned Iran’s “reckless and dangerous escalation” in the region and called on all sides to show restraint after Tehran’s “barrage of 300 missiles and drones” targeted Israel over the weekend.

With calls for sanctions on Iran, Italy seeks G7 message of restraint as mins meet

AP ■ ROME

Group of Seven foreign ministers are meeting on the Italian resort island of Capri, with calls for new sanctions against Iran over its attack against Israel and more aid to Ukraine to fight Russia’s war topping the agenda.

Under Italy’s rotating stewardship, the G7 leaders are expected to issue a united call for Israel to exercise restraint after Iran’s unprecedented weekend attack involving hundreds of drones, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles fired toward the Jewish state.

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said he had spoken to his Israeli counterpart, Israel Katz, on Tuesday and urged Israel to not only de-escalate any reaction to Iran’s attack but to stave off a planned offensive into the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

“I reiterated this message and I believe that on the occasion of the G7 foreign ministers in Capri, tomorrow and Friday

morning, a similar message will be sent,” Tajani told state-run RAI.

With Israel’s war in Gaza in its sixth month, Tehran’s attack added a new element of urgency to the three-day meeting of foreign ministers from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called for new sanctions against Tehran and was making a last-minute visit to Israel before arriving on Capri later Wednesday.

“We will discuss how a further escalation with more and more violence can be prevented,” she said.

“Because what matters now is to put a stop to Iran without encouraging further escalation.”

Germany, a staunch ally of Israel, has been among the chorus of European and US leaders urging Israel to de-escalate tensions and not retaliate for Tehran’s attack, which was largely repelled thanks to US and allied help.

British Foreign Secretary

David Cameron said he would push for “coordinated sanctions against Iran” at the meeting.

He argued that Tehran was orchestrating “so much of the malign activity in this region” from Hamas in Gaza, to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon to the Houthi rebels in Yemen who are behind attacks on shipping in the Red Sea.

“They need to be given a clear and unequivocal message by the G-7 and I hope that will happen,” Cameron told broadcasters during a visit to Israel.

Russia’s two-year war in Ukraine is also high on the agenda, with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg invited to the Capri meeting on Thursday as guests.

Kuleba is expected to repeat his country’s need for essential military support, including artillery, ammunition, and air defense systems to bolster its capacity as Russia pushes along the front line.

Russian missiles slam into Ukraine killing 14

AP ■ KYIV

Three Russian missiles slammed into a downtown area of the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv on Wednesday, hitting an eight-floor apartment building and killing at least 14 people, authorities said.

At least 61 people, including two children, were wounded in the morning attack, Ukrainian emergency services said.

Chernihiv lies about 150 kilometres (90 miles) north of the capital, Kyiv, near the border with Russia and Belarus, and has a population of around 250,000 people.

The latest Russian bombardment came as the war stretched into its third year and approached what could be a critical juncture as a lack of further military support from Ukraine’s Western partners increasingly leaves it at the mercy of the Kremlin’s bigger forces.

Through the winter months, Russia made no dramatic advance along the 1,000-kilometre (620-mile) front line, focusing instead on attritional



warfare.

However, Ukraine’s shortage of artillery ammunition, troops and armoured vehicles has allowed the Russians to gradually push forward, military analysts say.

A crucial element for Ukraine is the holdup in Washington of approval for an aid package that includes roughly USD 60 billion for Ukraine.

House Speaker Mike Johnson said Sunday that he would try to move the package forward this week.

Ukraine’s need is now acute, according to the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank.

“The Russians are breaking out of positional warfare and beginning to restore maneuver to the

battlefield because of the delays in the provision of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine,” the ISW said in an assessment late Tuesday.

“Ukraine cannot hold the present lines now without the rapid resumption of US assistance, particularly air defense and artillery that only the U.S. can provide rapidly and at scale,” it said.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pleaded with Western countries to provide his country with more air defense equipment, including more surface-to-air Patriot guided missile systems.

He said the Chernihiv strike “would not have happened if

Ukraine had received enough air defense equipment and if the world’s determination to counter Russian terror was also sufficient.”

Zelenskyy told PBS in an interview broadcast earlier this week that Ukraine recently ran out of air defense missiles while it was defending against a major missile and drone attack that destroyed one of Ukraine’s largest power plants, part of a recent Russian campaign targeting energy infrastructure.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba repeated Zelenskyy’s appeal for more help as he prepared to attend a Group of Seven foreign ministers’ meeting in Italy.

“We need at least seven more Patriot batteries to protect our cities and economic centers from destruction,” Kuleba told German daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung in an interview published Wednesday.

“Why is it so difficult to find seven Patriot batteries?”

Ukrainian forces are digging in, building fortifications in anticipation of a major Russian offensive that Kyiv officials say could come as early as next

month.

Ukraine is using long-range drone and missile strikes behind Russian lines which are designed to disrupt Moscow’s war machine.

Russia’s defence ministry said Wednesday that a Ukrainian drone was shot down over the Tatarstan region early Wednesday.

That’s the same area that was targeted in early April by Ukraine’s deepest strike so far inside Russia, about 1,200 kilometres (745 miles) east of Ukraine.

Ukrainian drone developers have been extending the weapons’ range.

Another Ukrainian drone was shot down over the Mordovia region, roughly 350 kilometers (220 miles) east of Moscow, the ministry said.

That is 700 kilometers (430 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

About an hour before that Mordovia attack, Russia’s civil aviation authority halted flights at airports in two of the country’s largest cities, Nizhny Novgorod and Tatarstan’s Kazan, because of safety concerns.

Leaked graft report sparks controversy against Muizzu

Male (PTI): Ahead of the parliamentary polls in the Maldives, the opposition parties have demanded a probe and impeachment of President Mohamed Muizzu following the leaked report of his alleged corruption from 2018, a charge dismissed by him.

Elections to the Majlis are to be held on Sunday and the atmosphere has been vitiated by the trading of charges between the main opposition the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Muizzu’s People’s National Congress (PNC).

Local media reports have highlighted that the political storm started on Monday with an anonymous handle ‘Hassan Kurusee’ posting on social media X leaked intelligence reports, including documents prepared by the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) of the Maldives Monetary Authority and the Maldives Police Service that allegedly linked President Muizzu to corruption.

“These reports, dated circa 2018, claim irregularities in money transfers to President Muizzu’s personal bank account, highlighting 10 critical red flag indicators of financial misconduct. These indicators suggest involvement with politically exposed persons, embezzlement, structured transactions, and the use of corporate entities to hide fund origins,” news portal Maldives Republic (mvrepublic.com) reported.

The allegations soon created a political storm with several reactions pouring in on various social media channels.

News portals and newspapers, however, tread with caution.

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and People’s National Front (PNF) demanded an investigation into the matter.

Former Vice President Dr Mohamed Jameel Ahmed urged Muizzu’s impeachment following the leaked intelligence reports.

Taking to his social media handle X, Jameel reposted these documents, emphasising the need for accountability at all levels of governance.

Suu Kyi moved from prison to house arrest

AP ■ BANGKOK



Myanmar’s jailed former leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been moved from prison to house arrest as a health measure due to a heat wave, the military government said as it freed more than 3,000 prisoners under an amnesty to mark this week’s traditional New Year holiday.

Suu Kyi, 78, and Win Myint, the 72-year-old former president of her ousted government, were among the elderly and infirm prisoners moved to house arrest because of the severe heat, military spokesperson Maj Gen General Zaw Min Tun told foreign media representatives late Tuesday.

The move has not yet been publicly announced in Myanmar.

Suu Kyi’s transfer comes as the army has been suffering a string of major defeats at the hands of pro-democracy resistance fighters and their allies in ethnic minority guerrilla forces.

The nationwide conflict began after the army ousted the elected government in February 2021, imprisoned Suu Kyi and began suppressing nonviolent protests

that sought a return to democratic rule.

Suu Kyi has been serving a 27-year prison term on a variety of criminal convictions in a specially built annex of the main prison in the capital Naypyitaw, where Myanmar’s meteorological department said temperatures reached 39 degrees Celsius (102.2 degrees Fahrenheit) on Tuesday afternoon.

Win Myint was serving an eight-year prison sentence in Taunggoo in Myanmar’s Bago region.

Suu Kyi’s supporters and independent analysts say the charges were fabricated in an attempt to discredit her and legitimize the

military’s seizure of power.

The military had claimed that her National League for Democracy Party used widespread electoral fraud to win a landslide victory in the 2020 general election, an allegation independent observers found unconvincing.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, an independent group that monitors casualties and arrests, more than 20,351 people arrested on political charges since the 2021 army takeover are still in detention, most of whom have not received criminal convictions.

Suu Kyi’s health has reportedly deteriorated in prison.

In September last year, reports emerged that she was suffering from symptoms of low blood pressure including dizziness and loss of appetite, but had been denied treatment at qualified facilities outside the prison system.

Those reports could not be independently confirmed, but her younger son Kim Aris said in interviews that he had heard that his mother has been extremely ill and has been suf-

fering from gum problems and was unable to eat.

Aris, who lives in the UK, urged that Myanmar’s military government be pressured to free his mother and other political prisoners.

News about Suu Kyi is tightly controlled by the military government, and even her lawyers are banned by a gag order from talking to the media about her cases.

