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AID TO TAIWAN

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INDIA PHARMA EXPORTS RISE
10 PER CENT IN FY24

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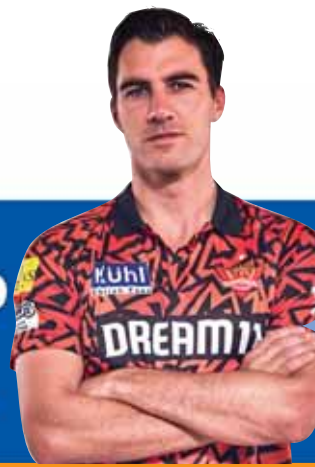
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Congress taxed on inheritance as Modi rips into Sam Pitroda remark

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ AMBIKAPUR/NEW DELHI

Yet another 'foul' play by a Congress leader gave an opportunity to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP to mount attack on the grand old party over the ongoing controversial remarks related to wealth and tax. This time its Sam Pitroda and the BJP-led by PM seized on his remarks on inheritance tax saying "zindagi ke saath bhi, zindagi ke baad bhi" as the Opposition party's mantra to "loot" people.

As Pitroda's comments provided fresh fodder to the BJP, its leaders latched onto them to target the Congress ahead of the second phase of Lok Sabha elections on Friday. Congress also marshalled a counter-offensive as its functionaries shared past comments of BJP leaders, including former Union Minister and MP in the outgoing Lok Sabha Jayant Sinha, in "favour" of such a tax.

In his poll rallies, Modi framed Pitroda's comments in his wider onslaught against the Congress, asserting that they have exposed its hidden agenda and that the party has become so removed from the country's social and family values that it wants to legally rob people of their assets and lifelong savings they want to bequeath to their children. Pitroda had spoken about inheritance tax in the US while delving into the issue of



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a public meeting for the Lok Sabha elections, in Surguja district, Chhattisgarh, on Wednesday

PTI

redistribution of wealth. Pitroda, himself, sought to clear the air saying it is unfortunate that what he said as an individual on inheritance tax in the US is twisted by "godi media" to divert attention from the "lies" Modi is spreading about the Congress manifesto. Modi's comments on Mangal Sutra and gold snatching are simply unreal, he added.

Congress, however, swung into damage control, distancing itself

from the comments of the US-based president of party's overseas wing and asserting that it has no plan to introduce such a tax. "Sensationalising his comments now and tearing them out of context are deliberate and desperate attempts at diverting attention away from Modi's malicious and mischievous election campaign; that is anchored only in lies and more

lies," Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said on a statement.

At an election rally in Chhattisgarh's Ambikapur, Modi said the dangerous intentions of the Congress are coming to the fore one by one and now "it says it will impose inheritance tax". "The advisor of 'shehzada' of the 'shahi parivar', who was also the advisor to the shehzada's father, said

that more tax should be imposed on the middle class and those who earn by toiling hard," Modi said, apparently referring to Rahul Gandhi and Pitroda.

"The Congress will impose a tax on the assets inherited by people from their parents and the "panja" (Congress' poll symbol) will snatch the assets from their children. Congress ka mantra hei Congress ki loot 'zindagi ke saath bhi, zindagi ke baad bhi' (Congress' mantra is looting people when they are alive and afterwards too)," Modi said taking a cue from LIC tagline. "Till you are alive, the Congress will impose more tax and after your life ends, it will impose the burden of inheritance tax on you. They (Congress) want to snatch your assets and rights of your children," the prime minister alleged. He spoke on similar lines in his rallies in Madhya Pradesh.

Amid the fierce attack from the BJP, the Congress has been insisting that its manifesto does not talk about "redistribution" and that it favours a "comprehensive socio-economic caste census".

"I mentioned US inheritance tax in the US only as an example in my normal conversation on TV. Can I not mention facts? I said these are the kinds of issues people will have to discuss and debate. This has nothing to do with the policy of any party including Congress," Pitroda said on social media.

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LOK SABHA ELECTION PHASE 2 SEATS

STATES	NO. OF SEATS	CONSTITUENCY
KERALA	20	Kasaragod, Kannur, Vatakara, Wayanad, Kozhikode, Malappuram, Ponnani, Palakkad, Alathur, Thrissur, Chalakudy, Ernakulam, Idukki, Kottayam, Alappuzha, Mavelikkara, Pathanamthitta, Kollam, Attingal, Thiruvananthapuram
Karnataka	14	Udupi Chikmagalur, Hassan, Dakshina Kannada, Chitradurga, Tumkur, Mandya, Mysore, Chamarajanagar, Bangalore Rural, Bangalore North, Bangalore Central, Bangalore South, Chikballapur, Kolar
RAJASTHAN	13	Tonk-Sawai Madhopur, Ajmer, Pali, Jodhpur, Barmer, Jalore, Udaipur, Banswara, Chittorgarh, Rajsamand, Bhilwara, Kota, Jhalawar-Baran
Maharashtra	8	Buldhana, Akola, Amravati (SC), Wardha, Yavatmal-Washim, Hingoli, Nanded, Parbhani
Uttar Pradesh	8	Amroha, Meerut, Baghpat, Ghaziabad, Gautam Budh Nagar, Aligarh, Mathura, Bulandshahar
Madhya Pradesh	7	Tikamgarh, Damoh, Khajuraho, Satna, Rewa, Hoshangabad, Betul
Assam	5	Karimganj, Silchar, Mangaldoi, Nawgong, Kaliaor
Bihar	5	Kishanganj, Katihar, Purnia, Bhagalpur, Banka
West Bengal	3	Darjeeling, Raiganj, Balurghat
Chhattisgarh	3	Rajnandgaon, Mahasamund, Kanker
Jammu & Kashmir	1	Jammu
Manipur	1	Outer Manipur
TRIPURA	1	Tripura East

Campaign for Phase II LS poll ends

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

After whirlwind roadshows, political tit-for-tats, and a fresh cycle of controversies on redistribution of wealth, inheritance tax and reducing the quota for SCs, STs and OBCs to favour Muslims, the curtains came down on Wednesday evening on a high-voltage campaigning for the second phase of Lok Sabha polls in 89 seats across 13 States on April 26.

The upcoming second phase polls will cover several important constituencies such as Wayanad (Kerala), from where Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is seeking re-election and Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala), which will witness a high-profile showdown between Shashi Tharoor and Rajeev Chandrasekhar, Meerut where Arun Govil who played Ram in the hit Ramayan TV series of the 1980s,



Mathura where Hema Malini is seeking reelection, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar's brother DK Suresh from Bengaluru Rural Lok Sabha constituency and former Karnataka Chief Minister HD Kumaraswamy (JDS) from Mandya. Polling is scheduled in all 20 seats of Kerala, 14 of the 28 seats in Karnataka, 13 seats in Rajasthan, 8 seats each in Maharashtra and Uttar

Pradesh, 7 seats in Madhya Pradesh, 5 seats each in Assam and Bihar, 3 seats each in Chhattisgarh and West Bengal, and 1 seat each in Manipur, Tripura and Jammu and Kashmir.

Amid heat wave conditions, the poll body on Wednesday extended the poll timings by two hours in some Assembly segments — Banka, Madhepura, Khagaria and Munger Lok Sabha constituencies was from 7 am to 6 pm to ensure enhanced voter participation. In other polling stations in Bihar, under these constituencies, the poll timings remain 7 am to 4 pm.

Staggered over seven stages, the first phase of the elections held last Friday for 102 seats across 21 states and Union territories saw a voter turnout of around 65.5 per cent. After Friday's phase, polling will be over in Kerala, Rajasthan and Tripura.

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From left to right: Mahesh Sharma, Rajendra Singh, Mahendra Singh Nagar

Noida readies for triangular contest

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Despite being associated with the 'jinx', which many considered to have ended the careers of Chief Ministers in Uttar Pradesh, including Mayawati, Yogi Adityanath has held his fort despite having made visits to Noida, soon after he assumed the CM's chair in 2017.

He became the first CM of the State to return after completing a five years term and breaking the 'Noida jinx' in the 2022 Assembly polls. The popular NCR city, which falls under the Gautam Buddha Nagar seat, which will go to elections on Friday in the second phase of Lok Sabha elections 2024.

Previously under Khurja Lok Sabha, the Gautam Buddha Nagar Lok Sabha constituency was established in 2008 on the recommendation of the Delimitation Commission of India, is set to witness a three way contest between BJP, SP and BSP for the upcoming elections on April 26.

In the upcoming 2024 Lok

Sabha elections, the electoral contest will primarily feature the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the Samajwadi Party (SP)-led INDIA Bloc and the BSP. As many as 15 candidates are in the fray to secure the seat with BJP MP Mahesh Sharma, a two-time winner from this seat in Uttar Pradesh, in the battle for the third time.

This new constituency covers Bulandshahar and Gautam Buddha Nagar districts and comprises five Vidhan Sabha constituencies: Noida, Jewar, Dadri, Sikandrabad, and Khurja. The SP, which is part of the Opposition INDIA Bloc, has fielded Mahendra Singh Nagar, a seasoned politician who served as the Congress district president from 1999 to 2016 before joining the SP in 2022. On the other hand, representing the BSP is Rajendra Singh Solanki, who recently joined the party.

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Ghaziabad: BJP eyes 4th straight win in Gateway to UP

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

One of the 80 Lok Sabha constituencies of Uttar Pradesh, Ghaziabad Lok Sabha constituency, considered as one of the most VIP constituencies and a gateway of the State is all set to witness a three-cornered fight between BJP, Congress and BSP for April 26 polls.

The Ghaziabad Lok Sabha seat has gained a reputation for being a stronghold of the BJP with the party's candidates consistently winning by significant margins in the three elections held in this constituency, and the BJP's vote share increasing with each successive election, further solidifying their position in this constituency.

The Ghaziabad Lok Sabha seat will witness a triangular contest in the general elections. The BJP has fielded Atul Garg, replacing sitting MP General (retired) VK Singh. The Congress has given ticket to Dolly Sharma and BSP has pitted Nand Kishor Pundir against the other two. The constituency has been a BJP stronghold and the party will be hoping to repeat its show in the previous two elections. Though the BJP has retained the seat since 2009 and is eyeing win for the fourth consecutive time.



Garg is currently a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Uttar Pradesh from Ghaziabad seat in the district. The party has fielded him on the seat, hoping to hand over the seat once again to the party. The BJP is banking on Modi's charisma. Notably, the Rajput Jat community also held a series of maha panchayats across western Uttar Pradesh, calling for a boycott of BJP candidates. Members of the Jat community — considered a traditional voter base of BJP ally Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) — held two meetings, one in Indirapuram on Sunday and the other near Bamheta on April 18, to discuss their stand during these elections. Their leaders said their list of grievances against the ruling party was a long one.

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IED explosion damages bridge on NH 2 in Manipur

PTI ■ IMPHAL

A bridge on the National Highway 2 in ethnic violence-hit Manipur's Kangpokpi district was partially damaged in an IED explosion early on Wednesday, disrupting traffic movement in the area, police said. The blast occurred on the bridge between Sapermeina and Koubru Leikha areas around 12.45 am, an officer said. No casualties were reported so far in the improvised explosive device (IED) blast, he said.

Three craters and cracks on both ends of the bridge were noticed, the officer said. Movement of heavy vehicles has been stopped on the bridge connecting Manipur's capital Imphal with Nagaland's Dimapur. Minutes after the explosion, police personnel rushed to the spot and cordoned off the bridge, he said, adding that an investigation into the IED blast has been initiated. Some two-wheelers, however, were seen plying on the bridge this morning. The IED explosion occurred hours after gunfights broke out between village volunteers of the two warring communities in Imphal West district.

SC tells EVM critics it cannot pass directions on basis of suspicion

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court said on Wednesday it cannot "control the elections" or issue directions simply because doubts have been raised about the efficacy of Electronic Voting Machines (EVM), as it reserved its judgement on a clutch of petitions claiming the polling devices can be tinkered with to manipulate the results.

The court said it cannot change the thought process of those doubting the



advantages of polling machines and advocating going back to ballot papers. A bench of Justices Sanjiv

Khanna and Dipankar Datta reserved its verdict on a batch of pleas seeking complete cross-verification of votes cast using EVMs with Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), after taking note of the answers to queries it had posed to the Election Commission.

It sought answers from an official of the poll panel to five questions related to the functioning of EVMs including whether the microcontrollers fitted in them are reprogrammable.

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RBI bars Kotak Mahindra Bank from onboarding customers online

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Cracking down on repeated non-compliance of IT norms, the RBI on Wednesday barred Kotak Mahindra Bank from onboarding new customers through its online and mobile banking channels and issuing fresh credit cards with immediate effect after the regulator found "serious deficiencies" in the lender's IT risk management. These actions, the RBI said, are

necessitated based on significant concerns arising out of Reserve Bank's IT examination of the bank for the years 2022 and 2023 and the continued failure on part of the bank to address these concerns in a comprehensive and timely manner. Meanwhile, Kotak Mahindra Bank said in a statement that it has taken measures for adoption of new technologies to strengthen its IT systems.

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Churn in Congress over Delhi candidates

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Disrespect on part of the party high command representative who used 'Get Out' on a three time Minister and biggest Dalit leader, Raj Kumar Chauhan, resigned from the Congress after serving the party for nearly three decades.

Brewing dissatisfaction in Delhi Congress over distribution of tickets to 'outsiders', for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in the national capital next month, prominent Dalit leader and three time former minister in the Sheila

Dikshit cabinet, Chauhan, resigned from the grand old party accusing those appointed to oversee the Lok Sabha elections in the city of disrespecting him publicly, a day after the meeting of Delhi Congress' disciplinary committee.

Chauhan was under fire for allegedly mobilising a section of Congress workers against its North West Delhi candidate, Udit Raj. On Monday, when its Delhi unit was officially introducing its three Lok Sabha candidates to the media, the protesters raised slogans of "Bahari



ummeedwar nahi chalega (an outsider candidate will not be allowed)", criticising Raj for his affiliation with the BJP till 2019.