Her legal team has faced several hurdles, including being unable to meet with her to receive her instructions since they last saw her in person in December 2022.

Whether the latest move was meant to be temporary was not announced.

Spokesperson Zaw Min Tun did not say where the released prisoners were being moved to in his remarks to US-government funded Voice of America and Britain’s BBC, but there was no indication it might be one of her own former homes.

The lake-side house where Suu Kyi spent most of her years in house arrest is in legal limbo after a court-ordered auction in March failed to find a buyer.

Before being sent to prison, Suu

Kyi was reportedly held in a military safe house inside an army base.

Other prisoners were released for the Thingyan New Year holiday, state-run MRTV television announced Wednesday, but it wasn’t immediately clear how many were pro-democracy activists and political prisoners who were detained for protesting army rule.

Aung Myo Kyaw of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said the group had heard of 7-10 people released in Yangon and nine from a prison in the central regions of Magway.

MRTV said that the head of the ruling military council, Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing, had pardoned 3,303 prisoners, including 28 foreigners who will be deported from Myanmar.

He also reduced sentences for others.

Mass amnesties on the holiday are not unusual in Myanmar.

Family and friends gathered outside the gates of Insein Prison, in northern Yangon, waiting expectantly and scanning the windows of buses that brought the released detainees out of the vast complex.

Biden seeking higher tariffs on Chinese steel

AP ■ SCRANTON



President Joe Biden is calling for a tripling of tariffs on steel from China to protect American producers from a flood of cheap imports, an announcement he planned to roll out on Wednesday in an address to steelworkers in the battleground state of Pennsylvania.

The move reflects the intersection of Biden’s international trade policy with his efforts to court voters in a state that is likely to play a pivotal role in deciding November’s election.

The White House insists, however, that it is more about shielding American manufacturing from unfair trade practices overseas than firing up a union audience.

In addition to boosting steel tariffs, Biden also will seek to triple levies on Chinese aluminum.

The current rate is 7.5 per cent for both metals.

The administration also promised to pursue anti-dumping investigations against countries and importers that try to saturate existing markets with Chinese steel, and said it was working with Mexico to ensure that Chinese companies can’t circumvent the tariffs by shipping steel there for subsequent export to the US.

“The president understands we must invest in American manufacturing. But we also have to protect those investments and those workers from unfair exports associated with China’s industrial overcapacity,” White House National Economic Adviser Lael Brainard said on a call with reporters.

Biden was set to announce that he is asking the US Trade Representative to consider tripling the tariffs during a visit to United Steelworkers union headquarters in Pittsburgh.

The president is on a three-day Pennsylvania swing that began in Scranton on Tuesday and will include a visit to Philadelphia on Thursday.

The administration says China is distorting markets

and eroding competition by unfairly flooding the market with below-market-cost steel.

“China’s policy-driven overcapacity poses a serious risk to the future of the American steel and aluminum industry,” Brainard said.

Referencing China’s economic downturn, she added that Beijing “cannot export its way to recovery.”

“China is simply too big to play by its own rules,” Brainard said.

Higher tariffs can carry major economic risks.

Steel and aluminum could become more expensive, possibly increasing the costs of cars, construction materials and other key goods for US consumers.

Inflation has already been a drag on Biden’s political fortunes, and his turn toward protectionism echoes the playbook of his predecessor and opponent in this fall’s election, Donald Trump.

The former president imposed broader tariffs on Chinese goods during his administration, and has threatened to increase levies on Chinese goods unless they trade on his preferred terms as he campaigns for a second term.

An outside analysis by the consultancy Oxford Economics has suggested that implementing the tariffs Trump has proposed could hurt the overall US economy.

Senior Biden administration officials said that, unlike the Trump administration, they were seeking a “strategic and balanced” approach to new tariff rates.

China produces around half of the world’s steel, and is already making far more than its domestic market needs.

‘IS detainees in Syria subjected to widespread abuse’

AP ■ BEIRUT



Amnesty International said on Wednesday it has documented widespread abuses, including torture and deprivation of medical care, in detention facilities holding thousands of suspected Islamic State members and their relatives in northeast Syria.

The centers and camps hold about 56,000 people — the majority of them children and teens — and are run by local authorities affiliated with the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

The SDF and its allies, including US-led coalition forces, defeated the Islamic State group in Syria in 2019, ending its self-proclaimed Islamic “caliphate” that had ruled over a large swath of territory straddling Iraq and Syria.

What to do with the suspected IS fighters and their families has become an intractable issue.

Many countries whose citizens travelled to Syria to join IS have been reluctant to repatriate them, as have local communities in Syria.

“People held in this system are facing large-scale violations of their rights, some of which amount to war crimes,” Nicolette Waldman, Amnesty’s senior crisis advisor, told journalists.

The United States is also

responsible for the alleged violations because it played a key role in establishing and maintaining the detention system, providing hundreds of millions of dollars to the SDF and affiliated forces and regularly interrogating detainees, Waldman said.

The human rights group interviewed 126 people accused of IS affiliation currently or formerly detained, along with repre-

sentatives of the local administration and aid workers.

The Amnesty report said the vast majority of detainees are being held “indefinitely, without charge or trial, in violation of international human rights law and international humanitarian law,” while those who have been tried were, in many cases, convicted on the basis of confessions extracted under torture.

The alleged abuses include “beating, stress positions, drowning, electric shocks and gender-based violence,” including a male detainee who said he and others had been sodomized with broomsticks by guards, the report said.

Detainees were also deprived of food, water and medical care and subjected to extreme cold and heat in overcrowded cells, with some allegedly dying of suffocation, it said.

The report added that many of the approximately 14,500

women and 30,000 children held had been victims of human trafficking, including women who were forced to marry IS fighters and minors who were forcibly recruited by the group, and that local authorities had failed to set up a “mechanism to identify trafficking victims” and protect them.

The report also criticised the practice of forcibly separating adolescent boys — some as young as 11 or 12 — from their mothers and placing them in rehabilitation centers indefinitely.

Amnesty called on local authorities, the US government and other allies to bring the detention system into compliance with international law and urged the United Nations to work with them to establish a screening process to release all who are not “reasonably suspected” of having committed a serious crime.

New Indian envoy meets Sergey Lavrov

PTI ■ MOSCOW

India and Russia on Wednesday discussed “contemporary regional and global issues” ahead of the high-level bilateral exchanges that would further strengthen the special and privileged strategic partnership between the two countries.

India’s newly appointed Ambassador to Russia, Vinay Kumar called on Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov here, days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi held separate telephonic conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Both the leaders have invited Modi to their respective countries.

“Ambassador @vkumar1969 paid courtesy call on Foreign



Minister H E Mr Sergey Lavrov; they discussed contemporary regional and global issues and upcoming high-level bilateral exchanges which would further strengthen the India-Russia Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership,” posted the official X handle of the Indian Mission in Moscow.

Earlier in the day, Kumar met and presented a copy of his Letter of Credence to Adrey Rudenko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, and “discussed further steps to deepen India-Russia Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership,” a post from the Indian Embassy said.

On April 12, Kumar was welcomed on his arrival here by the Department of State Protocol of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia and

Indian embassy officials.

On March 20, Prime Minister Modi held separate conversations with Putin and Zelenskyy and asserted that dialogue and diplomacy were the way forward for the resolution of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Modi spoke to Putin to congratulate him for winning a fifth term in office in mid-March elections and followed it up with a phone call to Zelenskyy to convey India’s “consistent support” for all efforts for peace and bringing an early end to the ongoing conflict.

Both Putin and Zelenskyy have invited the prime minister to visit Russia and Ukraine respectively after the Lok Sabha elections, sources said, adding they see Modi as a “peacemaker”.

Swedish Parl votes to ease gender change process

Stockholm (AP): The Swedish parliament passed a law Wednesday lowering the age required for people to legally change their gender from 18 to 16. Young people under 18 will still need approval from a guardian, a doctor, and the National Board of Health and Welfare.

However, a gender dysphoria diagnosis — defined by medical professionals as psychological distress experienced by those whose gender expression does not match their gender identity — will no longer be required.

The vote was 234 for and 94 against with 21 listed as absent.

The centre-right coalition of Sweden’s conservative prime minister, Ulf Kristersson, has been split on the issue, with his

own Moderates and the Liberals largely supporting the law while the small Christian Democrats were against it. The populist party with far-right roots Sweden Democrats, who support the government in parliament but are not part of the government, also opposed it.

Among others, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Spain already have similar legislation.

In the U.K., the Scottish parliament in 2022 passed a bill, allowing people aged 16 or older to change the gender designation on identity documents by self-declaration.

It was vetoed by the British government, a decision that Scotland’s highest civil court upheld in December.



Former president Donald Trump, poses for a photo with New York Police officers after visiting a bodega, Tuesday, who’s owner was attacked last year in New York. Fresh from a Manhattan courtroom, Donald Trump visited a New York bodega where a man was stabbed to death, a stark pivot for the former president as he juggles being a criminal defendant and the Republican challenger intent on blaming President Joe Biden for crime. Alba’s attorney, Rich Cardinale, second from left, and Francisco Marte, president of the Bodega Association, looked on.

UK lawmakers back landmark bill to phase out smoking

AP ■ LONDON

The British government’s plan for a landmark smoking ban that aims to stop young people from ever smoking cleared its first hurdle in Parliament on Tuesday despite vocal opposition from within Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s Conservative Party.

The bill, a key policy announced by Sunak last year, would make it illegal to sell tobacco products to anyone born after January 1, 2009. If passed, the bill will give Britain some of the toughest anti-smoking measures in the world. Authorities say it will create modern Britain’s “first smoke-free generation.” Under the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, children turning 15 this year or younger will never be legally sold tobacco. Once implemented — officials are aiming for 2027 — the legal age of sale that people in England can buy cigarettes will be raised by one year, every year until it is eventually illegal for the whole population.

The bill also includes measures

to crack down on youth vaping, such as banning the sale of cheap disposable vapes and restricting their flavours to prevent children from becoming addicted to nicotine.

It is currently illegal for anyone to sell cigarettes or tobacco products and vapes to people under 18 years old throughout the UK.

During the bill’s second reading late Tuesday, 383 lawmakers voted in favour while 67 opposed it after an afternoon of debate. Although the bill was widely praised by health experts and had the support of the opposition Labour Party, Sunak faced rebellion from more libertarian-minded members of his party, who criticised the proposals as “unconservative.”

Opponents, such as the smokers’ rights lobbying group FOR-EST, said the move risks creating a black market and will “treat future generations of adults like kids.” Prominent voices within the Conservative Party, including two of Sunak’s predecessors Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, said the plans

went against conservative values by limiting people’s personal freedoms.

The bill was a “virtue-signalling piece of legislation about protecting adults from themselves in the future,” Truss told Parliament during Tuesday’s debate.

Other high-profile Tories, including business secretary Kemi Badenoch, a Cabinet minister, also opposed the bill or abstained.

Conservative lawmakers were granted a free vote, meaning they could vote with their personal conscience rather than follow the official party line.

The plans were believed to have been inspired by similar policies proposed by New Zealand under former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, but the country’s new coalition government repealed the bill earlier this year.

The government said that smoking won’t be criminalised, and the phased changes mean that anyone who can legally buy cigarettes now won’t be prevented from doing so in the future.

Lanka Easter bombing victims to be honoured

Colombo (PTI): Over 200 Catholic devotees who lost their lives in the Easter suicide bombings in 2019 would be honoured as “heroes of faith,” head of the local church Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith said here on Wednesday.

As many as 270 people, including 11 Indians, were killed on April 21, 2019, when nine suicide bombers belonging to the local Islamist extremist group National Thawheed Jamaat (NTJ) linked to ISIS carried out a series of blasts that tore through three churches and as many luxury hotels in Sri Lanka.

Ranjith said, “Those who attended churches on the day didn’t expect to get killed and their bodies to be taken home.” He said signatures of the Catholic minority under the diocese of Colombo would be collected in the campaign to recognise the victims as “heroes of faith.” “This will also give the Easter attack an international appeal and it will become an international issue,” Ranjith said.

US navy flies aircraft through Taiwan Strait after rare US-China talk

AP ■ TAIPEI

The US 7th Fleet said a Navy P-8A Poseidon flew through the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, a day after US and Chinese defense chiefs held their first talks since November 2022 in an effort to reduce regional tensions.

The patrol and reconnaissance plane “transited the Taiwan Strait in international airspace,” the 7th Fleet said in a news release.

The patrol and reconnaissance plane “transited the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law, the United States upholds the navigational rights and freedoms of all nations,” the release said.

The critical strait is 160 kilometers (100 mile) wide and divides China from the self-governing island democracy. Although it’s in international waters, China considers the passage of foreign military aircraft and ships through it a challenge to its sovereignty.

China claims the island of Taiwan, threatening to defend it by force if necessary despite US military support for the island. China scrambled fighter jets to

“monitor the US plane’s passage” and operated “in accordance of laws and regulations, naval Col. Li Xi, spokesperson for the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s Eastern Theatre Command, said in a report on the command’s official Weibo social media site.

“Theatre troops are on high alert at all times to resolutely safeguard national sovereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability,” Li said.

China routinely issues stern protests and activates defences in response to the passage of ships and military planes through the straight, particularly those from the US.

China also regularly sends navy ships and warplanes into the strait and other areas around the island to wear down Taiwan’s defences and seek to intimidate its 23 million people, who firmly back their de facto independence.

“By operating within the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law, the United States upholds the navigational rights and freedoms of all nations. The aircraft’s transit of the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the United

States’ commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States military flies, sails and operates anywhere international law allows,” the 7th Fleet statement said.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Chinese counterpart, Adm. Dong Jun, on Tuesday in the latest US effort to improve communications with the Chinese military and reduce the chances of a clash in the region.

It was the first time Austin has talked to Dong and the first time he has spoken at length with any Chinese counterpart since November 2022. The call, which lasted a bit more than an hour, came as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is expected to travel to China this month for talks.

Military-to-military contact stalled in August 2022, when Beijing suspended all such communication after then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. China responded by firing missiles over Taiwan and staging a surge in military maneuvers, including what appeared to be a rehearsal of a naval and aerial blockade of the island.

Taliban suspend TV stations in Af for neglecting Islamic value

Islamabad (AP): The Taliban have suspended the activities of two TV stations in Afghanistan, alleging they failed to “consider national and Islamic values.” An official from the Information Ministry’s Media Violations Commission, Hafizullah Barakzai, said a court will investigate files on the two Kabul-based stations.

Noor TV and Barya TV cannot operate until the court gives its verdict.

“Despite repeated warnings and recommendations, Noor TV and Barya TV did not follow journalistic principles, they did not consider national and Islamic values,” Barakzai said on Tuesday.

He gave no further details on the alleged violations. Many journalists lost their jobs after the Taliban takeover in 2021, with media outlets closing over a lack of funds or because their staff left the country. Women journalists face additional hardships because of work bans and travel restrictions.

‘US mulling options to monitor N Korea’

AP ■ SEOUL

The United States and its allies are discussing options “both inside and outside the UN system” to create a new mechanism for monitoring North Korea over its nuclear weapons programme, the American ambassador to the United Nations said on Wednesday.

Russia last month vetoed a UN resolution in a move that effectively abolished monitoring by UN experts of Security Council sanctions against North Korea, which prompted Western accusations that Moscow was acting to shield its arms purchases from North Korea to fuel its war in Ukraine.

“I look forward to engaging with both the Republic of Korea and Japan, but like-minded (countries) as well, on trying to develop options both inside the UN as well as outside the UN. The point here is that we cannot allow the work that the panel of experts were doing to lapse,” US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield told a news conference in Seoul, using the formal name for South Korea.

Thomas-Greenfield didn’t pro-

vide specific details about US discussions with allies and other partners, including whether an alternative monitoring regime would more likely be established through the UN General Assembly or with an independent entity outside of the UN.

Thomas-Greenfield met with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul on Monday and they discussed unspecified “next steps to ensure a continuation of independent and accurate reporting” of North Korea’s illicit weapons development activities, according to her office.

Thomas-Greenfield said it was clear that Russia and China, which abstained from voting on the UN resolution vetoed by Moscow, will continue to try to block international efforts to maintain monitoring of UN sanctions against North Korea.

She criticised Russia for violating those sanctions with its alleged arms purchases from North Korea, and China for protecting the North from being held accountable.

Moscow and Beijing have thwarted US-led efforts to tighten UN sanctions on North Korea over its ramped-up bal-

listic missile testing since 2022, underscoring a divide between permanent Security Council members that deepened over Russia’s war on Ukraine. “I don’t expect that they will cooperate or agree with any efforts that we make to find another path, but that is not going to stop us from finding that path moving forward,” Thomas-Greenfield said.

Thomas-Greenfield also briefly addressed questions about tensions in the Middle East. When asked about the Palestinian Authority’s request to have full UN membership, she said a UN resolution in support of that request would not contribute to finding a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“President Biden has said categorically that we support a two-state solution for addressing the situation in the Middle East, where Palestinians will have a state of their own and Israel is secure in their state, and we are working on the ground to get to that place as quickly as possible,” she said.

“We do not see that doing a resolution in the Security Council will necessarily get us to a place where we can find a ... two-state solution moving forward,” she

added.

The Security Council imposed sanctions after North Korea’s first nuclear test explosion in 2006 and tightened them over the years in a total of 10 resolutions seeking — so far unsuccessfully — to cut funds and curb its nuclear and missile programmes.

The last sanctions resolution was adopted by the council in December 2017.

The Security Council established a committee to monitor sanctions, and the mandate for its panel of experts to investigate violations had been renewed for 14 years until last month.

Russia’s UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told the Security Council before last month’s vote that Western nations are trying to “strangle” North Korea and that sanctions are losing their “relevance” in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the North.

In its most recent report circulated last month, the panel of experts said it is investigating 58 suspected North Korean cyberattacks between 2017 and 2023 valued at approximately USD 3 billion, with the money reportedly being used to help fund its weapons development.

Solomon Islanders cast votes in election shaping ties with China

AP ■ HONIARA

Voting has closed across Solomon Islands on Wednesday in the South Pacific nation’s first general election since the government switched diplomatic allegiances from Taiwan to Beijing and struck a secret security pact that has raised fears of the Chinese navy gaining a foothold in the region.