Talking to The Pioneer, Chauhan said he has resigned from the party. Chauhan said he had no plan to join any other party including BJP. "AICC incharge for Delhi Deepak Babaria called a meeting at his house. When I started speaking in the meeting, Babria asked me to 'get out' and he repeated it four to five times. I was trying to tell him that the candidate, who has been given the ticket (Udit Raj), has been abusing every caste. I am a four-time MLA and a three-time minister (in Delhi government). We have done so

much development work for Delhi. An outsider was telling me to get out. That's why I was angry and sent my resignation to DPCC chief Arvinder Singh Lovely," Chauhan said. "I have resigned because a meeting was called...to discuss the election candidates...some 20 to 25 main leaders from North East Delhi, including Arvinder Singh Lovely, were a part of that meeting. During the meeting, we were trying to put our side forward but we were not allowed to," Chauhan alleged.

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Bengal moves SC against court order sacking 26,000 school staff

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■
BURDWAN

A day after a Division Bench of Calcutta High Court quashed the entire panel of 2016 SSC tests throwing about 26,000 teaching and non-teaching school staff out of their respective jobs alleging corruption in appointment process, the Bengal Government on Wednesday moved the Supreme Court seeking reversal of the High Court order.

Alleging that the Court had cancelled the entire selection process without giving sufficient time to the government to deal with the issue State pleaded that the findings of the CBI — based on whose investigation the entire recruitment process was cancelled — did not indicate that the entire process was tainted and hence, all the appointments were



irregular. "In fact, the High Court proceeds on the premise that further scrutiny of the selection might reveal more irregularities, which is purely based on conjecture and surmises and not supported by any cogent material on record," the State said in its plea even as the teachers who lost their jobs hit the streets with many of them threatening to commit

mass suicides if they were not reinstated. "Out of the 26,000 candidates many had got their jobs honestly... many of us had cleared other tests also earlier and had been working as teachers as sole bread-winners of our families with our parents children to take care of... if we lose job now after eight years then we will have to commit mass sui-

cide an agitating candidate said. Meanwhile, lambasting the BJP and the CPI(M) for hatching the "entire gameplan to embarrass the State Government" Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said that the way the BJP was dictating orders adding "I will not leave them and fight it out in the Supreme Court so that the jobs can be saved." The BJP would not give jobs but would take them she said. "At a time when the job market is so sluggish, when the people cannot find jobs these people are serving their own narrow political interests by getting the courts to chuck people out," she said. Five MLAs including two ministers and several top functionaries including Board chairpersons and sitting Vice-Chancellors were presently in jail on charges of recruitment scam.

Mamata attacks Modi Ghaziabad: BJP eyes 4th straight win in Gateway to UP

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■
BURDWAN

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday warned the people against voting the BJP saying if Narendra Modi returned to power then there would be no democracy left in India and no elections would take place after that as India would be a dictatorship. Notwithstanding, Mamata's leniency towards other senior BJP leaders like Rajnath Singh and Nitin Gadkari was worth noticing, particularly during election times even as she wondered why the BJP's would not fall on "better leaders like Gadkari and Singh who too were senior," and equally efficient. Launching a scathing attack on Modi, Mamata said, "If this an election to elect Modi babu to power then rest assured there will be no election after this if he returns and India will turn into a dictatorship where the ED and CBI and NIA will reign supreme and where everything will be sold out from government concerns to your culture to your food and

two your country." Addressing two rallies in Birbhum and Burdwan Banerjee said how Rajnath Singh had raised his concern about the TMC's objections to the implementation of Citizenship Amendment Act. "My question is Rajnath ji is a good and decent person and a senior too then why did the BJP not make him the Prime Minister or for that matter Nitin Gadkari ji... instead of these decent people the rioters whose hands are red with blood are ruling the country today," she said. Questioning the alleged dictation on food habits in BJP-ruled states she said, "in Madhya Pradesh they have stopped eating fish and in Rajasthan they are not letting people eat eggs... my question is I too like vegetarian and Dhokla but can you force me to eat that... remember 80 percent of Indians are non-vegetarians... then how can you dictate their food habits... even we do not take non-veg during our pujas but you cannot dictate us regarding what we will eat and what we will wear."

From Page 1

The Ghaziabad parliamentary seat this time has 14 candidates in the fray and Garg, a Vaish, has a major fight on his hands from Congress candidate Dolly Sharma, a Brahmin, and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)'s Nandkishor Pundhir, a Thakur. Interestingly, two relatives of Pundhir also in the electoral fray as independent candidates here. The opposition is trying hard to get Kshatriya discontent in their favour against the ruling party in western Uttar Pradesh when hundreds from the community from Ghaziabad, Hapur, Meerut, Bulandshahr and Gautam Budh Nagar participated in a "Kshatriya Swabhimana Mahasammelan" in Dhaulana in Hapur district last week. The Dhaulana area is part of Satha-Chaurasi belt which has 60 villages belonging to Shishodia Rajputs while 84 belong to Tomar Rajputs and these villages fall under different parliamentary constituencies of Ghaziabad, Meerut and Gautam Budh Nagar.

She was earlier associated with her own business but joined politics in 2017. Ghaziabad, was established as a Lok Sabha constituency in 2008 as part of the delimitation of parliamentary constituencies based on the recommendations of the Delimitation Commission of India, which was constituted in 2002. The Ghaziabad constituency comprises five assembly seats namely Loni, Muradnagar, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad and Dholana with more than 27 lakh voters during 2019 Lok Sabha elections, this seat comes among the highest number of voters category in the state. The Hapur Lok Sabha seat was renamed as Ghaziabad in 2008. Ghaziabad constituency is a general seat and not reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). There were 27,28,978 voters in the Ghaziabad constituency during the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections. Out of this, 15,19,938 voters were male and 12,08,931 were female voters. 109 voters belonged to the third gender. 2,564 were postal votes in the constituency. The number of service voters in Ghaziabad in 2019 was 2,846 (2,662 were men and 184 were women). In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Ghaziabad witnessed a 55.78% voter turnout in the year 2019. BJP's VK Singh won with a victory margin of 5,01,500 votes, securing 9,44,503 votes. Singh defeated Suresh Bansal of the SP, who got 4,43,003 votes. In 2014, the total number of voters in the Ghaziabad constituency was 23,57,553. Out of this, 13,33,055 voters were male and 10,24,455 were female voters. 43 voters in this constituency belonged to the 'others' category. There were 653 postal votes in the constituency. The number of service voters in Ghaziabad in 2014 was 1,959 (1,307 were men and 652 were women).

Campaign for...

From Page 1

In phase 2, Kerala has a maximum of 500 nominations from 20 Parliamentary Constituencies, followed by 491 nominations from 14 PCs in Karnataka. Minimum of 14 nominations were received from one PC in Tripura. 16-Nanded Parliamentary Constituency in Maharashtra received a maximum of 92 nominations. According to the Election Commission (EC), 1206 candidates from 12 States /UTs along with four candidates from Outer Manipur PC to contest elections in phase two Lok Sabha polls.

Kerala bore witness to a series of extraordinary scenes and unprecedented campaign maneuvers orchestrated by candidates and party workers on the final day. A total of 194 candidates are vying for the 20 seats in the state, making the April 26 Lok Sabha polls a crucial battleground for the LDF, the UDF, and the NDA. Two union ministers and three actors are among the total candidates who try their political luck this time. Diverse issues ranging from the implementation of the CAA, the alleged existence of 'love jihad', controversies surrounding 'The Kerala Story' movie, the Manipur violence, Rahul Gandhi's candidature in Wayanad, as well as alleged appeasement of minorities by various political parties, dominated the high-decibel public campaigns.

Kerala is expected to witness fierce battles in several constituencies, including Wayanad, where former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi is taking on CPI's Annie Raja. While Kerala has been ruled alternatively by Congress and the Left parties, the grand old party virtually swept the state in the last general elections when it secured 15 of 20 seats. Rahul is contesting from the Wayanad seat, which he had won in 2019 by over 4 lakh votes. This time, he is up against CPI's Annie Raja and Kerala BJP chief K Surendran. Interestingly, the Congress and CPI are part of the INDIA bloc nationally. The CPI has targeted Rahul Gandhi for his decision to contest from Kerala, where the ruling party says the saffron party does not pose any threat. In Kerala, the main contest is expected to be between the Congress and the Left but the BJP is also making efforts to put up a fight in some constituencies like Thrissur and Thiruvananthapuram. In Thrissur, the BJP has fielded actor-turned-politician Suresh Gopi, who is facing off against Congress' K Muraliedharan, and CPI's V S Sunilkumar. Muraliedharan won from Vatakara in the 2019 general elections. Thiruvananthapuram is also a high profile seat here with Congress leader Shashi Tharoor hoping to retain the seat for the fourth time.

The BJP which has never won a Lok Sabha seat in Kerala, has fielded Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar. Even the final day of election campaign was marked by the

presence of various national leaders in the state, including Home Minister Amit Shah, AICC Chief Mallikarjun Kharge, and Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi, who addressed public meetings in various constituencies.

The eight constituencies of Uttar Pradesh which is going to polls are Amroha, Meerut, Baghpat, Ghaziabad, Gautam Buddha Nagar, Bulandshahr, Aligarh and Mathura. Prominent among the total of 91 candidates whose future will be decided in the second phase of polling are actor Hema Malini, who is seeking a third term from Mathura; and Arun Govil, who played the role of Lord Rama in the famed TV serial Ramayan. He has been fielded by the saffron party from his native place Meerut. He criss-crossed the constituency to seek support of the people. The Congress' Danish Ali from Amroha and the BJP's Atul Garg from Ghaziabad and Mahesh Sharma from Gautam Buddha Nagar toured their constituencies seeking the people's support.

In Karnataka, a total of 247 candidates -- 226 men and 21 women -- are in the fray for the first round of voting in most of the southern and coastal districts, where an estimated over 2.88 crore voters are eligible to exercise their franchise in 30,602 polling stations. It is a straight electoral contest between the ruling Congress and the BJP-Janata Dal (Secular) combine in the state. While the Congress is contesting in all 14 seats, BJP has fielded nominees in 11, and its alliance partner JD(S) in three -- Hassan, Mandya and Kolar. Besides the three, the segments where elections will be held on Friday are: Udipi-Chikmagalur, Dakshina Kannada, Chitradurga, Tumkur, Mysore, Chamarajanagar, Bangalore Rural, Bangalore North, Bangalore Central, Bangalore South and Chikballapur.

Union minister Virendra Kumar and Madhya Pradesh BJP chief VD Sharma are among 80 candidates in the fray from six constituencies- Tikamgarh (SC), Damoh, Khajuraho, Satna, Rewa and Hoshangabad constituencies, which cover 55 assembly segments, in the second phase. In Rajasthan, other than the Banswara parliamentary constituency, Barmer-Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Jalore, Chittorgarh and Kota-Bundi are the hot seats in this phase. The other constituencies going to polls are Tonk-Sawai Madhopur, Ajmer, Pali, Udaipur, Rajsamand, Kota and Jhalawar-Baran. On the last day of campaigning, Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut held a roadshow in Jaisalmer in support of BJP candidate Kailash Chaudhary. Located along the India-Pakistan border, Barmer-Jaisalmer is the largest Lok Sabha constituency of Rajasthan. It is witnessing a triangular contest among Independent candidate Ravindra Singh Bhati, the Congress' Ummedaram and the BJP's Kailash Chaudhary.

As many as 204 candidates will battle it out for eight Lok Sabha seats- Buldhana, Akola, Amravati, Wardha, Yavatmal-Washim in western Vidarbha, Hingoli, Nanded and Parbhani in Maharashtra.

Congress taxed...

From Page 1

Sinha, then a junior finance minister, had publicly said in 2014 that he wanted to introduce inheritance tax while the then finance minister Arun Jaitley had praised the concept in 2018, saying it is a source of big endowment to hospitals and educational institutions in the western countries, Ramesh claimed, sharing screenshots of related reports.

Home Minister Amit Shah also flayed Pitroda's remarks, saying "The appeasement politics of the Congress stands exposed today with Sam Pitroda's statement on wealth redistribution. He reaffirmed the party's intention to seize the property of the majority and distribute it among the minority. It yet again brings to the fore that the empowerment of India's poor, Dalits, youth, tribes, and backward classes was never on Congress's agenda," he said on social media.

From Page 1

Solanki, a former MLA from Bulandshahr, brings substantial political experience, having been associated with both the BJP and the Congress in the past. Gautam Buddha Nagar has witnessed three Lok Sabha elections so far. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) won the inaugural elections in 2009, followed by consecutive victories for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 and 2019, establishing it as their stronghold.

BJP's Sharma, who has also served as a Minister of State for Culture and Tourism and Civil Aviation, emerged victorious in both 2019 and 2014. Additionally, he is the richest candidate in the contest with assets worth Rs 83.82 crore as per his filed affidavit. SP candidate has declared assets of Rs 8.76 crore and BSP candidate Solanki has declared assets of Rs 8.44 crore. Voter turnout stood at 13.89 lakh out of

Campaigns end for Jammu LS elections

MOHIT KANDHARI ■
JAMMU

With the second round of campaigning ending, the stage is set for another close contest between the Bharatiya Janta Party and the Congress party on the Jammu-Reasi Lok Sabha seat on April 26.

The Congress party candidate Raman Bhalla is locked in a close contest with the two-time sitting BJP MP Jugal Kishore Sharma. Ankur Sharma of Ekam Sanatan Bharat Dal is also in the fray. Over 17.80 lakh voters will decide the fate of 22 candidates from the seat spread over 18 Assembly segments in four districts including Reasi, Samba, Jammu, and Rajouri.

On the last day of campaigning the congress party demonstrated its strength by taking out a massive road show. The BJP on

the other hand focused on reaching out to the voters on ground zero. Several senior party leaders and BJP star campaigners, camping in Jammu addressed a series of street corner meetings in a last-minute effort to woo the electorate.

Jammu district with 11.89 lakh voters and 11 Assembly constituencies is turning out to be the hot spot as all the contesting candidates are trying to woo the majority of voters to romp home safely.

The border belt of Samba and RS Pura form a sizable voter base to tilt the balance in support of the winning candidate. Reasi district with three Assembly Constituencies, is going to play a significant role in the final tally of voters.

The Election Commission has made elaborate security arrangements to instill confidence among the electorate to improve the total voter turnout.

Noida readies for triangular contest

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22.97 lakh in 2019, and 11.94 lakh out of 19.86 lakh in 2014. The upper expenditure limit for candidates is Rs 95 lakh, as per Election Commission guidelines. While there were initially a total of 34 contenders, which includes 25 Independents, only 15 are still contesting following the rejection of 19 applications post-scrutiny. No candidate withdrew their nomination by the deadline. It is said that the Gujjar community in Noida has a political influence, especially in Greater Noida.