The Solomon Islands’ closer relationship with China and a troubled domestic economy weighed on voters’ minds as they cast their ballots.

As many as 420,000 registered voters had their say across 50 national seats on Wednesday.

For the first time, the national vote also coincides with elections for eight of the 10 local governments.

Esther Maeluma cast her vote in the National Art Gallery in the capital Honiara and said it seemed busier than the last national election in 2019.

“I want my country and the economy to be good and that’s why I chose my candidate,” she said outside a polling station.



Some voters queued outside polling stations from 4 a.m. — three hours before polling began — with many more flocking to booths early after seeing the growing crowds.

Voting ended at 4 p.m.

With early voting available to a select few, voters have spent recent days travelling back to home electorates, quietening the streets of Honiara and forcing the nation’s main hos-

pital to enter crisis mode due to a lack of staff.

“I didn’t used to vote, but now I can see that maybe my vote can change the system and the country,” hospital worker Loretta Maeohu said.

The United States has been working to build diplomatic bridges with South Pacific island nations since Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare signed the security pact with

China. Russia’s Sputnik news agency last week published an article featuring anonymous claims that the United States was planning an “electoral coup” in the Solomon Islands, which were repeated in an article published by the Chinese Communist Party’s Global Times newspaper. Links to the articles have been posted on social media.

US Ambassador to the Solomons, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu, Ann Marie Yastishock on Tuesday released a statement dismissing “blatantly misleading claims about the United States’ engagement in the region.”

“We strongly refute allegations being made in known propaganda outlets that claim USAID and the US government has sought to influence the upcoming election in Solomon Islands,” Yastishock said.

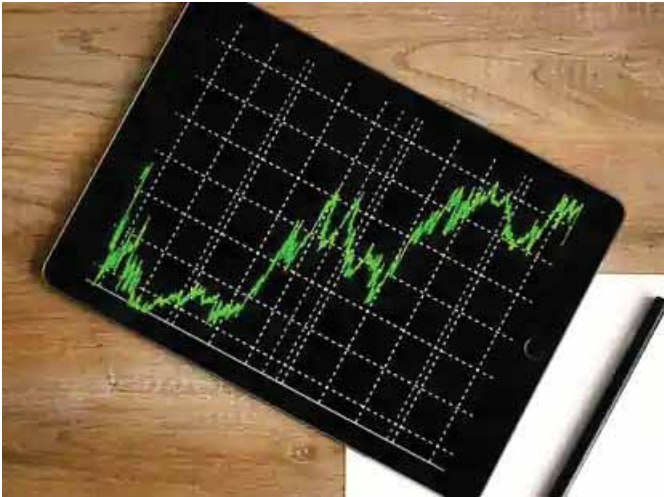
More than 1,000 polling stations were scattered across villages and town centres across the Solomons archipelago, 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) off Australia’s northeast coast.

Indian economy projected to grow 6.5 per cent in 2024, says UNCTAD

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

India's economy is projected to grow by 6.5 per cent in 2024, according to a report by the UN which noted that multinationals extending their manufacturing processes into the country to diversify their supply chains will have a positive impact on Indian exports. UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in its report released on Tuesday said that India grew by 6.7 per cent in 2023 and is expected to expand by 6.5 per cent in 2024, continuing to be the fastest-growing major economy in the world. "The expansion in 2023 was driven by strong public investment outlays as well as the vitality of the services sector which benefited from robust local demand for consumer services and firm external demand for the country's business services exports," the report said, adding that these factors are expected to continue to support growth in India in 2024.

The report also noted the increasing focus by multinationals on India as a manufacturing base as they diversify their supply chains, a reference to China. "In the outlook, an increasing trend of multinationals extending their manufacturing processes into India to diversify their supply chains will also have a positive impact on Indian exports, while moderating commodity prices will be beneficial to the country's import bill," it said. Last week, the flagship '2024 Financing for Sustainable Development Report: Financing for Development at a Crossroads' launched at the world body said that investment in South Asia, particularly in India, remains strong. It added that India is benefiting from growing interest from multinationals, which see the country as an alternative manufacturing base in the context of developed economies' supply chain diversification strategies, making an apparent



reference to China. The UNCTAD report said the Reserve Bank of India is expected to keep interest rates constant in the near term, while restrained public consumption spending will be offset by strong public investment expenditures. In other Southern Asian

countries, however, economic growth remains more subdued. Three countries in the region - Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka - are currently under IMF programmes, the conditionalities of which necessitate the application of tight monetary policies and fiscal austerity

measures whose impacts are most severely felt by low-income households, it said. Global growth is projected to be 2.6 per cent in 2024, slightly slower than the 2.7 per cent in 2023. This makes 2024 the third consecutive year in which the global economy will grow slower than before the pandemic when the average rate for 2015-2019 was 3.2 per cent, the report said. The UNCTAD report added that the risks that substantially threatened to slow down global economic growth in 2023 did not fully materialise. "Some economies - including large ones, such as China, India, Indonesia, the Russian Federation, the United States, among others - escaped the financial trouble that loomed earlier in the year," it said, adding that as a result, the world economy grew 2.7 per cent, just 0.2 percentage point more than the threshold of 2.5 per cent that is often associated with a global recessionary phase.

"This positive dynamic is now being squandered. Policy discussions continue to centre on inflation, conveying confidence that anticipated monetary easing will heal the world's economic woes. Meanwhile, the pressing challenges of trade disruptions, climate change, low growth, under-investment and inequalities are growing more serious," it said. The report said that China's economy, projected to grow 4.9 per cent in 2024, has been facing some headwinds such as external uncertainties, a troublesome housing market, an under-performing labour market and subdued consumption. The UNCTAD report comes even as the International Monetary Fund said in its latest edition of the World Economic Outlook released on Tuesday that growth in India is projected to remain strong at 6.8 per cent in 2024 and 6.5 per cent in 2025, with the robustness reflecting continuing strength in domestic demand and a rising working-age population.



Funskool seeks to transform India into global hub for toy manufacturing

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Toy manufacturer Funskool India, part of tyre major MRF Group, has taken up expansion at its manufacturing facilities in Tamil Nadu to make India a global hub for toy manufacturing. The expansion work at its premises in Ranipet, would effectively double the manufacturing capacities. The upgraded facilities in both Unit 1 and 2 of the manufacturing facilities represent a substantial investment in Funskool's production capabilities, a company statement here said on Wednesday. "Funskool India has experienced remarkable growth over the years. With this expansion, we solidify our position as a leader in India's toy industry and move closer to our goal of transforming India into a global hub for toy manufacturing" Funskool India Ltd Chairman Arun Mammen said after inaugurating the upgraded facilities. Besides the two units at Ranipet, Funskool India has 1.62 lakh sq ft of manufacturing space at its first plant in Goa. "Our commitment to the Make in India initiative is stronger than ever. This expansion not only meets the manufacturing needs of rising domestic demand but exports as well," Funskool India Ltd CEO R Jeswant said. With the expansion work, Funskool India would take up production of a wide range of toys including both plastic and wooden varieties. "A dedicated wing within the expanded campus has started focusing on the manufacturing of wooden toys, aligning with Funskool's strategic growth objectives," the statement said. Funskool said the workforce at the Ranipet factories comprises 80 percent women. The manufacturing facilities utilize solar energy for running the plants ensuring health and safety and managing environmental impact in all operations.



India power consumption rises to 70.66 billion units in first half of April

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's power consumption grew nearly 10 per cent year-on-year to 70.66 billion units (BU) in the first half of April this year, showing improvement in economic activities and consumption patterns, according to the power ministry data. According to the data, power consumption in the country rose to 70.66 BU during April 1-15 this year from 64.24 MU in the year-ago period. The peak power demand met or the highest supply in a day rose to about 218 GW in the first half of April compared to 206 GW in the same period a year ago. The highest supply in a day during the entire month of April last year was about 216 GW. The ministry has projected a peak power demand of 260 GW during the summer season (April to June) in view of longer heat wave duration. The peak power demand had touched an all-time high 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. The experts said that the power demand will increase in the coming days as rains in different parts of the country have reduced the need for cooling appliances like air conditioners, desert coolers etc used during this time of the year. However, they said that power consumption growth in double digits shows improvement in economic activities and change in consumption patterns. They are of the view that the consumers in India are also increasing their energy consumption on various appliances and gadgets as is being done in the developed world. Besides, they pointed out that the increase in electricity in the transport sector like electric buses, cars, rickshaws and railways has also changed the consum

Women participation in tech roles in non tech sectors to grow by 2027: Report

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Women's participation in technology roles in non-tech businesses is expected to grow by nearly a quarter by 2027 across all levels, including freshers, junior, mid-senior, leadership, and C-Suite levels, a report said on Wednesday. The tech women's participation rate in non-tech industries stood at 19.4 lakh workforce in 2023, which is expected to grow by 24.3 per cent to 24.1 lakh employees by 2027, TeamLease Digital's report - Women at the Heart of India's Digital Evolution, has revealed. With only 0.5 per cent of the

total women workforce engaged in tech roles in non-tech sectors, there is a pressing need to amplify female participation in this domain. Having said that, the tech sector is increasingly prioritising the employment of women and India's women's STEM participation stands at 43 per cent globally, which is the highest in the world," TeamLease Digital Chief Executive Officer Neeti Sharma said. This would further grow this year (2025) on the basis of the sustained efforts of the government and women-centric programs enabling increased participation of women in tech, inclusive



maternity and childcare support, she stated. The TeamLease Digital - 'Women at the Heart of India's Digital Evolution', report is based on data obtained from its wide network and proprietary

database, as well as several public sources from 2019 till 2023. Further, mentioning city-specific statistics, the report found that the percentage of women joining the workforce from tier I cities (55 per cent) outnumbers the tier II cities. Women hiring is projected to centre in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat in the coming months, with talent being hired in locations such as Chennai, Pune, Nasik, Coimbatore, Kochi, Aurangabad, and Vadodara, it stated. Currently, in the manufacturing segment, Tamil Nadu accounts for 43 per cent of the total

employed women workforce, it noted. It found that the fresher level had the highest concentration of women at 34 per cent, which gradually declines as the hierarchy rises, with 26 per cent in the junior level (3-5 years experience), 18 per cent in the mid-senior level (5-15 years), 11 per cent in leadership roles (15-20 years), and a mere 8 per cent in the C-suite or boardroom level. The decline in women in leadership positions is mainly due to lack of opportunities, support for women with caregiving responsibilities, and fewer mentors and role models, the report said.

Middle East conflict, US inflation, foreign fund outflows drag markets lower from record peaks

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Global uncertainties, mainly Escalating tensions between Iran and Israel, have led to a massive correction in the equity markets in the last three days after a record-shattering rally that saw the BSE Sensex crossing the historic 75,000 mark last week. Hotter-than-expected US inflation data fuelled concerns that the Federal Reserve will hold back on delivering the cuts to interest rates. Also, foreign fund outflows and profit-taking contributed to the correction in the equity markets. In the past three days, the BSE benchmark tanked 2,094.47 points or 2.79 per cent. Investors' wealth tumbled Rs 7.93 lakh crore in the three days of the market crash amid simmering tensions in the Middle East and weak global trends. "The heavy correction in the market can be attributed to several factors, including the escalating tensions between Iran and Israel, which have heightened geopolitical uncertainties and prompted risk aversion among investors. "Additionally, the Federal Reserve's hawkish stance on inflation has shifted interest rate expectations, dampening hopes for significant interest rate cuts. Rising geopolitical tensions in the Middle East have contributed to the

correction, as investors move towards safer assets amidst uncertainty. These factors combined have led to a significant correction in the market after a period of record rally," said Suman Bannerjee, CIO of hedge fund Hedonova. The BSE Sensex hit its all-time peak of 75,124.28 on April 9. The index breached the historic 75,000 mark for the first time ever on the same day. On April 10, the 30-share BSE benchmark settled above the 75,000 mark for the first time. The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies went past the coveted Rs 400 lakh crore mark for the first time ever on April 8. From February 29 to April 10, the BSE benchmark jumped 2,537.85 points or 3.50 per cent. However, from April 12 onwards the markets have been falling. "The recent heavy correction in the market can be attributed to geopolitical tensions. Additionally, anticipation of delayed rate cuts in the USA has added pressure. These factors have collectively contributed to the downturn following a period of record rally in the markets," Arvinder Singh Nanda, Senior Vice President, of Master Capital Services Ltd, said. Stock markets are closed on Wednesday for Ram Navami. Swastika Investment Ltd Managing



Director Sunil Nyati said the market corrected due to selling in the broader market, weak global cues, selling by Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs), upcoming US Federal Reserve meeting and rising crude oil prices. When there is widespread selling across various sectors and stocks, it can lead to overall market decline as investors' sentiment turns negative, Nyati said. "India is a major importer of crude oil, and higher oil prices can negatively affect the country's trade balance, inflation, and fiscal situation," Nyati added. Last month, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 1,151.05 points or 1.58 per cent. "Markets extended their losing streak for the third straight session

on the back of weak global cues as a sharp rise in US bond yields due to rising Middle East tensions have made equity markets less attractive and prompted investors to resort to profit-taking. Investors are fearing that the ongoing conflict could fuel buoyancy in crude oil prices and in turn, weigh on inflation," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. Bannerjee said the Q4 earnings report will be crucial as solid results could reignite the rally, while disappointments might trigger further corrections. "Additionally, the Federal Reserve's policy actions regarding interest rates will be closely monitored for any changes in their stance. Furthermore, global economic health and significant developments, especially geopolitical tensions, such as the Iran-Israel conflict, can significantly impact investor sentiment and market movements," he said. "The near-term direction of the Indian stock market can be influenced by several key factors - performance of global markets, Lok Sabha election results, foreign investors trading activity, upcoming decisions by the US Federal Reserve regarding interest rates and fluctuations in oil prices," Nyati said.

Daimler India to foray into battery electric segment with new gen eCantar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Daimler India Commercial Vehicles on Wednesday said it plans to foray into the domestic battery electric segment with the launch of the all-electric next-generation light duty truck eCantar in the next 6-12 months. The all-new next-generation eCantar had its world premiere in Japan and Europe in the second half of 2022. "The launch of the all-electric eCantar in India, within the next 6 to 12 months, is the first step in our long-term strategy to decarbonise our entire product portfolio," Daimler India Commercial Vehicles (DICV) MD and CEO Satyakam Arya said in a statement. However, the reality is that diesel ICE and carbon dioxide neutral propulsion technologies will continue to co-exist in the Indian market for the foreseeable future, he added. "A long-term plan like ours hinges on many complex external factors, some of which are, the availability of a charging and refuelling infrastructure, the availability



of green energy, cost parity and wide-scale customer acceptance," Arya said. Therefore, the company's initial focus with the eCantar is to achieve product and service excellence, along with customer acceptance, he noted. "Over the next two decades we will have a firm footing with decarbonised transportation solutions and will be making progress towards becoming a leader in sustainable transportation in India," Arya said. On how a conducive policy framework is crucial to ensuring economic viability for customers, he stated that adoption of carbon neutral vehicles is possible if there is wide consumer acceptance about changes in the equations of total cost of ownership.

India not reaping benefits of democratic dividend: Raghuram Rajan

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

India is not reaping the benefits of democratic dividends, former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan said Tuesday, emphasizing that there is need to focus on improving the human capital and enhancing their skill sets. "I think we are in the midst of it (democratic dividend), but the problem is we are not reaping the benefits," Rajan said at a conference on "Making India an Advanced Economy by 2047: What Will it Take" at the George Washington University here. "That's why I said 6 per cent growth. If you think that's about what we are right now, take away the fluff in the GDP numbers. That 6 per cent is in the midst of a demographic

dividend. It is much below where China and Korea were when they reaped their demographic dividend. And that's why I'm saying we are being overly complicit when we say this is great. This is not because we are losing the demographic dividend because we are not giving those guys jobs," the former RBI governor said. "And that leads us to the question, how do we create those jobs? The answer to my mind is partly enhancing the capabilities of the people we have, partly changing the nature of the jobs that are available and we need to work on both fronts. "This idea of apprenticeship, which the Congress has in its manifesto is worth working on. I think there's a lot that needs to be done to make it effective, but we need many more



students to at least be capable of doing a good job," Rajan said, adding that there also needs to be focus on job creation. Rajan was critical of India spending billions of dollars on chip manufacturing. "Think about these chip factories. So many billions going to subsidise chip manufacturing," he said, adding that a number of job intensive areas like leather are not doing good. "We are going down in those areas. No wonder we have more of a job problem. The job problem was not created in the last 10 years. It's been growing over the last few decades. But if you neglect the areas which are more intensive, I'm not saying we need to now offer subsidised subsidies to leather examples, but figure out what's going wrong there

and try and rectify that," he said. Responding to a question, Rajan said a lot of Indian innovators now are going to Singapore or to Silicon Valley to set up because they find access to the final markets much easier there. "We need to ask what is it that forces them to go outside of India to set up rather than stay inside India? But what is really heartwarming is talking to some of these entrepreneurs and seeing their desire to change the world and increasingly many of them are not happy staying in India," he said. "They want to actually expand more globally. I think there is a young India that has a Virat Kohli mentality. I'm second to none in the world," Rajan said. Earlier in his presentation, Rajan said regardless of whether one picks

services, manufacturing, agricultural construction, India has a problem. "And this is so well known, I don't need to elaborate. Unemployment numbers are high, disguised unemployment is even higher, labor force participation is low, female labor force participation is really alarmingly low...the share of agriculture and jobs is increasing in recent times. Of course all this is exhibited in highly educated unemployment and massive numbers of people applying for government jobs. PhDs applying for jobs as peons in railways," he said. "Even as this is happening. Even as we have a massive labour which is unemployed, we have the capital intensity of manufacturing steadily going up," Rajan said.



Manika, Sreeja make group stage exits from ITTF World Cup

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Star Indian table tennis player Manika Batra and her compatriot Sreeja Akula exited in the second-round group stage after losing against China's Wang Manyu and defending champion

Chen Meng respectively at the ITTF World Cup in Galaxy Arena in Macau on Wednesday. World no. 39 Sreeja lost 1-3 (4-11 4-11 15-13 2-11) to reigning Olympic champion and world no. 4 Meng of China and finished second in

Group 4. Manika also made an exit finishing second after losing 0-4 (6-11 4-11 9-11 4-11) against world no. 2 Manyu of China. Both the Indian players had earlier won their respective first-round group stage matches on Tuesday.