Unhappy over the issue of pending registries, homebuyers and residents of several group housing societies in Noida and Greater Noida West have launched a "No Registry, No Vote" campaign ahead of these elections. The number of voters in the constituency has gone significantly up compared to the last election cycle. According to officials, a total of 26,20,040 voters will

be casting votes this time, up from 22.97 lakh in 2019, which is a considerable increase of over 3 Lakh voters. The Gautam Buddha Nagar constituency comprises five Assembly constituencies which include Noida, Dadri, Jewar, Khurja, and Sikandrabad, even though they are located in the adjoining Bulandshahr district, form a part of the Gautam Buddha Nagar Lok Sabha constituency. The total number of voters as of March 15 in Noida is 7,59,418 voters, which comprises 4,25,521 males, 3,33,885 female and 12 third gender. The election process started with the issuance of notification on March 28, in which candidates had until April 4 to file their nominations. Withdrawals could be made until April 8. The number of voters is 7,04,502 in Dadri and 3,67,046 in Jewar. Additionally, Sikandrabad has

3,97,500 voters and Khurja 3,91,574. The total number of voters in Gautam Buddha Nagar district stands at 18,30,966 barring parts of Bulandshahr. This diverse electorate includes 102 third-gender voters, 10,08,345 men, and 8,22,519 women. The seat comprises 10,502 differently-abled voters, 24,223 first-time voters, 26,353 individuals aged 80 years or above, and 2,906 service voters.

There are a total of 1,826 polling booths in Gautam Buddha Nagar, out of which 51 have been designated as 'model booths', with seven being managed entirely by women, and four by divyangs (persons with disabilities). Additionally, young officers and personnel will be in charge of five booths. Moreover, seven additional polling booths, in Sector 78 The Manthan School, Kidzee PreSchool Sector 116, community centre Sector 72, Our Little Wonder Sector 116, community centre Sector

122, club house Prateek Laurel Sector 120 and club house Jaypee Wish Town Sector 128, will be set up in Noida constituency. In a bid to conduct smooth elections, the district has been divided into 120 sectors and 26 zones of which 342 sensitive booths have been identified for special attention. Additionally, more than 5,000 police personnel from the commissionerate will be deployed for election duty, along with personnel from paramilitary forces, Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC), civil police, home guards, and local security guards.

To monitor expenditure, nine static surveillance teams, nine flying squads, three video surveillance teams, three video-viewing teams, and three assistance expenditure observers will be deployed across Noida, Dadri, and Jewar. Authorities will ensure free, fair, and incident-free polls with maximum voter turnout.

RBI bars Kotak Mahindra...

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It said it will continue to work with RBI to swiftly resolve balance issues at the earliest.

In an almost similar action, the RBI in December 2020 had barred HDFC Bank from issuing new cards and launching new digital initiatives after repeated instances of technological outages at the lender. The restrictions were later lifted in March 2022.

In a statement regarding the supervisory action against Kotak Mahindra Bank, the RBI said: "Serious deficiencies and non-compliances were observed in the areas of IT inventory management, patch and change management, user access management, vendor risk management, data security and data leak prevention strategy, business continuity and disaster recovery rigour and drill, etc."

The Kotak Mahindra Bank has been directed "to cease and desist", with immediate effect, from onboarding of new customers through its online and mobile banking channels and issuing fresh credit cards.

"The bank shall, however, continue to provide services to its existing customers, including its credit card customers," RBI said. For two consecutive years, the bank was assessed to be deficient in its IT Risk and Information Security Governance, contrary to requirements under Regulatory guidelines, the RBI added. "During the subsequent assessments, the bank was found to be significantly non-compliant with the Corrective Action Plans issued by the Reserve Bank for the years 2022 and 2023, as the compliances submitted by the bank were found to be either inadequate, incorrect or not sustained," the RBI said.

Churn in Congress over Delhi candidates

From Page 1

"We were shouted at and asked to get out of the room. If we cannot express our opinion even in a closed room, where can we?" he demanded.

Chauhan said in writing that the Congress is going to lose all three seats in Delhi. They made blunders when the party decided to tie up with the AAP. Now they gave tickets to outsiders. Thirdly, they brought people like Babaria who cannot win a Councillor election," he added.

On Tuesday, Delhi Congress' disciplinary committee held a meeting and left it to the AICC to decide on whether to take any action on complaints against Chauhan. During a meeting held on Sunday at the residence of AICC Delhi in-charge Babria, a heated argument had erupted between Babria and Chauhan, sources in the party said.

It was also decided in the disciplinary meeting that the committee will identify those who shouted slogans when the three Congress candidates for the Lok Sabha elections were being introduced to the media at a press conference by the Delhi Congress chief and issue show cause notice to them to maintain discipline in the party. The disciplinary committee of Delhi Congress, under the chairmanship of Narendra Nath, unanimously decided that the AICC should decide on the complaint against Chauhan.

On Monday, a section of Congress workers also held a protest against the nomination of former BJP MP Udit Raj as the party's Lok Sabha poll candidate from North West Delhi.

The protesters gathered outside the Congress office at Deen Dayal

Upadhyay Marg and raised slogans against "outsiders" fielded by the party in the elections.

Sources in the Congress said that there are over a dozen former MLAs and councilors who are upset with giving tickets to Kanhaiya Kumar and Udit Raj for the Lok Sabha elections. A Congress leader said on the condition of anonymity that top party leadership have been conveyed their resentment of giving tickets to outsiders in Delhi.

A four-time MLA from Mangolpuri assembly segment, Chauhan was a minister in Sheila Dikshit's cabinet for 13 years and held several important portfolios, including PWD and urban development. He had lost the 2013 and 2015 polls to AAP's Rakhi Birla. Chauhan had resigned from the party in 2019 and joined the BJP but within a month he returned to the Congress.

SC tells EVM critics it cannot ...

From Page 1

Senior Deputy Election Commissioner Nitesh Kumar Vyas, who had earlier made a presentation to the court on the functioning of EVMs, was summoned by the bench to appear at 2 pm to answer the queries.

Vyas, while responding to the question about microcontrollers, said they are one-time programmable at the time of manufacture and installed in all the three units of EVMs-the balloting unit, VVPAT and the control unit. They cannot be reprogrammed thereafter, he asserted.

An advocate, appearing for petitioner NGO, claimed the EC official's statement was not fully correct. He cited a report by a private body to back his contention. "The report says the kind of memory used in these three units can be reprogrammed. A malicious programme can easily be uploaded at the time of symbol loading," he

claimed, adding efforts should be made to remove the doubts about the transparency of EVMs. Justice Khanna told the advocate the court has to rely on the data and information provided by the EC, a constitutional body, which says the programme in the memory of an EVM can be written only once.

"If you are prejudiced or predisposed about something, then we cannot help it. We cannot change your thought process," the bench said.

Justice Datta said, "Can we issue a mandamus (directions) on the basis of a suspicion? The report you are relying on goes on to say that there is no incident of manipulation yet. We can't control the elections. We are not the controlling authority of another constitutional authority." The bench recalled that the top court had in the past issued two orders on VVPAT, an independent vote verification system which enables electors to see whether their votes have been recorded correctly.

AAP questions Chief Secretary over bypassing elected Government

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Government has come down heavily on the Centre appointed Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar as the senior AAP leader and Delhi Minister on Wednesday sought his explanation regarding the provisions that empower him to bypass the 'elected Government while sending the file to the Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena office'. Bhardwaj on Tuesday accused the CS of trying to manipulate MCD Mayor elections by appointing BJP Councillor to preside over Mayor elections that are scheduled on Friday. Seeking an explanation till 6 pm on Wednesday in a letter to Kumar, he said, "In your communication as attached in Annexure-A, you have quoted section 77(a) of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act and Sec.45 (I) 4(viii) of GNCTD Amendment Act as the reason for bypassing the Minister UD while sending the file for appointment of presiding officer to elections of Mayor of MCD." Slamming Kumar for 'failing to explain his misconduct for obvious reasons', Bhardwaj said, "It is clear that there has been no recent amendment in section



77(a) of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957, and it is same as it was in 2023-24 as well, so you should have followed the same practice which was followed for last year and many years before that." The note has also been copied to Saxena. "While the file being discussed is not related to any disqualification of voters in elections of MCD, rather is related to appointment of Presiding officer for the elections of

Mayor of MCD. You are directed to explain how the above mentioned Sections permit you to send the file to LG bypassing the undersigned (Minister UD)," Bhardwaj asserted. Calling the matter 'urgent' since elections of Mayor of MCD is scheduled on Friday, the Minister said, "please send your explanation by 6 pm on today." On Tuesday, In a letter to the Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar

Saxena, the Minister wrote, "Please refer to the Annexure A' which shows the movement of the file related to appointment of Presiding Officer for conducting elections of Mayor for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. As your goodself is well aware that this is a transferred subject and as per the Constitution of India, this subject is under the control of the Elected Government of Delhi." He states that unlike the previous years in which the file was routed through the Minister of Urban Development, the CS tried bypassing the Delhi government. Bhardwaj said, "However, as it is clearly evident from the file movement, the CS Naresh Kumar has deliberately bypassed the undersigned. He is very well aware that CM is in Judicial Custody, however he knowingly sent the file to the office of CM and as expected he got that file returned to him. And then he sent the file directly to your goodself." He requested the Centre appointed LG to take appropriate action against Kumar for "his deliberate and repeated misconduct" while also requesting Saxena to return the file to CS and direct Kumar to send the file through Bhardwaj.

Delhi BJP forms 40 teams to reach out to voters from different sections

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP has galvanised its campaign machinery ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, forming more than 40 teams for voter outreach to different sections, including minorities, as well as to take care of speeches, logistics, data, media, booth work and manifesto among others. Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva, who also heads the election management committee, said these different teams headed by experienced leaders will ensure campaigning goes smoothly on all seven Lok Sabha seats. The votes will be polled on the Lok Sabha seats in Delhi on May 25. The nomination papers will be filed by the candidates from April 29 till May 5. "These campaign committees for specific purposes will discharge the dual function of monitoring involvement of leaders and workers of different departments and cells of the party as well as boosting voter outreach in view of the polls," Sachdeva said. Party MLA from Ghonda Assembly constituency Ajay



Mahawar has been appointed as convener of the election management committee of the party along with Rajiv Babbar, Gajendra Yadav and Yogita Singh as co-conveners. Niraj Tiwari, who heads the 'Purvanchal' campaign committee, said that in view of the polls, the activists of the Purvanchal Morcha have been asked to reach out to voters in their respective Lok Sabha constituencies to spread awareness about the Modi government's welfare works in the city. Tiwari, who is also co-head of 'Jhuggi Jhopri' (slum

settlements) campaign team, said the issue of non implementation of various schemes like Ayushman Bharat health insurance plan and PM Awas Yojana by the Kejriwal government was being spread through the workers. Senior Delhi BJP leader and MLA Vijender Gupta, who is co-head of the manifesto committee, said that work was underway to launch the document ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. Delhi BJP will also bring out a "charge sheet" against the ruling AAP in Delhi that will focus on various aspects of nine years of chief ministership of Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi, party leaders said. Heads and incharges of teams for special contacts with professionals and eminent citizens, talking points of speeches of leaders, booth related works, beneficiary contact, transport facilities, publicity material, advertisements through TV, radio, FM channels, contact with women, youth, scheduled caste voters among others have also been deputed, party leaders said.

Delhi Minister Bharadwaj meets Kejriwal in Tihar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

AAP leader and Delhi Cabinet Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj on Wednesday had a 30-minute-long meeting with Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in Tihar, saying he has asked people to not worry about him. Bharadwaj said he met Kejriwal in the 'mulakat jangla' and had a conversation with him over the phone. Meanwhile, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MP Sanjay Singh alleged the Tihar jail administration cancelled Delhi Minister Atishi's meeting with Kejriwal at the last moment and said "even the British rule did not see this kind of behavior." There was no immediate reaction from the Tihar Jail administration. Bharadwaj said "I had a half-an-hour meeting in the 'mulakat jangla'. He said people should not worry about him. He said he is strong and he will continue his fight with the blessings of the people of Delhi," Delhi minister told reporters after the meeting. The 'mulakat jangla' is an iron mesh which separates the inmate from the visitor in a room inside the jail. A visitor and an inmate can talk to each other by sitting on different sides of the mesh. The Delhi Chief Minister who was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in a money laundering case on March 21 has not stepped down and the AAP has asserted that he will continue to run the government from jail. Earlier, Punjab Chief



Minister Bhagwant Mann and AAP's national general secretary (organisation) Sandeep Pathak met Kejriwal in Tihar Jail on April 15. After the meeting, Pathak told reporters that Kejriwal will meet two ministers each week and review the progress of work under their respective departments. After his arrest, Kejriwal had sent messages to his ministers to address issues such as water supply and availability of medicines in government hospitals. He also asked party MLAs to visit their constituencies and offer help to the people there. Addressing a press conference, Sanjay Singh said that Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj and City Education Minister Atishi were supposed to meet the chief minister in Tihar. "But Atishi's meeting was not confirmed yesterday. Delhi Education Minister Atishi applied for the meeting and at the last moment her meeting was cancelled," Singh said. "After her meeting was cancelled, party national general secretary

(organisation) Sandeep Pathak was supposed to accompany Bharadwaj, but he was informed around 9.30 am today that even his meeting was cancelled," he added. Singh questioned the reasons behind the move and feared that Kejriwal might not even be allowed to meet his wife in future. "You are cancelling a MP's meeting, a minister's meeting with Kejriwal. You had cancelled my meeting with him earlier. Tomorrow you might cancel the meeting with his wife. Even the British rule did not see this kind of behaviour," he said. Singh said he would be writing to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Delhi Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena regarding the same. "He is being meted out worse treatment than the one meted out to terrorists or hardcore criminals. They are allowed to meet in person their lawyers and their families but you are stopping his meetings," he said. The AAP leader said "no reason was given" for cancellation of the meeting.