There are sixteen groups in each of the men's and women's singles competition. Group stage matches consists of four games, with the ratio of wins and losses determining the final rankings that will further help them to book a berth for the knockout rounds.

Every practice, drill will count from now on: Harmanpreet

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian men's hockey team captain Harmanpreet Singh on Wednesday said with 100 days left for the Paris Olympics, every day, every practice and every drill will count towards building momentum to shine at the biggest sporting stage. Last edition's bronze medallist India are currently placed sixth in the world, but Harmanpreet said they are hungry to improve upon their Tokyo result in Paris. The star drag-flicker's comments came following India's dismal show in the recent tour of Australia, where they were whitewashed 0-5 by the hosts. "We just returned from the intense Australia tour. After a short break, we will hit the grind again. With only 100 days to go until the Paris Olympics, the excitement in the team is growing," Harmanpreet said in a Hockey India release. "The unity of our team continues to grow, fuelled by our shared goal to clinch the gold medal. Craig Fulton, our chief coach, keeps us on track with the Olympics countdown in our weekly schedule.



"Every day counts, every practice, every drill — it's all about building towards that moment on the Olympic stage. All in all, we're hungry, we're focused, and we're ready to shine," he added. India qualified for the Paris Olympics by winning gold medal in last year's Hangzhou Asian Games. India vice-captain Hardik

Singh said the need of the hour is to iron out the grey areas before the Paris Games. "The Australia Tests highlighted the areas that we need to improve, and upon our return to camp, we aim to make sure that we iron out any remaining issues well in time for the Paris 2024 Olympics," he said. "We will give our best on each

of the 100 remaining days to make sure that our pursuit for the gold medal at the Olympics is successful," he added. In Paris Olympics, India are clubbed alongside defending champions Belgium, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand and Ireland in Pool B. India will play their opener against New Zealand on July 27.

MotoGP racing for new momentum in America

AP ■ AUSTIN (TEXAS)

A new American team with ties to the NASCAR stock car series, a new television deal in the United States and upcoming American ownership. MotoGP, global motorcycle racing's version of Formula 1, looks primed for a bid to copy F1's explosive growth in recent years and bring a new group of fans - notably from the US - to the thrills of two-wheeled speed. "It has what Americans really crave or demand out of their sports: A combination of physical ability and danger," said Bobby Epstein, president of the Texas race-track Circuit of the Americas, which hosts MotoGP's only race in the US. Liberty Media's purchase of Spain-based Dorna and the commercial rights to MotoGP by the end of the year has fueled speculation of what might come for a racing series anchored largely in Europe. "They know what to do, they raise Formula 1 to the maximum peak we've ever seen," said Italy's

Francesco Bagnaia, the 2022 and 2023 MotoGP champion with Ducati. "It will be a great opportunity for MotoGP." Liberty took over Formula 1 in 2017 and has overseen its rise in popularity, with an expanded calendar, new races in Las Vegas and Miami, and the slick Netflix docu-series "Drive to Survive." Liberty has yet to reveal specific plans for MotoGP. But, President and Chief Executive Greg Maffei called the series "a great sporting spectacle that we can expand to a wider global audience. The business has significant upside, and we intend to grow the sport for MotoGP fans, teams, commercial partners and our shareholders." MotoGP already has two key elements for growing its American audience: Trackhouse Racing's move into the series this season and its potential crossover appeal to NASCAR fans; and a broadcast deal with TNT Sports to carry every sprint race and grand prix live across the network's platforms. "I see a tremendous amount of

potential, which is exactly why I made the investment to come into this sport," said Justin Marks, co-owner of Trackhouse Racing with pop star Pitbull. "I understand the American motorsport consumer. I understand the profile of the American racing fan." Those fans will appreciate daredevil riders racing at speeds that can top 200 mph (321 kph), and short races that typically finish in under an hour, Marks said. Trackhouse is already trying to lure its NASCAR fans into giving MotoGP a look. Trackhouse NASCAR drivers Ross Chastain and Daniel Suarez were in the MotoGP paddock at the Grand Prix of the Americas last week before their race on Sunday. Earlier in the week, Trackhouse MotoGP riders Miguel Oliveira and Raul Fernandez visited the team's NASCAR headquarters in North Carolina. All of it was cross-promoted across team social media accounts. "It's our one time to race on American soil. I spent a lot of time



talking to fans who walked up and shook my hand and just said, 'Thanks for doing what you are doing and investing in motorcycle racing,' Marks said. American fans will look for an American rider. They won't find one - yet. No American has held a full-time ride in MotoGP since 2015. No

rider from the US has won a MotoGP race since 2011. The last American champion was the late Nicky Hayden in 2006. Europe dominates talent development at all levels. Of the 22 riders this season, 16 are from Spain, including Fernandez, or Italy. Oliveira is Portuguese. Joe Roberts, who races for the

Onlyfans American Racing team, is the only American rider at the Moto2 level. "An American rider at the top level of GP competing for wins is the absolute best-case scenario. It's just going to get take a while to get there. Hopefully, Trackhouse can help curate that American talent," Marks said. The Liberty takeover announcement noted that Dorna would remain an "independently run company" that will remain based in Madrid. Carlos Ezpeleta, Dorna's chief sporting officer, last week downplayed the prospect of major changes in the immediate future. The series had already added F1-style sprint races and expanded its calendar to 22 races. "Liberty does not think that the sport needs fixing, and we agree with that," Ezpeleta said. MotoGP had three races in the US in 2013. By 2016, it was down to one. The Circuit of the Americas has hosted the series for a decade. Race sites are mostly set through 2026.

Epstein said adding a new US race too soon would only dilute attendance at his race and a new one. Marks would like to see MotoGP follow the F1 model of expanding into new American markets with international appeal and flavour, such as Southern California or Miami. Marks chose Los Angeles as the site to unveil the Trackhouse team and liveries back in January. Friends Vince Chu, 59, and Russ Smith, 69, of Las Vegas made their first trip to the race in Austin last week. They were decked out in Ducati gear as they roamed the "Ducati Island" fan zone. Both said they hope MotoGP will draw new fans and welcomed the idea of more races, particularly on the West Coast. But, they also had a message for Liberty and any idea about expansion: MotoGP fans expect their series to remain affordable. "I'm a Formula 1 fan, I'm from Las Vegas, and I couldn't go to the race in Vegas. (Cost) was outrageous," Chu said.



Former world champion runner Jeruto faces doping case

AP ■ LAUSANNE (SWITZERLAND)

Former steeplechase world champion Norah Jeruto faces a doping case hearing in June, five weeks before the Paris Olympics open. The Court of Arbitration for Sport said Wednesday it will hear an appeal by World Athletics on June 17 against a ruling last year that cleared the 2022 world champion of suspected blood doping. Jeruto had argued that ulcers and a bout of COVID-19 could explain her blood test results in 2020 and 2021 which were later judged to be irregular. She did not test positive for a banned substance. The Kenya-born Jeruto competed for Kazakhstan when she won gold in the 3,000-meter steeplechase at the worlds in Eugene, Oregon, but could not defend her title last year as she was suspended during an investigation. The Athletics Integrity Unit implicated the 28-year-old

Jeruto in banned blood transfusions and taking the endurance-boosting hormone EPO. An independent tribunal judging the case said a COVID-19 infection in late 2020 raised "sufficient doubt on this part of the case that it would be unfair to convict (Jeruto)." An expert witness said internal bleeding from Jeruto's ulcers could explain why some of her samples indicated she had lost blood, and there was no evidence she received any transfusions. Jeruto became an African champion while representing Kenya and won on the top-tier Diamond League circuit in 2021. She missed the Tokyo Olympics that year while her change of allegiance to Kazakhstan was processed. An urgent CAS verdict is likely before the women's steeplechase is raced at the Paris Olympics on August 6-8 at Stade de France.

Paris prepares for 100 days countdown to Olympics

AP ■ PARIS

In Paris' outskirts, a bright-eyed young girl is eager for the Olympic and Paralympic Games to end. That's because the swimming club where 10-year-old Lyla Kebbi trains will inherit an Olympic pool. It will be dismantled after the Games and trucked from the Olympic race venue in Paris' high-rise business district to Sevran, a Paris-area town with less glitter and wealth. There, the pieces will be bolted back together and - voila ! - Kebbi and her swim team will have a new Olympic-sized pool to splash around in. "It's incredible !" she says. "I hope it's going to bring us luck," adds her mother, Nora. In 100 days as of Wednesday, the Paris Olympics will kick off with a wildly ambitious waterborne opening ceremony. But the first Games in a century in France's capital won't be judged for spectacle alone. Another yardstick will be their impact on disadvantaged Paris suburbs, away from the city-center landmarks that are hosting much of the action.