Rahul indulging in politics to disintegrate India: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi BJP on Wednesday staged a protest near the Congress party headquarters here, claiming that Rahul Gandhi was indulging in politics to disintegrate India. The BJP also said that the Congress manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls was an "insult" to the culture of the country. Ahead of Lok Sabha polls, the BJP including Prime Minister Narendra Modi have launched a frontal attack on the Congress alleging its manifesto smacks of appeasement and that if it came to power, it would redistribute people's wealth and also give reservations to Muslims from the quotas for SC, ST and OBC communities. Senior BJP leaders, including national general secretary Tarun Chugh, Delhi state president Virendra Sachdeva, and Delhi BJP Mahila Morcha president Richa Pandey, took part in the protest. Chugh said the manifesto of the Congress "conspired" to "snatch away" property and

jewellery of women and give it to the minorities. He alleged the Congress manifesto was an "insult" to the culture of the country and that Gandhi was indulging in politics to disintegrate India. "The manifesto of Congress is full of appeasement and it will weaken the country," Sachdeva said. He claimed the manifesto includes "jihad" and "appeasement" politics. Addressing a press conference here, Sachdeva slammed the Congress, saying the party's manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections "aims to break the country". "The manifesto of the Congress reeks of 'jihadi' thinking and appeasement politics. They have said if we come to power we will survey the assets of the country. Congress should explain which assets they are referring to. Are they talking about the jewellery of our mothers and daughters?" he said. Asking if the Congress wanted to "confiscate the assets of mothers and sisters," Sachdeva said, "Is it a crime to belong to



the majority Hindu community? Is it a crime to wear 'mangalsutra'?" Leader of Opposition in MCD Raja Iqbal Singh also addressed the press conference. He slammed the AAP for delaying the disbursement of funds for purchasing uniforms and books for students in MCD schools. Sachdeva said all claims of improvement in Delhi government's education system are completely hollow and same has been confirmed by the repeated comments of the Delhi High Court. The BJP leader said in the past two weeks, the Delhi High

Court has exposed the hollow claims of the Arvind Kejriwal government's world-class education system by issuing strict directives on the deterioration of schools run by both the Delhi government and the municipal corporation. Sachdeva said the Delhi High Court, after the report of the social jurist on government schools in North East Delhi, had condemned the Delhi's Education Secretary. On April 8, the court criticized the Delhi government for running schools in tin sheds and tents with broken desks, dilapidated classrooms, and for

accommodating 144 students in a class room, besides expressing concern over the lack of education and play foed facilities in schools. Sachdeva said it is regrettable that even after the directives issued by the Delhi High Court two weeks ago, the Arvind Kejriwal-led Delhi government and the municipal corporation of Delhi have not started any work for improvement in schools. It is a criminal negligence of the Kejriwal government that during the hearing of a case on Tuesday, the Delhi High Court had to give strict directives to the Municipal Commissioner for improvement. The court said that it is alarming that out of more than 7 lakh students studying in municipal schools, 2,73,346 students did not receive last year's book, copy, school uniform, bag, etc. The corporation says they do not have bank accounts, while there are clear instructions from the central government that zero balance accounts can be opened for students, he said.

Kejriwal gets time to file response in evading summons case

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A city court on Wednesday granted time to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to file response to the replies filed by the ED on his two petitions seeking revision against an order on allegedly evading the agency's summonses in the excise policy case. Kejriwal had approached the special court against an order passed by a magisterial court summoning him on a complaint filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for allegedly evading the agency's summonses in the case. Special Judge Rakesh Syal on Wednesday granted two weeks to Kejriwal to file rejoinder on the ED's replies. The court's directions came after Kejriwal's lawyers sought time, saying they could not get instructions from him as he has been arrested by the ED in the case. "Counsel for the petitioner

submits that they have to file rejoinder to the reply filed by the ED. However, they have not been able to take instructions from the petitioner, who is in JC (judicial custody), as there are over 30 cases, pertaining to the petitioner, pending in various courts in India. Heard. Let the rejoinder be filed before the next date," the judge said. The court will now hear the plea on May 14. Kejriwal was arrested by the ED on March 21. He is currently lodged in the Tihar jail, Delhi. The Delhi chief minister had challenged the summonses issued by the magisterial court after taking cognisance of two complaints filed by the ED for evading summonses issued to him. The ED filed a complaint seeking prosecution of Kejriwal for skipping multiple summonses issued to him in the case linked to the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy.

Car owners demand better roads from leaders fighting LS polls: Survey

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Car owners have demanded better roads from the political leaders contesting in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections 2024 on Wednesday according to a survey from different parts of the country. A survey by the Park+, a super app for car owners, which was designed to understand Indian car owners' expectations from political parties reveals that 98 percent of car owners want better roads from the government. Additionally, 83 percent of Indian women car owners want more women traffic police personnel on roads and 81 percent

of car owners demand a more friendly traffic police force, compromising both men and women. The survey sample consisted of over 50,000 car owners from Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, and Chennai. "With over 4.5 Cr+ cars running on Indian roads today, Indian car owners form the backbone of the Indian middle class, and their demands for better roads, friendly traffic police personnel, and better traffic management are key election demands that political parties can address to bring delight back to owning a car in India," Amit Lakhota, CEO and Founder

of Park+, said. Additionally, top three demands by Delhi NCR car owners include friendly traffic police personnel, better road infrastructure and better traffic management during office hours. Moreover, about 61 percent of car owners want better management by traffic police to counter road rage and dangerous driving. 83 percent of women car owners want more women traffic police personnel on highways and main roads and 72 percent of car owners felt that waterlogging was a major concern during monsoon season.

Protesting farmers from Tamil Nadu climb mobile tower

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Farmers from Tamil Nadu, including a woman, on Wednesday climbed onto a mobile tower while protesting at Delhi's Jantar Mantar over demands of better prices for their crops and the river interlinking issue. While many farmers from Tamil Nadu gathered at Jantar Mantar, some of them climbed nearby trees and a mobile tower, according to the police.

They were brought down by police officials who used a fire brigade crane to bring the farmers back to the ground from the mobile tower. "Around 50 people have come for interlinking of rivers. Two of them tried climbing a mobile tower but they returned back to the ground," Deputy Commissioner of Police (New Delhi) Devesh Kumar Mahla said, adding that some of them tried climbing trees at the site. Around 100 farmers from

Tamil Nadu participated in the demonstration where they demanded a doubling of their income from farm produce, a pension of Rs 5,000, individual insurance, and interlinking of all rivers in India. "If our demands were not met they would contest the Lok Sabha polls against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Varanasi constituency," the farmers said. A senior official of the Delhi Fire Services (DFS) said that they got a call about

Zoo to undergo make over in coming months

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The National Zoological Park in the national Capital will undertake multiple beautification projects in the upcoming months in order to revamp the zoo with modern technology. Zoo Director Sanjeet Kumar said, "There are numerous ongoing enhancements at the zoo, such as plans to adorn walls and rocks with drawings and paintings, while pathways will also get seasonal decor. These beautification efforts aim to enhance the zoo's aesthetic appeal and provide visitors with an immersive experience." According to senior officials, it will be a 1000 crore project and the zoo will be upgraded with modern amenities. Visitors will see a completely new zoo after the revamp is done. However, the beautification will start once it is approved by the Prime Minister Office and the cabinet, the senior official said. The Zoo Director emphasised that the ambitious beautification plan for Delhi's zoo would also prioritise the safety of the



animals and the visitors. The plan includes the cleaning, plantation, enrichment, and beautification activities, which will be carried out simultaneously in and around the entire zoo infrastructure. "We are working on beautification projects such as animal enclosures, animal safety measures, the main entrance gate, zoo pathways, selfie point updates, and other amenities," Kumar added. Sanjeet Kumar previously served as the Regional Chief Conservator of Forests for the Bhubaneswar Circle in Odisha for a year and has now been appointed as the Director of The National Zoological Park. The National Zoological Park, popularly known as Delhi Zoo, is situated in a 176-acre area under the central government's jurisdiction. It was initiated in 1952.

Nations must invest in resilient infrastructure for better tomorrow: Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said natural disasters are becoming more frequent and more severe, and their true impact on people, families and communities is beyond just numbers. In a recorded message played at the 6th edition of the International Conference on Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), the Prime Minister said, "Countries must invest in resilient infrastructure today for a better tomorrow. Resilience needs to be factored into new infrastructure creation and it also needs to be a part of post-disaster rebuilding after disasters." "As we all have witnessed, natural disasters are becoming more frequent and more severe. The damage they cause is usually reported in dollars, but their true impact on people, families and

communities is beyond just numbers. "Earthquakes destroy houses, making thousands of people homeless. Natural disasters can disrupt water and sewage systems, putting the health of people at risk. Some disasters can impact energy plants, leading to potentially dangerous situations. These things have a human impact," Modi said. He said nature and disasters have no borders and disasters and disruption cause widespread impact in a highly interconnected world. "The world can be resilient collectively only when each country is resilient individually. Shared resilience is important because of the shared risks. CDRI and this conference help us come together for this collective mission," the prime minister said. Citing the high risk of disasters in small island developing States, Modi said countries must support the



most vulnerable to achieve shared resilience. "CDRI has a programme which is funding projects across 13 such places. Resilient housing in Dominica, resilient transport networks in Papua New Guinea and enhanced

early burning systems in the Dominican Republic and Fiji are some examples," Modi said. It is heartening that CDRI also has a focus on the global south, he said. The prime minister said that during India's G20 presidency,

a new disaster risk reduction working group was formed with financing at the heart of the discussions. Along with the growth of CDRI, such steps will take the world to a resilient future, he said.

Modi added that the growth of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure has been impressive in the last few years. Launched in 2019, CDRI is now a global coalition of 39 countries and seven organisations. Investment in infrastructure suffered setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic years, and the recent rebound has been highly unequal, with developing countries falling behind, P K Mishra, the principal secretary to the Prime Minister at the conference. He said disaster and climate risks are increasing and countries will be forced to divert more funding to recovery and rebuilding if they do not build resilience in the infrastructure systems. "During the pandemic years, investment in infrastructure suffered setbacks, and lately, we observe sustained revival. However, this rebound is highly unequal, with developing countries lagging,

We must ask ourselves why?" he said. Mishra said research by CDRI has shown that the annual investment required to address the infrastructure deficit, achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reach net zero and strengthen resilience by 2050 amounts to USD 9.2 trillion. "If we do not design resilience into our project pipelines, it will be increasingly difficult to achieve the high levels of funding needed to close the infrastructure deficit, particularly in the global south," he said. Mishra said the prime minister has given a clarion call to make India a developed country, and many other countries in the global south are also aiming at becoming developed countries or developing faster. "In all these cases, a lot of infrastructure is going to be built. Therefore, ensuring disaster and climate resilience of infrastructure systems,

particularly in the context of uncertainties posed by a changing climate, is a shared global challenge," he said. Mishra said India recognises that closing the infrastructure deficit and doing so in a manner that all new infrastructure is resilient go hand in hand. He said the investment made in infrastructure in the country over the past two decades has created better livelihood opportunities for millions of citizens, and this progress needs to be sustained. "The infrastructure we build today needs to be resilient to present and future disaster risks for decades," he said. Mishra urged the participants of the conference to focus on creating opportunities for better articulation of infrastructure challenges faced by the global south. He sought the conference to find new ways to mobilize finance and incentivize investments in resilient infrastructure in the global south.

Congress manifesto influenced by foreign forces, claims BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Wednesday launched an all-out attack on the Congress over Sam Pitroda's "inheritance tax" remarks, alleging he has exposed the party's "nefarious design" of taking away common people's wealth and property. The BJP's accusation came after Pitroda, the president of the Indian Overseas Congress, talked about "inheritance tax in the United States" on the Congress' "redistribution of wealth" issue. Latching on to his remarks, BJP national spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi said, "Sam Pitroda has elaborated the nefarious design of the Congress. We are a saving based economy. In India, one generation (of a family) earns by doing hard work. The second generation builds on that and then the third generation gets some comfort." "And, the Congress wants to snatch away that happiness and peace from the people with Sam Pitroda talking about imposing tax on gold," he charged. "People in India purchase gold



as their savings and even those who are poor say there should be gold. And you want to impose 45 per cent tax on them (gold)," Trivedi added. The Congress distanced itself from Pitroda's remarks, alleging that sensationalising them are attempts at diverting attention from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "malicious" poll campaign. "By doing an X-ray of the Congress' manifesto, their high tech guru Pitroda has made it clear that both the lives and wealth of the people of the country are in danger. You want to take away the wealth of people from them," the BJP spokesperson hit back, saying the Congress can hide its "nefarious intentions" now. He also alleged that the

Congress' manifesto was influenced by foreign forces. "Understand how big the danger is. The Communist party, a prominent constituent of INDI alliance, says it will dismantle India's nuclear weapons and Congress says it will stanch away from you the little 'dhan and anna (wealth and food) that you have at home,' Trivedi charged, exhorting people to seriously ponder over the issue. With his remarks triggering a row, Pitroda said on X that "it is unfortunate that what I said as an individual on inheritance tax in the US is twisted by Godi media to divert attention from what lies the PM is spreading about the Congress manifesto. PM's comments on Mangal Sutra

and gold snatching is simply unreal." "I mentioned US inheritance tax in the US only as an example in my normal conversation on TV. Can I not mention facts? I said these are the kind of issues people will have to discuss and debate. This has nothing to do with the policy of any party including Congress," he said. "Who said 55 percent will be taken away? Who said something like this should be done in India? Why is BJP and media in panic," Pitroda asked. Attacking the Congress over Pitroda's remarks, Modi said at a rally in Chhattisgarh, "The Congress party's dangerous intentions have come to fore yet again. Now these people are saying they will impose inheritance tax on properties bequeathed to children by their parents." Home Minister Amit Shah also flayed Pitroda's remarks, saying "The appeasement politics of the Congress stand exposed today with Sam Pitroda's statement on wealth redistribution. He reaffirmed the party's intention to seize the property of the majority and distribute it among the minority."



Modi greets people on Panchayati Raj Day

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday greeted people on the Panchayati Raj Day, asserting that his government will continue to work to strengthen local body institutions. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj observes April 24 as National Panchayati Raj Day, marking the enactment of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, which came into force on this day in 1993 and paved the way for empowering of local bodies. Modi said on X, "On Panchayati Raj Day, greetings to all those working at grassroots to transform rural India and ensure a better quality of life for the people. Our Government will continue to work to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions and give wings to people's dreams."

Navy official freed from Qatar prison; father thanks Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI



Captain Saurabh Vashisht, one of the eight imprisoned former Indian Navy personnel released by Qatar following India's diplomatic efforts, and his father have written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to convey their heartfelt thanks and laud his leadership. Vashisht said his heart is brimming with appreciation and reverence, as he praised Modi for his unwavering support and tireless efforts during one of the most challenging phases of his life, officials noted on Wednesday. He said in the letter to the prime minister that, "In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, you emerged as a steadfast beacon of hope and resilience, transcending the realms of politics to embody a guiding force of unparalleled significance." He added, "Your solemn vow that no Indian would be left behind resonated deeply within our spirits, and time and again, you have demonstrated the profound sincerity of that commitment." All eight officials were given

the capital punishment by Qatar on reportedly espionage charges which was later committed. However, India's persistent intervention ensured their release in February and they returned home. Vashisht said in his solitary confinement in a Qatar prison, he was sustained by the hope that no stone will be left unturned to ensure his release as he observed the prime minister's major diplomatic engagements such as being the State guest of the United States government, Chief Guest of Honour at Bastille's Day parade in France and hosting the G20 summit, in India. He said, "Witnessing your auspicious inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, I felt that our Lord Ram was also blessing us to attain our freedom. I remain eternally indebted to you for restoring

our freedom, for the unwavering advocacy you extended to our plight, and for safeguarding the welfare of our families during our protracted separation." Modi's resolute commitment to the well-being of every Indian, irrespective of circumstance, evokes profound admiration and reverence, he said, praising him for exemplifying the true essence of leadership and empathy. Officials said Captain Vashisht's father Wing Commander Rajinder Kumar Vashisht (Retired) also praised and thanked Prime Minister Modi for the return of his son. "In this agonising saga spanning over 18 months, you emerged as our rock, our unwavering pillar of hope. At 86 years of age, I find myself extremely overwhelmed with gratitude for your relentless efforts in bringing my son back from the brink of despair," he said. He said in his decades of life, he has traversed through changing times and eras, witnessed myriad leaders, yet none have radiated the "unwavering compassion, foresightedness, and devotion to our nation and its citizens, as you have".



DRDO builds lightest bullet proof jacket

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

Defence Research and Development Organisation's (DRDO) Defence Materials and Stores Research and Development Establishment (DMSRDE), Kanpur has successfully developed the lightest bullet proof jacket in the country for protection against 7.62 x 54 R API (Level 6 of BIS 17051) ammunition, Defence Ministry has said. Recently, this bullet proof jacket was successfully tested at TBRL, Chandigarh as per BIS 17051-2018. This jacket is based upon new design approach, where novel material along with new processes has been used. The front Hard Armour Panel (HAP) of this jacket defeats multiple hits (06 shots) of 7.62 x 54 R API (Sniper rounds) in both ICW (In-conjunction with) and Standalone design. The ergonomically designed front HAP is made up of monolithic ceramic plate with polymer backing which enhances the wearability and comfort during the operation. The areal density of ICW Hard Armour Panel (HAP) and standalone HAP is less than 40 kg/m² and 43 kg/m² respectively.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

Army Chief General Manoj Pande said here on Wednesday evolution of technology has impacted warfare but technological advantage may just be reduced to a tactical level when it is taken away from the larger strategic context and regarded as the "sole driver" of success in a war. In his address at a seminar here, he also said technologies are emerging in new uncharted domains, and "revolutionising and establishing a 'new normal' in different fields". General Pande further said technology has also emerged as the "new strategic arena of competition, driving geo-political power plays and is being leveraged for weaponisation of many domains, ranging from information to supply chains". The Army chief was addressing a gathering during a seminar on "Year of Technology Absorption: Empowering the Soldier" organised by a defence think-tank at Manekshaw Centre at Delhi Cantonment. Technology from a warfighting

Technologies emerge as strategic arena of competition: Army Chief

perspective, has undergone significant evolution over the centuries, and has "impacted warfare in a profound manner," he said. General Pande cited the examples of rifles, railroads, telegraphs and ironclad ships in the 19th-century wars; the machine gun, tank, aeroplane, aircraft carriers and atomic weapons in the 20th-century wars; to the niche technologies that have today permeated into the military domain. They "all highlight examples of how technologies change the face of wars and influence their outcomes," he said. History shows that armies that have managed to adopt and integrate new technologies have gained advantage on the battlefield and achieved success, he underlined. Infusion of technologies such as computers, radars, code-breaking and aircraft production by the Allies in World War II was instrumental



in securing victory for them, while in the early years of the War, it was Germany and Japan which leveraged their industrial and technological capacities to "accrue advantages of scale," over the Allies, the Army chief added. "On the other hand, technological advantage may just be reduced to a tactical level, when it is taken away from the larger strategic context and regarded as the

sole driver of success in war. Vietnam and Afghanistan are examples of the same," he asserted. "Therefore, understanding of new technologies, harnessing their potential and accruing strategic superiority -- is the essence of leveraging technology from a warfighting perspective," the Army chief said. The Indian Army is observing 2024 as the 'Year of Technology Absorption'.

The scope of grey zone warfare too, has "enhanced" due to technological advancements. Consequent to these developments, the battle space has become "more complex, contested and lethal, and shall remain so in the future," the Army chief said. The impact of external dependency on critical components, supply chain disruptions and "weaponisation of denial regimes" came to the fore, during the pandemic and also from the lessons of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, he said. "We need to recognise that, even if we were to import some warfighting systems, no country will share the latest, advanced and critical technology. Being import-dependent for critical technologies hence entails the risk of remaining one technological cycle behind, in niche areas," the Army chief said. Therefore, the need to be self-reliant in warfighting platforms and systems and achieving self-sufficiency in critical technologies through indigenous research and development, is an "imperative," he added.



India, Japan discuss developments in nuclear non proliferation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

Top officials of India and Japan on Wednesday exchanged views on developments in the areas of disarmament and non-proliferation relating to nuclear, chemical and biological domains, outer space security, non-proliferation issues, conventional weapons and export control," the ministry said in a statement. The Indian delegation was led by Muanpui Saiawi, Joint Secretary (Disarmament and International Security Affairs), Ministry of External Affairs, while the Japanese delegation was led by Katsuro Kitagawa, Director General for Disarmament, Non-proliferation and Science Department, it added.

WHO for doubling efforts to beat challenges posed by malaria

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

On the eve of the World Malaria Day, the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Wednesday emphasised on the need for heightened focus on addressing the obstacles to health equity, gender equality and human rights in malaria responses. Saima Wazed, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia, stressed on redoubling efforts to overcome challenges posed

by malaria and ensure all individuals, irrespective of their socio-economic status or geographical location, have access to prevention, diagnosis and treatment services for the disease. "Moreover, by leveraging digital technology, we can better understand the diverse health needs of populations, collect and analyse data and monitor progress in real-time, enabling us to identify and address health inequities through both proven

interventions and innovation in service delivery," Wazed said. "On World Malaria Day 2024, we unite under the theme 'Accelerating the fight against malaria for a more equitable world,'" she said. This theme, which is in sync with this year's World Health Day theme -- "My Health, My Right" -- underscores the urgent need to address the stark inequities that persist in access to malaria prevention, detection and treatment services.



Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur campaigning in a road show for the BJP Hyderabad Lok Sabha candidate on Wednesday. Pioneer Photo



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Turncoats

Former Veep Venkaiah Naidu flags party-hopping, calls for strengthening anti-defection law

The pervasive trend of politicians of all hues switching parties, for better career prospects or in pursuit of election tickets especially ahead of Assembly or Lok Sabha polls, is nothing new. This phenomenon, commonly known as party-hopping, has now been flagged by former Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu as particularly damaging to our democracy. It also raises questions about the efficiency of the anti-defection law in curbing such practices. The law, enshrined in the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, was introduced to deter elected representatives from switching allegiance to other political parties after being elected. The law aims to maintain stability and integrity within the political system by penalising defections and preserving the sanctity of electoral mandates. However, despite its existence, party-hopping remains a disturbing trend in Indian politics. Politicians often defect from their original party to join another for a ticket, ministerial position or personal ambitions. Additionally, the anti-defection law is limited in its scope and does not address the broader issues of political morality and ethics. Politicians often exploit legal loopholes and engage in prolonged legal battles to circumvent disqualification, thereby escaping accountability for their actions. This not only undermines the democratic process but also erodes public trust in the political system. However, the toothlessness of the anti-defection law and the failure to effectively address this issue reflect deeper systemic challenges within the political system.



So, why is the anti-defection law still toothless in addressing this issue? One of the primary reasons is the loophole in the law that allows for defection without disqualification under certain circumstances. The law permits defection if one-third or more of the members of a legislative party together decide to join another party, effectively legitimising mass defections. This provision has been exploited by political parties to engineer defections and destabilise rival Governments. Moreover, the anti-defection law lacks stringent enforcement mechanisms and timely interventions. While the law penalises individual defections, it does little to address the systemic factors that incentivise party-hopping, such as the allure of power, patronage politics and lack of internal democracy within parties. Furthermore, the anti-defection law is subject to political manipulation and selective application by ruling parties. To strengthen the anti-defection law and address the scourge of party-hopping, comprehensive reforms are necessary. This includes closing loopholes, imposing stricter penalties for defections, enhancing oversight mechanisms and promoting internal democracy within parties. There needs to be a concerted effort to foster a political culture based on principles of integrity, accountability and ethical conduct. Urgent reforms are needed to strengthen the law, uphold democratic principles and restore public trust in the integrity of the political process.

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PICTALK



Devotees carrying holy water from Ganga river wait in queues to perform 'puja' at Vindhyachal Dham, in Mirzapur

Graft dominates election discourse

Mounting concerns over corruption and economic uncertainties are shaping the contours of the political contest



SHIVAJI SARKAR

Innocuous developments are unfolding amidst the growing fervour of the impending elections. Despite concerns of the RBI regarding inflation, escalating toll rates, and transportation costs, the nation finds itself amidst a politically charged atmosphere. Nonetheless, certain court rulings are adding intrigue to the evolving scenario.

In addition to the impact of electoral bonds, which have added colour to the political landscape and influenced prices, three other judgments are exerting significant influence. These include the Supreme Court's hearings on the Voters Verifiable Print Audit Trail (VVPAT), commonly known as the voting slip; a judgment regarding the denial of payment to Reliance Infra for the Delhi Airport Metro EPL; and the severe criticism of Patanjali's owners, who are contemners of court orders regarding their advertising. These developments are intensifying the dynamics of the electoral contest.

Not less interesting is the ED mounting fresh money laundering probe into the Chhattisgarh liquor scam and the ED linking Kerala CPM leaders to bank fraud. Could there be more arrests even after Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and Kavita of BRS? Will prices take a backseat to politics and court rulings, or will they remain pressing concerns alongside these factors? Voters, though reticent, are far from oblivious. Whether attending rallies of prominent leaders or not, they are keenly aware of every development that influences their lifestyle. Conversations range from questioning why individuals with questionable backgrounds align themselves with the BJP to analysing defections from BJP to Congress factions. Both voters and party members evaluate the potential implications of each unfolding event, particularly returning officers of Chandigarh municipal polls and Himachal defections.

Corruption is not a non-issue. Arrests of select opposition State leaders on corruption charges by central investigative agencies such as CBI, ED, and income-tax department are unlikely to change



the general public perception that corruption pervades all political parties. Many view the pre-election arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal as a strategic move aimed at thwarting the popular politician's participation in the election campaign, rather than a genuine effort to address corruption.

It leads them to think that possibly price surges of many medicines and commodities or galloping rises in tolls have electoral bond connections. Former Vice President Venkaiah Naidu's recent remark on corruption involving all parties has given it a new dimension for the voters to rethink the extent of the impact of corruption. Amidst the dropping of corruption charges against former Union Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel, allegedly implicated in an Rs 25,000-crore aircraft purchase scandal, questions arise as to why Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal faces arrest for his alleged involvement in a Rs 100 crore State liquor policy issue. People ponder whether the Air India sell-off was conducted transparently or mired in controversy. The action against Kejriwal has spurred opposition unity, evident from the overflowing rally at Delhi's Ramlila Ground.

The recent Supreme Court decision concerning Reliance Infra's Delhi Airport Metro's EPL has prompted questions

about corporate exploitation of public sector Delhi Metro. The Court overturned its own 2021 order directing Delhi Metro to pay Reliance Infra Rs 2782 crore, which had ballooned to Rs 7686 crore with accrued interest. Chief Justice DY Chandrachud, along with Justices R Gvai and Surya Kant, justified this drastic action, citing a 'miscarriage of justice' resulting in an 'undeserved windfall for Reliance Infra. This ruling, following closely after the electoral bond controversy, has heightened voter scepticism. Had Delhi Metro been forced to pay, it could have burdened commuters with significantly higher fares.

Likewise, the court's rejection of Patanjali's apology in a contempt case, stemming from misleading advertisements contravening its order, serves as a stark example of how the rule of law can rectify corrupt practices, unveil false brand images, and maintain price stability. The court's warning to be prepared for consequences, along with its criticism of the Uttarakhand Government, underscores the power of legal intervention. Erratic power bills and arbitrary demands in UP and many States are also potential issues. Each of these cases, people realise, are instances of political linkages affecting price rises and profiteering. The glaring lapses on the part

of the executive and administration add to the woes of the people and the breakdown of the law-and-order machinery. The judiciary is uncovering corrupt practices that impact economic and administrative systems, consequently rising cost of living. Dainik Bhaskar has done a study on prices in Rajasthan. It finds that compared to 2019, prices of petrol, diesel and cooking gas increased by 42 per cent; food items cost 34 per cent more; medicine prices for diabetes and heart diseases rose by 54 per cent and people's dining outside has been reduced by 40 per cent. Pulses have become costlier by 20 per cent, vegetables by 233 per cent; taxi fares by 67 per cent, edible oil 100 per cent, and FMCG rose by 60 per cent. Salaries during the period for different classes have risen by 11 per cent to 26 per cent. Price concerns persist, with numerous unnecessary infra, road airport and metro projects shocking even political workers. However, this doesn't diminish the significance of religious fervour surrounding the Ram temple and Modi's assurances, which remain potent issues in certain regions, albeit overshadowed by economic factors and caste considerations. Amethi and Raebareli, however, remain in focus, more than Varanasi. (The author is a senior journalist; views are personal)



THE COURT'S REJECTION OF PATANJALI'S APOLOGY IN A CONTEMPT CASE STEMMING FROM MISLEADING ADVERTISEMENTS CONTRAVENING ITS ORDER SERVES AS A STARK EXAMPLE OF HOW THE RULE OF LAW CAN RECTIFY CORRUPT PRACTICES

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EMBRACING NANO INFLUENCE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "The rising power of nano influencers", published on April 24, this is my response. The rise of nano influencers marks a shift towards authenticity in social media marketing. These individuals, with modest followings of 1,000 to 10,000, offer brands a refreshing avenue to connect with consumers. Unlike macro and celebrity influencers, nano influencers embody relatability and community-driven engagement. Their appeal lies in their resemblance to ordinary individuals—friends, family and colleagues—eschewing the polished facades of traditional influencer marketing. This authenticity fosters genuine rapport and trust, essential commodities in an era inundated with impersonal ads. Brands increasingly gravitate towards nano influencers for their cost-effectiveness and heightened engagement rates. Moreover, their endorsements carry the weight of peer recommendations, bolstering consumer confidence and purchase decisions. Yet, challenges persist. Identifying influencers aligned with brand values and managing logistics pose hurdles. Nonetheless, the allure of genuine connections propels brands towards embracing nano influence, fostering deeper, more meaningful consumer relationships amidst the din of commercialism.