By promising socially positive and also less polluting and less wasteful Olympics, the city synonymous with romance is also setting itself the high bar of making future Games generally more desirable. Critics question their value for a world grappling with climate warming and other emergencies. Potential host cities became so Games-averse that Paris and Los Angeles were the only remaining candidates in 2017 when the International Olympic Committee selected them for 2024 and 2028, respectively. After scandals and the \$13 billion cost of the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Games in 2021, unfulfilled promises of beneficial change for host Rio de Janeiro in 2016 and the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi tarnished by Russian doping and President Vladimir Putin's subsequent land grabs in Ukraine, the Switzerland-based IOC has mountains of skepticism to dispel. Virtuous Summer Games in Paris could help the long-term survival of the IOC's mega-event. SPREADING BENEFITS



BEYOND CENTRAL PARIS The idea that the July 26-Aug. 11 Games and Aug. 28-Sept. 8 Paralympics should benefit disadvantaged communities in the Seine-Saint-Denis region northeast of Paris was built from the outset into the city's plans. Seine-Saint-Denis is mainland France's poorest region. Thanks to generations of immigration, it also is vibrantly diverse, counting 130 nationalities and more than 170 languages spoken by its 1.6 million inhabitants. For Seine-Saint-Denis kids facing racial discrimination and other barriers, sports are sometimes a route out. World Cup winner Kylian Mbappé honed his silky

soccer skills as a boy in the Seine-Saint-Denis town of Bondy. Once heavily industrialized, Seine-Saint-Denis became grim and scary in parts after many jobs were lost. Rioting rocked its streets in 2005 and again last year. Members of an Islamic extremist cell that killed 130 people in the French capital in 2015 hid after the carnage in an apartment in the town of Saint-Denis and were killed in a shootout with heavily armed SWAT teams. That drama unfolded just a 15-minute walk from the Olympic stadium that will host track and field and rugby and the closing ceremonies. Concretely, the Games will

leave a legacy of new and refurbished sports infrastructure in Seine-Saint-Denis, although critics say the investment still isn't enough to catch it up with better equipped, more prosperous regions. Seine-Saint-Denis got the new Olympic village that will become housing and offices when the 10,500 Olympians and 4,400 Paralympians have left. It also is home to the Games' only purpose-built competition venue, an aquatics center for diving, water polo and artistic swimming events. Other competition venues already existed, were previously planned or will be temporary. "We really were driven by the ambition of sobriety and above all not to build sports facilities that aren't needed and which will have no reason to exist after the Games," Marie Barsacq, the organizing committee's legacy director, said in an interview. The hand-me-down 50-meter pool for Sevran will be a significant upgrade. The Seine-Saint-Denis town of 51,000 people was whacked by factory

closures in the 1990s. Its existing 25-meter pool is nearly 50 years old. Other Seine-Saint-Denis towns are also getting new or renovated pools - particularly welcome for the region's children, because only half of them can swim. "The ambition for these Olympic Games ... Is that they benefit everyone and for the longest time possible," said Sevran Mayor Stéphane Blanchet. The Olympics, Blanchet said, can't "carry on just passing though and then moving on without thinking about tomorrow." PARIS' COSTS COMPARE FAVORABLY Close to 9 billion euros (\$9.7 billion), more than half from sponsors, ticket sales and other non-public funding, Paris' expenses so far are less than for the last three Summer Games in Tokyo, Rio and London in 2012. Including policing and transport costs, the portion of the bill for French taxpayers is likely to be around 3 billion euros (\$3.25 billion), France's body for auditing public funds said in its most recent study in July.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Asian Para Games gold-winner Sheetal Devi grabbed a silver in the Khelo India NTPC National Ranking archery meet, finishing second behind Haryana's Ekta Rani, who is able-bodied and a junior world champion. In the competition held at the DDA Yamuna Sports Complex, the 17-year-old Sheetal competed with able-bodied junior archers and lost 138-140 to Ekta in the individual compound event final. Sheetal, who was bestowed the Arjuna award earlier this year for her two gold and a silver medal winning performance in the Hangzhou Asian Para Games, was born with a rare condition called phocomelia which makes her the

Sheetal claims silver in competition with able bodied at Khelo India National meet

first and the only international para-archery champion without arms. Sheetal believes her performance in the Khelo India event will help her prepare for the challenges ahead. "This result will help me more going ahead in the international platforms and the Olympics," Sheetal was quoted as saying in a media release from the Sports Authority of India. Her coach Abhilasha said the competition was much-needed for the teenager before the Paralympics. "Taking part in the national ranking



tournament, alongside able-bodied competitors, is giving training and competition exposure which is much-needed prior to the Olympics," said the archer's coach Abhilasha. "We have to go abroad for exposure but we are getting the same experience here itself. Domestic-level tournaments like these are helping the cause," Abhilasha added. On her part, Ekta said she felt inspired by Sheetal's presence in the competition. "I have faced-off with Sheetal

previously so I had the match experience against her. We faced off in Patiala last December as well. It feels good to play against her because she is an armless archer and it gives a lot of motivation as well," Ekta said. Ekta bagged the prize money of Rs 50,000 whereas Sheetal received Rs 40,000. The tournament was conducted in three categories — senior, junior and sub-junior in recurve and compound. Eighty-seven archers competed in this event.



Punjab Kings, Mumbai Indians desperate to resurrect IPL campaign

PTI ■ MULLANPUR

Punjab Kings and Mumbai Indians will be desperate to resurrect their faltering campaigns in the Indian Premier League when the two bottom-rung teams face-off here on Thursday. Only a few decimal points separate the two teams after six matches each with Punjab's marginally better Net Run Rate of -0.218 keeping them at the seventh spot in the IPL points table, one above Mumbai Indians (-0.234). Both Punjab and Mumbai have lost four matches each and are coming off defeats in their respective last outings, which mean pressure will be high on both the camps to get their act together. For Punjab, the challenge of getting the best out of their top order has compounded with regular skipper Dhawan being sidelined for seven to 10 days due to a shoulder injury. The only bright spot for PBKS this season has been resolute displays from their unsung

Indian players Shashank Singh and Ashutosh Sharma, who both bat lower in the order and have had to make up for the shortcomings at the top more than once. The form of Prabhsimran Singh - 119 runs in six matches at 19.83 - is a concern and the same can be said for India wicketkeeper-batter Jitesh Sharma. With selection for the World Cup squad on the horizon, Jitesh, who has managed a mere 106 runs in six outings at 17.66, would be under the pump too. PBKS will have to find more support for their overseas bowling duo of Sam Curran (126 runs and 8 wickets) and Kagiso Rabada (9). The Indian pair of Arshdeep Singh (9) and Harshal Patel (7) have both been easy targets for batters. Mumbai Indians would know they have enough firepower in the camp to turn the tide but a collective effort on a consistent basis is the need of the hour. Two wins at home against Delhi Capitals and Royal Challengers Bengaluru did end



their three-match losing run, but a loss to Chennai Super Kings despite Rohit Sharma's century meant the five-time winners have forced them to go back to the drawing board. It starts with Hardik Pandya's form and role in the side. The all-rounder has looked to share responsibility in bowling department but his economy rate of 12 is alarming. On the same parameter, Gerald Coetzee (9) and uncapped Akash Madhwal (4) have given away more than 10 runs an over. With the bat, Pandya has not provided any consolidation while batting first or finished matches in the latter half. At the same time, Pandya has faced hostile environments at various stadiums in all the games he has played so far this season, something that could have an adverse impact on a player. Rohit and Ishan Kishan's form thus become crucial for Mumbai Indians, for whom Suryakumar Yadav has produced mixed results.

TEAMS (FROM):
Punjab Kings: Shikhar Dhawan (c), Matthew Short, Prabhsimran Singh, Jitesh Sharma, Sikandar Raza, Rishi Dhawan, Liam Livingstone, Atharva Taide, Arshdeep Singh, Nathan Ellis, Sam Curran, Kagiso Rabada, Harpreet Brar, Rahul Chahar, Harpreet Bhatia, Vidwath Kaverappa, Shivam Singh, Harshal Patel, Chris Woakes, Ashutosh Sharma, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Shashank Singh, Tanay Thyagarajan, Prince Choudhary, Rilee Rossouw.
Mumbai Indians: Hardik Pandya (c), Rohit Sharma, Suryakumar Yadav, Dewald Brevis, Jasprit Bumrah, Piyush Chawla, Gerald Coetzee, Tim David, Shreyas Gopal, Ishan Kishan (wk), Anshul Kamboj, Kumar Kartikeya, Akash Madhwal, Kwena Maphaka, Mohammad Nabi, Shams Mulani, Naman Dhir, Shivalik Sharma, Romario Shepherd, Arjun Tendulkar, Nuwan Thushara, Tilak Varma, Harvik Desai, Nehal Wadhwa, Luke Wood.