Meera Iyer | Bhopal

PHULE'S PROGRESSIVE LEGACY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "A timeless inspiration for India's reform agenda", published on April 24, this is my response. Jyotirao Phule's legacy as a pioneering social reformer resonates strongly in modern India. His relentless efforts to uplift marginalised communities, particularly women and Dalits, laid the groundwork for a more inclusive society. Phule's advocacy for education, gender equality and social justice remains as relevant today as it was in the 19th century. His establishment of the Satyashodhak

Unveiling historical wounds



Apropos the news article, "Historic legal battle unfolds over Gyanvapi", published on April 24, this is my response. The ongoing legal battles concerning worship rights at Gyan Vapi, from Varanasi courts to the Supreme Court, resonate with ethical implications. Both sides' legal prowess seems even-

ly matched, yet the essence of the dispute is far from symmetric. One side defends worship rights, while the other asserts property ownership, blurring the lines of justice. The roots of this conflict delve deep into history, where Aurangzeb's divisive legacy still casts its shadow.

Reverend Sherring's accounts vividly depict the systematic desecration of Hindu temples under Mughal rule, highlighting a painful chapter often overlooked. The struggle over Gyan Vapi transcends legalities; it's a battle to reclaim dignity and heritage. As the judiciary delves into this sensitive matter, it must recognise the injustice endured, ensuring that this trial isn't merely legalistic but a reaffirmation of justice for a wounded community. History's scars must not dictate the present; it's time for healing and restoration.

Divya Menon | Chennai

Samaj provided a platform for empowerment and caste equality, echoing the need for grassroots movements in contemporary times. Moreover, Phule's forward-thinking educational reforms, such as vocational training and multilingual education, mirror present-day policies like the New Education Policy, of 2020. Embracing Phule's vision means prioritising the inclusion of marginalised groups in all spheres of society, from politics to education. As we commemorate Phule's legacy, it's imperative to mainstream the periphery, ensuring every citizen's voice is heard and valued. By doing so, we honour Phule's spirit and move closer to realising his dream of a truly egalitarian society.

Kavita Mehra | Jaipur

ETERNAL QUEST FOR LIBERATION

Madam — Apropos the news article, "The Mysteries of Afterlife", published on April 24, this is my response. The Upanishads, with their timeless wisdom, unravel the intricacies of existence

and the journey of the soul beyond mortal realms. Central to their discourse is the juxtaposition of the transient with the eternal, delineating the essence of the self (Atman) from the cycles of birth and death.

Karma, the architect of destiny, weaves the fabric of our lives, transcending the boundaries of time and space and shaping our journey through successive rebirths. Yet, amidst the karmic tapestry, lies the ultimate pursuit — moksha, liberation from the shackles of samsara, a merging with the divine essence. Through contemplation of these profound concepts, the Upanishads beckon us to introspect, to seek beyond the veneer of mortality, towards the realisation of our true nature and the attainment of eternal bliss. In embracing their teachings, we embark on a voyage of self-discovery, navigating the depths of consciousness towards the shores of enlightenment.

Naina Kapoor | Chandigarh

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Nurture workplace safety and inclusivity

Effective workplace safety and inclusivity initiatives demand a holistic approach, addressing fundamental needs while nurturing higher aspirations



SMITA SHETTY KAPOOR

In the ever-changing landscape of workplace safety and inclusivity, this journey is quite often likened to Maslow's theory where foundational components set the stage for higher aspirations. Like Maslow's hierarchy that progresses from physiological needs to self-actualisation, our modern-day approach must deal with basic requirements before going up to more ambitious aspirations. The demand of today goes further than what organisations aspire for but rather addresses what is most urgent at the particular moment. Statistics indicate a diverse workforce composition inclusive of X-Gens, Millennials, Gen Zs and soon Generation Alpha. As this demographic shift occurs, are we ready? What kind of policies and practices should be considered for this new era?



Safe Workplaces: Organisations are increasingly investing in creating both physically and psychologically safe environments. Initiatives encompass Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) policies, which not only ensure workplace safety but also serve as a magnet for high-performing employees. ESG's emphasis on societal contributions resonates with individuals seeking purpose beyond monetary benefits.

Respectful Workplaces: Establishing psychologically safe environments mandates clear policies, including Codes of Business Conduct, Grievance Redressal protocols and Workplace Harassment guidelines (including Prevention of Sexual Harassment). Additionally,

dedicated committees should address issues promptly while proactively working on prevention initiatives. Diversity and Inclusion: To remain relevant, organisations must adopt equal employment policies, refine communication practices, foster employee resource groups and establish Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) councils. Failure to prioritise these initiatives could deter potential candidates and partners, underscoring their importance in today's landscape. **Flexibility:** Sensitivity toward employees' diverse needs is paramount. Accommodations for special circumstances, accessibility for differently-abled individuals, gender-neutral facilities and amenities such as nursing spaces are essential. **Appreciation:** Cultivating a culture of appreciation is pivotal for fostering a sense of belonging among employees. Initiatives such as team bonding activities and addressing unconscious biases contribute significantly to creating supportive environments. This culture of appreciation propels individuals

toward self-actualisation, the pinnacle of Maslow's theory, counteracting toxicity and promoting inclusivity. **Training and Development:** Prioritising continuous training and development programs is essential to cultivate a culture of growth and inclusivity within organisations. By equipping employees with the necessary tools and resources to excel, companies demonstrate their unwavering commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace environment. **Accessibility and Accommodation:** Guaranteeing accessibility for all employees, irrespective of their physical capabilities, is imperative to foster inclusivity. This involves implementing measures such as installing wheelchair ramps, providing ergonomic workstations and offering assistive technologies to facilitate equal participation in the workplace. Additionally, organisations need to establish policies that address accommodation requests promptly and with utmost respect for employees' needs and preferences. (The writer is founder Kelp; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

NAVIGATING
WORKPLACE ANXIETY

The pressure to consistently perform and deliver causes stress and anxiety



SAKSHI SETHI

In today's fast-paced and competitive work environments, it is not uncommon for employees to experience feelings of stress, worry and anxiety. While it is commonly associated with professional settings, at the same time it is important to recognise that similar dynamics even occur in educational environments, particularly at the school level. One of the primary contributors to workplace anxiety is the pressure to perform at a high level consistently. Employees often face demanding deadlines, complex projects and performance expectations that can create a sense of overwhelm and inadequacy.

Workplace anxiety can manifest in various forms, ranging from mild nervousness before a presentation to debilitating panic attacks triggered by overwhelming workloads or toxic office dynamics. Left unaddressed, it can have detrimental effects on both individual well-being as well as organisational productivity. Various studies and researchers have found a negative correlation between workplace anxiety and job performance that indicates that higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower performance ratings across various job tasks and responsibilities which brings in a dire need for employers to understand the root causes of workplace anxiety and implement strategies to mitigate its impact. By understanding the root causes of anxiety and implementing strategies to address them, not only the schools but also the organisations can create supportive environments where all members of the community can thrive. The recent concept of 'Unhappy leaves' which isn't even a standard term in employment or HR terminology, could soon refer to situations where employees take leave from work due to dissatisfaction, stress or burnout caused by their job or work environment. Employees might take such leave to address their mental health, seek new opportunities or simply take a break from the stresses of their current job.



Addressing workplace anxiety requires a multi-faceted approach that involves both the individual experiencing the anxiety and the organisation. Today, an increasing number of employers are becoming aware of the adverse effects that stress can have on an employee's performance and are offering different programs to help employees manage stress in their lives. This approach is an initiative that will prove to increase workplace performance as well as employee loyalty and retention in the long run.

Employers must work to improve employee satisfaction through measures such as providing support for mental health, fostering a positive work environment, offering opportunities for professional development and addressing any concerns or grievances that their employees may have.

On an individual level, employees can take proactive steps to manage workplace anxiety and safeguard their well-being which may include practicing self-care activities such as regular exercise, mindfulness meditation and relaxation techniques to reduce stress levels. Setting boundaries, prioritising tasks and seeking social support from colleagues or professional networks can help alleviate feelings of anxiety and promote resilience in the face of workplace challenges. Organisations and schools can implement policies and practices that promote work-life balance, stress management and mental health awareness. Providing access to resources such as counselling services, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and wellness initiatives can equip employees with tools and strategies to cope with workplace anxiety proactively and foster positive working relationships for creating a psychologically healthy workplace.

Remember that overcoming workplace anxiety is a journey and it may take time to find what works best for you.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

The democratic status
of India under scannerUTTAM
CHAKRABORTY

The latest report from the V-Dem Institute categorises India as one of the 'worst autocracies' globally, significantly undermining its democratic reputation

The Gothenburg-based V-Dem Institute's report on Democracy Report 2024 claims that India has been reduced to the status of an "electoral autocracy" in 2018 and has further downgraded to "one of the worst autocracies". The report categorically found that almost all elements of democracy have worsened in more countries than improved and the report also singled out freedom of expression, fair elections and freedom of association/civil society as the three most affected elements of autocracy. There is ostensibly a clarion call for India to take on this global index based on arbitrary methods. The time has come to decolonise the democracy index and frame a domestic democracy index in the global area.

Suffice it to say, that this report based on faulty methods has shaken India's sentiment. The dichotomy is quite apparent that India has been measured in a biased manner in the scale. The flawed methodology and nonchalant attitude of people who helm the global index have put India on a declining global index. The global criticism has allegedly hurt India's sovereign ratings. The Indian Government publicly rejected this global democracy index, arguing that Delhi did not need the sermons. India has accused the rank and file of hypocrisy, calling them self-appointed guardians of the world who find it very difficult to stomach the fact that no one in India seeks their approval.

Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) gives an overview of the State of democracy in 165 independent countries and two territories. This includes almost the entire world population and most of the world's States (micro States are not counted). Rated on a scale of 0-10, the democracy index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, Government activity, political participation, political culture and civil liberties. Based on the results of various indicators in these categories, each country is classified into one of four regime types- "full democracy", "flawed democracy", "hybrid regime" or "authoritarian regime". Note that since 2015, the EIU has observed a decline in democratic standards in India. While democracy can be subjective, the EIU Democracy Index is based on five key indicators - the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of Government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties. It is criticised that this democracy index sent out faulty information to the entire world.

According to the EIU Democracy Index, India's civil liberties score was lower than in 2014. Civil liberties are assessed by freedom of expression, freedom of speech, restrictions on the Internet, the independence of the judiciary of the State and the ability of citizens to address their complaints to citizens. The perceptions of human rights, perceptions of religious discrimination and whether the Government uses new risks and threats as an excuse to limit civil liberties. Since 2017, civil liberties scores have been in free fall. It was 7.35 in 2017 and 2018, then dropped to 6.76 in 2019 and bottomed out in 2020 at 5.59.

In 2021 and 2022, India's civil liberties score was 6.18 and by 2023 it had fallen again to 5.88, the score of Ghana, Thailand, Ecuador and Guatemala, all of which have lower Democracy index scores than India. While the civil liberties scores of developed countries have not improved over this peri-



od, India's deterioration has meant that India no longer ranks above them in this parameter. Precisely, according to the report declining civil liberties have affected India's democracy scores. As a result, the Indian Government decided to create its framework for democracy ratings after it was downgraded by international groups and indices. It contacted the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), one of India's largest think tanks, which has partnered with the Government on several projects and initiatives.

According to the EIU Democracy Index, national elections will be held in 2024 in eight of the world's ten most populous countries - Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia and the United States. There are no choices in half of them for free and there is no lack of justice and many other prerequisites of democracy, such as freedom of speech and association. Not surprisingly, elections in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Russia - where opposition forces are subject to State repression - do not lead to regime change or democracy. Elections in the United States, Brazil, India and Indonesia - all classified as "flawed democracies" - at least offer the possibility of change, although they are also likely to see incumbents or anointed followers win. The EIU Democracy Index's position on India's elections is problematic in terms of the methodology used in the study.

The World Happiness Report is a publication that contains articles based on respondents' ratings of their own lives and national happiness ratings, which the report also correlates with various life (quality of) factors. In March 2024, Finland was declared the happiest country in the world seven times in a row. However, India is currently ranked 126 out of 146 countries with a happiness score of 4,054. India is lower in the happiness index than its neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh and China. The decline in happiness levels is closely linked to India's deepening mental health crisis, exacerbated by the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pan-

dem. However, one can understand the situation in China. Then China can be ahead of India in terms of the happiness index.

In the report, experts from fields such as economics, psychology, survey analysis and national statistics discuss how well-being measures can effectively measure national progress and address other related topics. Each report is structured into chapters that address the issue, delving deeper into topics related to happiness such as mental health, the tangible benefits of happiness, the role of ethics, political implications and links to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) approach to measuring subjective well-being and other international and national initiatives.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) publishes a World Press Freedom Index every year. RSF is an international non-Governmental organisation whose mission is to protect and promote media freedom. It is headquartered in Paris and has consultative status with the United Nations. This annual World Press Freedom Index aims to "compare the level of press freedom for journalists and the media in 180 countries and territories" with the previous calendar year. The latest Reporters Without Borders (RSF) report says India's ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has fallen to 161 out of 180 countries. In comparison, Pakistan fared better in terms of media freedom, ranking 150th, an improvement from 157th last year. In 2022, India was ranked 150th on the scale. However, the press freedom index of India seems manufactured or could be based on flawed methodology. The history of Pakistani journalism has been turbulent, with periods of relative openness interspersed with severe restrictions on press freedom, especially during the military dictatorship.

Similarly, press freedom in Afghanistan has been dismal for years. Even two years after the fall of Kabul, we hear almost every day from Afghan journalists, both

domestic and in exile, about the hostile environment they face.

The Committee to Protect Journalists' attempt is to provide support and assistance to journalists in exile. Since 2021, Afghan journalists have become one of the largest groups of journalists in exile receiving annual grants from CPJ, contributing to a 227 per cent jump in the CPJ grants to journalists in exile over the three years 2020-2022. It received increasing reports of Afghan journalists in exile who were targeted in immigration-related incidents. Afghan journalists seeking asylum in Pakistan told us they have been arrested and blackmailed for overstaying their visas and many are living in hiding and in fear. Then how India can be put below Pakistan and Afghanistan's press freedom index on the scale of press freedom?

The importance of methodology in any study remains vital. Research methodology is a way of explaining how the researcher intends to conduct his research. It is a logical, systematic plan for solving a research problem.

It provides researchers with a road map to ensure that their research is systematic, rigorous and objective. Without a well-defined research methodology, it is difficult to obtain accurate and reliable results, draw meaningful conclusions and contribute to the data set. Research methodology lends legitimacy to the research and provides scientifically sound results. It also includes a detailed plan to help keep researchers on track, making the process smooth, efficient and manageable. The methodology of the researcher allows the reader to understand the approach and methods of concluding. However, the methodology used in the democracy index has invited numerous issues. At this juncture, when the entire world is conspiring against India in terms of the democracy index, India must decolonise the index.

(The writer is an associate professor at the School of Management, Presidency University Bengaluru; views are personal)



THE LATEST REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF) REPORT SAYS INDIA'S RANKING IN THE 2023 WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX HAS FALLEN TO 161 OUT OF 180 COUNTRIES. IN COMPARISON, PAKISTAN FARED BETTER IN TERMS OF MEDIA FREEDOM, RANKING 150TH, AN IMPROVEMENT FROM 157TH LAST YEAR

Determining the limits of corruption, the Indian way

The recent raids on public functionaries and private individuals speak volumes about the deep roots of corruption still existing in Indian society

Whether it is the issue of electoral bonds, the liquor policy of Delhi or many others involving politicians, bureaucrats and even private individuals, the ghost of corruption is back haunting the national discourse at present. People may have different perceptions and views on the prevalence of corruption in India depending upon their experiences, knowledge or even interests. Some may think that corruption is highly prevalent within the Government functionaries and in the political class, whereas others may opine that corruption of some form or the other exists in every sphere including in the private sector, even in small businesses. While there may



SIDDHARTH MISHRA

be some others who may justify corruption and yet others who vehemently criticize it. Does it mean that it is how one looks at the scenario that shapes the societal perspectives in this regard and if it is treated as true, does it require looking at the whole issue from different perspectives? Speaking honestly, corruption seems to be prevalent in all walks of life irrespective of whether it is the public or pri-

ate sector. There is some other form of corruption visible everywhere in this country. However, the form of corruption that usually becomes the talk of the town is the Governmental or the political class corruption. By that account, for that matter, should even a rickshaw puller or a vegetable or fruit vendor asking for more than the genuine price or overcharging not amount to corruption? Should not the boss, in a private enterprise, dominating, harassing or seeking undue favours from subordinates as a condition of promotion, be seen as corrupt? Ironically, the law does not seem to be treating such attitudes as, falling in the purview of, and, requiring to be prohibited by corruption law, though perhaps, the law

might be providing some other type of remedy in such cases. It is not just that the corruption is not confined to the Government sector, rather monetary is also not the only type of corruption that exists. Other forms of corruption do exist in this country that usually go unnoticed or unchecked. Arrogance in people in power, delaying even genuine work and harassing, or humiliating ordinary people unnecessarily should amount to corruption. Public functionaries take oaths before assuming office and vow to remain honest in their duties, they hold public offices as the trustees for people, who have faith in them and it is their primary duty to serve the common people

and refrain from breaching people's faith. Scores of people throughout the country face tremendous challenges, harassment and humiliation in getting work done in the Government departments at every level but public memory is short-lived and people easily forget such issues as time passes. There is no doubt that corruption is not in the interest of the society or the State. Therefore, to curb the menace of corruption, the subsequent Governments have adopted numerous legal measures including the enactment of laws and the establishment of enforcement machinery. However, as is evident from the recent incidents of corruption, all such measures do not seem to deter people from

involving in acts of corruption. Does it mean that the laws have failed to curb corruption or is it that the laws per se cannot provide a solution to this problem? Does one need to look beyond the legal measures to get rid of this menace that is eating into the vitals of this country? Can this country do away with the menace of corruption through law and its enforcement? If that was true, then this country would have become corruption-free long back. Does it mean that corruption inherently exists in ourselves and has acquired the status of an accepted norm and it is not possible to get rid of corruption in this country? The question that arises is whether corruption has become a way of life in this

country and whether should people now stop criticising corruption or people involved in it. Moreover, another disturbing aspect is whether involvement in corruption attaches any stigma or invites social backlash to the accused any longer. Doubts do exist about whether considerations of a person's involvement in corrupt practices weigh on people's psyche while making choices, especially political ones. Does this all not call for revisiting the whole gamut of social, educational and cultural moorings. The recent raids upon public functionaries and private individuals speak volumes of the deep roots of corruption still existing in Indian society. The author recalls a high-ranked IT officer, who was

once involved in the anti-corruption raids, telling him that one of the former bureaucrats who was raided for unaccounted assets, had illegally acquired numerous properties, most of which were not even ever seen or visited by him. That officer sadly quipped, 'how much corruption would or should one do and that there has to be a limit to corruption'. This Statement unfortunately and ironically seems to resonate with the general sentiment of the masses who seem to have painfully accepted administrative or political corruption as fait accompli, but wish that at least 'they must do it in limits'.

(The author is a Sr Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law, the University of Delhi; views are personal)

US Senate passes \$95.3 bn package for Ukraine, Israel

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The US Senate has voted overwhelmingly to provide a USD 95.3 billion aid package to Ukraine and Israel and to strengthen the security of America and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan.

The final approval on Tuesday night by the Senate ends months of uncertainty and delays about whether the US would continue to back Kyiv in its fight against Russian aggression.

The bill was passed in a bipartisan vote of 79-18.

The bill passed on Tuesday by the House of Representatives earlier now heads to the White House for President Joe Biden to sign it into law.

"I will sign this bill into law and address the American people as soon as it reaches my desk tomorrow so we can begin sending weapons and equipment to

Ukraine this week," Biden said in a statement.

"The need is urgent: for Ukraine, facing unrelenting bombardment from Russia; for Israel, which just faced unprecedented attacks from Iran; for refugees and those impacted by conflicts and natural disasters around the world, including in Gaza, Sudan, and Haiti; and for our partners seeking security and stability in the Indo-Pacific," he said.

The bill broadly has four parts: First, a USD 60.8 billion Ukraine aid measure, a USD 26.4 billion bill for Israel and humanitarian relief, a USD 8.1 billion package for Taiwan and other Indo-Pacific region allies and a "sidecar" bill dealing with issues ranging from TikTok to frozen Russian assets.

The bill gives USD 23.2 billion to replenish stocks of US weapons and equipment sent to Ukraine through presidential drawdown authority and to

expand defence industrial base and it allocates USD 13.8 billion in direct support for the Ukrainian military. It directs the president to transfer long-range tactical missiles, known as ATACMS, to the Ukrainian Army, unless the president determines that doing so would be detrimental to US security interests. The bill gives USD 5.4 billion to replenish stocks of US weapons and equipment delivered to Israel and to expand the defence industrial base, USD 5.2 billion for Iron Dome, David's Sling and Iron Beam defence systems and USD 2.4 billion for US Central Command operations in the Middle East.

It also allocates USD 9.2 billion for humanitarian assistance in Gaza, Haiti, Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo and other conflict zones. However, no funds can be transferred to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency; certification is required that no fund-

ing is diverted to Hamas.

On the Indo-Pacific the bill allocates USD 3.3 billion to develop US submarine infrastructure, including dry dock construction; USD 2 billion in assistance for Taiwan, the Philippines and other regional allies to purchase US weapons and equipment.

To replenish US stocks of weapons and equipment sent to the region and expand the defence industrial base USD 2 billion was allocated; USD 542 million for US Indo-Pacific Command operations and USD 250 million for World Bank International Development Association loans and grants. Among other things, the bill requires Chinese-owned ByteDance Ltd. to divest its stake in TikTok within one year of enactment and US app stores and internet hosting services would be barred from carrying the product.

Pakistan & Iran agree to focus on ways to combat terrorism

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan and Iran have recognised the need to focus on combating terrorism and the need to develop a "united front" against the menace, the two countries said on Wednesday as Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi wrapped up his three-day maiden trip to the neighbouring nation.

Raisi's visit to Pakistan was the first by any head of state to Islamabad after the February 8 general election.

"Recognising that terrorism posed a common threat to regional peace and stability and presented a major impediment to the development of the region," the two neighbours agreed to "adopt a collaborative approach to confront this menace ... while fully upholding the principles of the UN Charter," a joint statement issued by the two countries said.

The Pakistan government has complained regularly to Iran and Afghanistan, with which it shares a border, to rein in the militants belonging to the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other splinter groups who cross the border and carry out strikes in Pakistan.

The joint statement said, both sides "reaffirmed their commitment to the development of Afghanistan as a peaceful, united, sovereign and independent state, free from the threats of terrorism and drug trafficking." It further added that the two countries reaffirmed their willingness to "enhance cooperation on counter-terrorism and security and to develop a united front against terrorism." Noting the relevance of coordinating regional and international efforts to ensure security and stability in the region, both Pakistan and Iran "recognised that increasing participation of all strata of

Afghans in basic decision-making will lead to the strengthening of peace and stability in this country."

The statement further said that both sides "stressed the importance of peaceful settlement of disputes through dialogue and diplomacy."

Tehran and Islamabad also agreed to "expeditiously finalise" a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) as the two sides signed eight MoUs while vowing to increase trade to USD 10 billion in the coming years. Raisi said Tehran was ready to exchange its prowess in industry, science, and technology with Pakistan while showing his resolve to remove trade barriers between the two neighbours.

According to the Foreign Office, the two sides held productive talks during the visit. "The two sides held productive discussions and agreement to advance bilateral cooperation in multiple domains including

in trade, connectivity, energy and people-to-people contacts," the FO said in a statement.

Raisi arrived on Monday with a large delegation to promote ties about three months after the relationship suffered a setback due to tit-for-tat air strikes against each other, apparently to hit terrorists.

In Islamabad, he held detailed talks with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, President Asif Ali Zardari and Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir focussing on key security and economic issues. The two sides agreed to eradicate the threat of terrorism which caused a fissure in ties in January when they resorted to air strikes against alleged militant hideouts on each other's soil. The two countries voiced their support for the people of Palestine as they demanded Israel to halt attacking Gaza. On Tuesday in Lahore, Raisi was received by Punjab chief minister Maryam Nawaz.

Aus police arrest 7 teens for extremism, linked to recent stabbing of bishop

AP ■ SYDNEY

Australian police arrested seven teenagers accused of following a violent extremist ideology in raids across Sydney on Wednesday to protect the community from a potential attack, officials said. The seven, aged 15 to 17, were part of a network that included a 16-year-old boy accused of the stabbing of a bishop in a Sydney church on April 15, police said.

Five other teenagers were still being questioned late Wednesday by the Joint Counter-Terrorism Team, which includes federal and state police as well as the Australian Security Intelligence Organization, the nation's main domestic spy agency, and the New South Wales Crime Commission, which specialises in extremists and organised crime. More than 400 police officers executed 13 search warrants at properties across southwest Sydney because the suspects were considered an immediate threat, New South Wales Police Deputy Commissioner David Hudson said.

"We will allege that these individuals adhered to a religiously motivated, violent extremist ideology," Hudson told reporters.

"It was considered that the group ... posed an unacceptable risk and threat to the people of New South Wales, and our current purely investigative strategies could not adequately ensure public safety," Hudson added. Australian Federal Police Deputy Commissioner Krissy Barrett said investigators found no evidence of specific targets or timing of an intended "violent act".

She said the police operation was not linked to Anzac Day on Thursday, a public holiday when Australians remember their war dead.

It has been a potential target of extremists in the past. A 16-year-old was charged on Friday with committing a ter-

rorist act, a crime that carries a maximum penalty of life in prison, following the knife attack in which an Assyrian Orthodox bishop and priest were injured.

An Australian Federal Court judge on Wednesday extended an order banning social media platform X from showing videos of Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel being repeatedly stabbed. Justice Geoffrey Kennett extended the ban, which the court put in place on Monday, until May 10. X, formerly called Twitter, announced last week it would fight in court Australian orders to take down posts relating to the attack. Australia's eSafety Commission, which describes itself as the world's first government agency dedicated to keeping people safer online, applied to the court for the temporary global ban.

Hoynes, a lawyer for X, told the judge on Wednesday that the bishop didn't want the video banned. Emmanuel recently signed an affidavit "stating that he is strongly of the view that the material should be available," Hoynes said.

Hoynes said the eSafety Commission was attempting to exercise "exorbitant jurisdiction" with "injunctions that effectively operate throughout the whole world".

Hoynes also said a court ordered ban on the video "might be futile".

"It appears that this material is now appearing in lots of different places," Hoynes added.

The commission's lawyer Christopher Tran said X had not complied with Monday's order. Hoynes said he did not "have instructions about that one way or the other".

X has not responded to The Associated Press's questions on Tuesday about the company's compliance with the order. X's owner, Elon Musk, has accused Australia of stifling free speech, while Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has labeled Musk an "arrogant billionaire".

Columbia University progresses post-Gaza protester arrests

AP ■ NEW YORK

Columbia University said early Wednesday that it was making "important progress" with pro-Palestinian student protesters who set up a tent encampment and that it was extending a deadline to clear out, yet standoffs remained tense on the Ivy League campus in upper Manhattan.