Rinku credits Gambhir for Narine transformation as specialist opener

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Sunil Narine opening for Kolkata Knight Riders in this IPL has proved to be a masterstroke and credit for the West Indian's move up the order should go to team mentor Gautam Gambhir, reckons Rinku Singh. Narine smashed his maiden T20 hundred on Tuesday, a 56-ball 109 against Rajasthan Royals. His form at the top this season has been nothing short of remarkable considering he aggregated just 154 runs over the past three seasons while batting lower down the order. As an opener this season, he has already collected 276 runs in six games. After scoring a memorable hundred at the Eden Gardens, Narine gave due credit to former captain

Gambhir for making him open for the first time since 2017. In the post-match interaction, Rinku echoed Narine's words. "You can see the way Narine is batting this time. In every match, he's making runs, opening the batting and that was his (Gambhir's) idea only," Rinku said. Narine was unleashed as an opener under Gambhir's captaincy in 2017 when he smashed IPL's fastest fifty in 15 balls, a record that was gradually improved by KL Rahul (14), Pat Cummins (14) and Yashasvi Jaiswal (13). Narine also has a 13-ball 50 for Comilla Victorians in the Bangladesh Premier League in their match against Chattogram Challengers in 2022. Earlier he would just swivel his bat, but this time Narine is seen batting



with skill and poise as his stroke-making in the arc has vastly improved. Asked about the transformation, Rinku said: "Nothing much has changed. It's the result of his sheer hard work at the nets. 'I've just noticed one change -- he's more patient now. Earlier he used to swing his bat to every ball, now he has restrained himself and playing according to the merit of the ball. He is batting thoughtfully and wisely.' But Narine's century went in vain as Jos Buttler (107 not out; 60b) showed his masterclass to single-handedly steer Rajasthan Royals to an eight-wicket win in the final ball of the match. "It happens sometimes but it won't impact much. Our team is doing very well. We are not thinking much (about the loss). Credit to RR they

did well. Also, you need a bit of luck in your favour. It was there day. Buttler innings was the turning point. Full credit goes to him," Rinku said. With the KKR top-order going strong this time, the finisher Rinku, who was KKR's leading rungetter in IPL 2023 with 474 runs at 59.25, is not getting much opportunities. This season Rinku has an aggregate of 83 runs at 27.66 and is yet to score a fifty. But his strike-rate has been a handsome 184-plus. "Our top order batters are doing so well that I'm not getting much opportunities to show my batting this time." Rinku played as an Impact Sub on Tuesday and that was because of a nigggle. "I had a nigggle, I will be back to playing the full match against RCB on Sunday," he said.



Iyer fined ₹12 lakh for first slow over rate offence

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Kolkata Knight Riders captain Shreyas Iyer has been fined Rs 12 lakh for maintaining a slow over-rate during their IPL game against Rajasthan Royals here. KKR lost to Royals by two wickets here on Tuesday with Jos Buttler smashing an unbeaten 107 off 60 balls. "As it was his team's first offence of the season under the IPL's Code of Conduct relating to minimum over rate offences, Iyer was fined Rs 12 lakhs," said the IPL in a release. It was the Royals' sixth win in seven matches while KKR suffered their second loss in six games.

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Jos Buttler has seen "crazy things" happen in the IPL and he drew inspiration from the likes of Virat Kohli and Mahendra Singh Dhoni to single-handedly pull off the highest run chase in the tournament's history here. Buttler smashed an unbeaten 107 off 60 balls as Rajasthan Royals came back from the dead to beat Kolkata Knight Riders by two wickets on Tuesday night. Fittingly, Buttler hit the winning runs. The Englishman was struggling to even walk towards the end but didn't give up. Chasing a record 224, Royals were 121 for six in the 13th over. "Keep believing, that was the real key today. I was struggling a bit for rhythm. At times you feel frustrated or you are questioning yourself. I tell myself it's okay,

Guys like Kohli, Dhoni keep believing and that is what I tried to do: Buttler

keep going, you'll get your rhythm back and try to stay calm. "There's been plenty of times throughout the IPL, you've seen crazy things happen. Guys like Dhoni and Kohli, the way they stay till the end and keep believing and I tried to do the same," Buttler said at the post-match presentation. Both Dhoni and Kohli have played some exhilarating knocks in the ongoing tournament even though the latter has not found enough support from his team and has mostly ended up on the wrong side of the results so far. Buttler also credited head coach Kumar Sangakkara for building



his self-belief. "That's something Sanagakkara has told me a lot - there's always a breaking point. The worse thing you can do is to not fight and give your wicket away. "He (Sangakkara) just tells me to stay there and at some point, the momentum will change. That's been a big part of my play over the last few years." He termed Tuesday's knock as his best IPL innings. "I would think so (best IPL innings). Very satisfying." RR skipper Sanju Samson said Buttler is a special player and when he is on song, no target is safe. "Very happy with the win. We were wondering like the

wickets we lost. Rovman (Powell) hit a couple of sixes and that's when we felt like we were in the game. Some luck also, they also played really well. The quality of spin they had, they bowled really well. This ground suited them. "Jos (Buttler) did what he does for us in the last 6-7 years, so happy for him. It (Buttler's knock) should go right on top. Being an opener, if he gets in, no runs are unchaseable. He does something special," he said. KKR skipper Shreyas Iyer said it was a bitter pill to swallow for his team. "I would second that actually (bitter pill to swallow), emotions were a roller coaster, certainly didn't think we will get into this situation. "It's a funny game at the end of the day, he (Jos Buttler) was striking the ball cleanly and timing them so well, have to take it on the chin and move on," Iyer added.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The national selection committee is unlikely to blood any rookie IPL performer during the upcoming T20 World Cup in the Americas but a couple of tried-and-tested faces might have to brace up for disappointment when the squad is finalised by the end of this month. With the ICC making it mandatory to announce the provisional 15-member squad by May 1 cut-off date, Ajit Agarkar and his colleagues have some straightforward choices to make if every member of the team is fit. "There would not be any experimentation or left-field selections. All those who have played for India and have done well consistently in T20 Internationals and the IPL will be rewarded," a BCCI source told PTI on conditions of anonymity. It is understood that one among Shubman Gill and Yashasvi Jaiswal might miss out but in case both proven performers are selected in the final 15, then only one among two finishers — Kolkata Knight Riders' Rinku Singh and Chennai Super Kings' Shivam Dube — will get the nod. The other close call could be for the second wicketkeeper's slot where

Sanju Samson has competition from Jitesh Sharma, KL Rahul and Ishan Kishan. Rahul and Kishan bat at the top of the order, and they haven't tried batting in the middle order in this IPL so far, which makes it difficult for the selectors to analyse their impact down the order. Although Hardik Pandya's bowling fitness remains a concern, there is no immediate doubt on his selection. Much like him, Virat Kohli's inclusion is also a formality. The other automatic selections are skipper Rohit Sharma, Suryakumar Yadav, pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, Ravindra Jadeja, Rishabh Pant, Arshdeep Singh, Mohammed Siraj and Kuldeep Yadav. These 10 names, if fit, will definitely be on the flight across the Atlantic. It is understood that Siraj is being rested by RCB as he has been playing constantly and needed workload management. In the choice between Gill and Jaiswal, the former has scored more runs but in case of Jaiswal, who has been a big find for Indian cricket, the selection committee might not give up easily on him merely for a few low IPL scores. Also, being the only left-hander in inside the top four is a novelty and in a largely unidimensional top order.

No fresh faces likely INDIA T20 WC SQUAD



However, if Gill piles up enough runs, it will be a difficult choice unless the selectors accommodate both and drop one among Shivam and Rinku from the 15.

The reserve spinner's slot could also be a three-way battle between Axar Patel, a handy batter apart from being an accurate left-arm spinner, Yuzvendra Chahal, who is yet to

play a single T20 World Cup match in his nine-year international career, and Ravi Bishnoi, who plays for Lucknow Super Giants. While Chahal is head and shoulders

above the other two in terms of bowling skills, his repeated omissions from important squads leaves a big question mark about his inclusion showpiece in June. **IMPACT PLAYER RULE IS HURTING TEAM SELECTION:** A former international player, who is also a broadcaster, gave an interesting insight. "The 'Impact Player' rule, which is basically a glorified '12-a-side' cricket contest has been good for IPL viewership but detrimental for Indian cricket. It has killed the concept of all-rounder and hence a half-fit Hardik Pandya also has premium value because he can bowl," he stated. "Think about it, if there was no Impact Player rule, could MS Dhoni (not Ruturaj Gaikwad) as CSK 'skipper' afford to not bowl Dube? Selectors don't know about Dube's bowling form. "Similarly, a guy like Rahul Tewatia is no longer in contention despite being a good finisher, who also used to be a handy leg-break bowler. He doesn't bowl now as he is an Impact Player'. Who is it hurting? The national team," he pointed out. **NEW CROP OF T20 PLAYERS:** The likes of Riyan Parag, Mayank Yadav, Abhishek Sharma, and Harshit Rana have all performed well but it is understood that the

selection committee would like to follow the process of easing them in via bilateral cricket instead of putting them to test in a high-stakes World T20 game. There are two white-ball series against Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka and these young men would be in line for their India debuts at that time. Nitish Reddy, who is a seam bowling all-rounder and was part of India Emerging side that toured Sri Lanka last year, could also follow the same path. It will be interesting to see if BCCI makes arrangements for the likes of Mayank Yadav, Harshit Rana or Akash Madhwal to be taken as net bowlers, which will also give them good exposure. **The probable 20 (15+5 stand bys) in contention:** **Specialist Batters (6):** Rohit Sharma, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Rinku Singh **All-Rounders (4):** Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Shivam Dube, Axar Patel. **Specialist Spinners (3):** Kuldeep Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Ravi Bishnoi. **Wicketkeeper-batter (3):** Rishabh Pant, KL Rahul and Sanju Samson. **Pacers(4):** Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Arshdeep Singh and Avesh Khan.