Student protesters "have committed to dismantling and removing a significant number of tents," the university said in a statement. A smaller encampment remained on campus Wednesday morning. Across the country, protesters at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, some 480 kilometers north of San Francisco, started using furniture, tents, chains and zip ties to block the building's entrances Monday evening. Both campuses are part of intensifying demonstrations over Israel's war with Hamas by university students demanding that schools cut financial ties to Israel and divest from companies that are enabling its



months-long conflict. Dozens have been arrested on charges of trespassing or disorderly conduct.

Columbia President Minouche Shafik in a statement Tuesday set a midnight deadline to reach an agreement with students to clear the encampment, or "we will have to consider alternative options." By around 3 a.m., the university said that there was "con-

structive dialogue" and that it will continue conversations for 48 hours.

The statement said student protesters "will ensure that those not affiliated with Columbia will leave. Only Columbia University students will be participating in the protest."

Student protesters also will comply with city fire department requirements and "have

woman by the hair, and another student having their head bandaged for an injury. "I think a lot of students are in shock about it," she said.

Three students have been arrested, according to a statement from the school, which down the campus until Wednesday. Students had occupied a second campus building Tuesday.

Another encampment was set up Tuesday at the University of Rochester in upstate New York. Omar Darwesh, a Palestinian senior, said he has lost relatives to the war. "We're not calling for the destruction of Israel, we're never talking about threatening Jews - the focus is on us and what we need, and that's being treated like a human. We have to find a way to coexist," he told TV station WHCC.

University of Rochester officials said in a statement that the protesters must follow ground rules, including presenting university identification if asked. The upwelling of demonstrations has left universities struggling to balance campus safety with free speech rights.

Many long tolerated the protests, which largely demanded that schools condemn Israel's assault on Gaza and divest from companies that sell weapons to Israel.

Now, universities are doling out more heavy-handed discipline, citing safety concerns as some Jewish students say criticism of Israel has veered into antisemitism.

Protests had been bubbling for months but kicked into a higher gear after more than 100 pro-Palestinian demonstrators who had camped out at Columbia were arrested Thursday. By late Monday at New York University, police said 133 protesters were taken into custody and all had been released with summonses to appear in court on disorderly conduct charges. In Connecticut, police arrested 60 protesters, including 47 students, at Yale after they refused to leave an encampment on a plaza at the center of campus. Yale President Peter Salovey said protesters had declined an offer to end the demonstration and meet with trustees.

China blasts US military aid to Taiwan

AP ■ BEIJING

China on Wednesday blasted the latest package of US military assistance to Taiwan on Wednesday, saying that such funding was pushing the self-governing island republic into a "dangerous situation." The US Senate late Tuesday passed USD 95 billion in war aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan after months of delays and contentious debate over how involved the United States should be in foreign wars. China claims the entire island of Taiwan as its own territory and has threatened to take it by force if necessary.

The mainland's Taiwan Affairs Office said the aid "seriously violates" US commitments to China and "sends a wrong signal to the Taiwan independence separatist forces." Office spokesperson Zhu Fenglian added that Taiwan's ruling pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, which won a third four-year presidential term in January, is willing to "become a pawn for external forces to use Taiwan to contain China, bringing Taiwan into a dangerous situation." On Tuesday, Taiwan's President-elect

Lai Ching-te told a visiting US Congressional delegation that the aid package would "strengthen the deterrence against authoritarianism in the West Pacific ally chain" and "help ensure peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and also boost confidence in the region."

The package has had broad congressional support since Biden first requested the money last summer. But congressional leaders had to navigate strong opposition from a growing number of conservatives who question US involvement in foreign wars and argue that Congress should be focused instead on the surge of migration at the US-Mexico border. The package covers a wide range of parts and services aimed at maintaining and upgrading Taiwan's military hardware. Separately, Taiwan has signed billions in contracts with the US for latest-generation F-16V fighter jets, M1 Abrams main battle tanks and the HIMARS rocket system, which the US has also supplied to Ukraine. Taiwan has also been expanding its own defense industry, building submarines

and trainer jets. Next month, it plans to commission its third and fourth domestically designed and built stealth corvettes to counter the Chinese navy as part of a strategy of asymmetrical warfare, in which a smaller force counters its larger opponent by using cutting edge or nonconventional tactics and weaponry. China launches daily incursions into waters and airspace around Taiwan by navy ships and warplanes. It has also sought to pick away Taiwan's few remaining formal diplomatic partners. However, only two People's Liberation Army Air Force planes and seven navy vessels were found operating in areas around Taiwan between Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning, possibly as a result of heavy rainstorms and low visibility overnight along the island's west coast facing China. At times of heightened tensions, China has launched dozens of such missions over a 24 hour period, many of them crossing the center line in the Taiwan Strait dividing the sides or entering Taiwan's air defense identification zone.

Blast near ship off Yemen may mark new attack by Houthi rebels

AP ■ JERUSALEM

A ship near the strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait saw an explosion in the distance Wednesday, marking what may be a new attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels through the crucial waterway for international trade. The explosion, reported by the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations centre, comes after a relative lull from the Houthis after they launched dozens of attacks on shipping in the region over Israel's ongoing war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis did not immediately claim responsibility for the blast, but suspicion fell on the group as they've repeatedly targeted ships in the same area. It typically takes the Houthis several hours before acknowledging their assaults. The explosion happened some 130 km (80 miles) southeast of Djibouti in the

Gulf of Aden. "The master of a merchant vessel reports an explosion in the water a distance from the vessel," the UKMTO said. "Vessel and crew reported safe. Authorities are investigating." The private maritime security firm Ambray separately reported the apparent attack.

The Houthis have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, seized one vessel and sank another since November, according to the US Maritime Administration.

Houthi attacks have dropped in recent weeks as the rebels have been targeted by a US-led airstrike campaign in Yemen and shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has declined because of the threat. American officials have speculated that the rebels may be running out of weapons as a result of the US-led campaign against them and firing off drones and missiles steadily in the last months.

The Houthis have said they would continue their attacks until Israel ends its war in Gaza, which has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians there. The war began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on Oct 7, killing 1,200 people and taking some 250 others hostage.

The ships targeted by the Houthis largely have had little or no direct connection to Israel, the US or other nations involved in the war. The rebels have also fired missiles toward Israel, though they have largely fallen short or been intercepted.

The assaults on shipping have raised the profile of the Houthis, who are members of Islam's minority Shiite Zaydi sect, which ruled Yemen for 1,000 years until 1962. The group seized Sanaa, Yemen's capital, in late 2014. A Saudi-led coalition has been battling the group in a stalemated conflict since 2015.

Microsoft, Amazon face scrutiny from UK competition watchdog

AP ■ LONDON

British competition regulators said Wednesday they'll scrutinise recent artificial intelligence deals by Microsoft and Amazon over concerns that the moves could thwart competition in the AI industry. The Competition and Markets Authority said it's looking into Microsoft's partnership with France's Mistral AI and the company's hiring of key staff from another startup, Inflection AI. The watchdog also separately announced that it's investigating Amazon's \$4 billion investment in San Francisco-based Anthropic.

Big Tech companies have been pouring money into generative AI startups amid growing public and business interest in the technology, but the investments have also drawn attention from

antitrust authorities. The UK watchdog said it was seeking comments from "interested third parties," before deciding whether to carry out an in-depth antitrust investigation.

"We will assess, objectively and impartially, whether each of these three deals fall within UK merger rules and, if they do, whether they have any impact on competition in the UK," the watchdog's executive director of mergers, Joel Bamford, said in a statement.

Microsoft said it will provide the watchdog with the information it needs to carry out its inquiries. "We remain confident that common business practices such as the hiring of talent or making a fractional investment in an AI start-up promote competition and are not the same as a merger," the company said.

Microsoft last month hired Mustafa Suleyman, who co-founded Google's DeepMind AI research lab, to head up its consumer artificial intelligence business, along with the chief scientist and several top engineers and researchers from Inflection, his AI startup. Microsoft also teamed up earlier this year with Mistral, which has become France's AI darling after being founded only last year. That followed Microsoft's previous existing partnership with ChatGPT maker OpenAI, which is also facing scrutiny from the CMA. Amazon, meanwhile, has spent billions for a minority stake in Anthropic. The two companies are collaborating to develop so-called foundation models, which underpin the generative AI systems that have captured global attention.

Ex-Japanese PM Taro Aso meets Trump

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Ex-Japanese prime minister Taro Aso has met former president Donald Trump and both the leaders discussed the enduring importance of the US-Japan alliance to their physical and economic security in the strategic Indo-Pacific region.

Aso, vice president of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, met Trump on Tuesday at the Trump Tower in Manhattan. Both the leaders discussed the enduring importance of the US-Japan alliance to both countries' physical and economic security and stability in the Indo-Pacific, according to a statement issued by the Trump Campaign on the meeting with the 83-year-old visiting Japanese leader. "They also discussed challenges posed by China and



North Korea. President Trump praised Japan's increased defence spending," the press release said after the meeting. "He's a highly respected man in

need of the Republican Party in the 2024 US presidential race, told reporters in New York. The Trump-Aso meeting comes after US President Joe Biden hosted Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida earlier this month at the White House for a state visit, during which the president touted the US-Japan alliance as being "stronger than it's ever been" and announced new plans for military cooperation with the country. The meeting between Trump and Aso took place after the former president's appearance in court for his hush money trial. Trump has in recent weeks increasingly met with foreign leaders, who have sought to bolster ties as polls continue to show a tight race to the White House between him and President Biden when the elections take place in November.

Smoke seen as ANA flight carrying 200 lands safely

Smoke was seen coming from an All Nippon Airways plane as it landed safely at Shin Chitose airport in northern Japan on Wednesday, public broadcaster NHK reported. The ANA flight from Tokyo was carrying about 200 people and no injuries were reported, NHK said. The smoke, coming from the wing area, subsided when the engines stopped, it said. In January, a Japan Airlines flight and a coast guard plane collided and burst into flames at Tokyo's Haneda Airport. All 379 passengers and crew members were evacuated from the JAL plane and survived.

Blinken begins key China visit

Tensions rise over new US foreign aid bill

AP ■ SHANGHAI

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has begun a critical trip to China armed with a strengthened diplomatic hand following Senate approval of a foreign aid package that will provide billions of dollars in assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan as well as force TikTok's China-based parent company to sell the social media platform - all areas of contention between Washington and Beijing.

Blinken arrived in Shanghai on Wednesday just hours after the Senate vote on the long-stalled legislation and shortly before President Joe Biden is expected to sign it into law to demonstrate U.S. resolve in defending its allies and partners. Passage of the bill will add further complications to an already complex relationship that has been strained by disagreements over numerous global and regional disputes.

Still, the fact that Blinken is making the trip - shortly after a conversation between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, a similar visit to China by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and a call between the U.S. and Chinese defense chiefs - is a sign the two sides are at least willing to discuss their differences.

Of primary interest to China, the bill sets aside \$8 billion to counter Chinese threats in Taiwan and the broader Indo-Pacific and gives China's ByteDance nine months to sell TikTok with a possible three-month extension if a sale is in progress. China has railed against U.S. assistance to Taiwan, which it regards as a renegade province, and immediately condemned the move as a dangerous provocation. It also strongly opposes efforts to force TikTok's sale. The bill also allots \$26 billion

in wartime assistance to Israel and humanitarian relief to Palestinians in Gaza, and \$61 billion for Ukraine to defend itself from Russia's invasion. The Biden administration has been disappointed in China's response to the war in Gaza and has complained loudly that Chinese support for Russia's military-industrial sector has allowed Moscow to subvert Western sanctions and ramp up attacks on Ukraine.

Even before Blinken landed in Shanghai - where he will have meetings on Thursday before traveling to Beijing - China's Taiwan Affairs Office slammed the assistance to Taipei, saying it "seriously violates" U.S. commitments to China, "sends a wrong signal to the Taiwan independence separatist forces" and pushes the self-governing island republic into a "dangerous situation."

China and the United States are the major players in the Indo-

Pacific and Washington has become increasingly alarmed by Beijing's growing aggressiveness in recent years toward Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries with which it has significant territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea.

The U.S. has strongly condemned Chinese military exercises threatening Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a renegade province and has vowed to reunify with the mainland by force if necessary. Successive U.S. administrations have steadily boosted military support and sales for Taiwan, much to Chinese anger.

A senior State Department official said last week that Blinken would "underscore, both in private and public, America's abiding interest in maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. We think that is vitally important for the region

and the world." In the South China Sea, the U.S. and others have become increasingly concerned by provocative Chinese actions in and around disputed areas.

In particular, the U.S. has voiced objections to what it says are Chinese attempts to thwart legitimate maritime activities by others in the sea, notably the Philippines and Vietnam. That was a major topic of concern this month when Biden held a three-way summit with the prime minister of Japan and the president of the Philippines.

On Ukraine, which U.S. officials say will be a primary topic of conversation during Blinken's visit, the Biden administration said that Chinese support has allowed Russia to largely reconstitute its defense industrial base, affecting not only the war in Ukraine but posing a threat to broader European security.

N Korea sends delegation to Iran

AP ■ SEOUL

A high-level North Korean economic delegation was on its way to Iran, the North's state media said Wednesday, for what would be the two countries' first known talks since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Embracing the idea of a "new Cold War," North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is pushing to build up cooperation with countries confronting the United States, as his intensified weapons tests prompted the US and South Korea to expand their military drills. Pyongyang's delegation led by Yun Jung Ho, North Korea's minister of external economic relations, flew out Tuesday for the trip to Iran, official Korean Central News Agency said Wednesday. State media did not immediately provide further details.

Pyongyang and Tehran are among the few governments in the world that support Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and both have been accused of providing Russia with military equip-

ment. The last known time North Korea sent senior officials to Iran was in August 2019, when a group led by Pak Chol Min, vice chair of Pyongyang's rubber-stamp parliament, made a weeklong visit. The two countries had active diplomatic exchanges until North Korea sealed its borders in an effort to stave off the pandemic, before a cautious reopening in 2023. South Korea's Unification Ministry, which handles affairs with the North, did not immediately comment on Yun's visit to Iran. North Korea has made efforts for months to boost the visibility of its ties with Russia and China as Kim attempts to break out of diplomatic isolation and join a united front against the US.

In 2023, Kim visited Russia's Far East for a rare summit with Putin, which highlighted the countries' expanding military cooperation, including the North's alleged transfers of artillery shells, missiles, and other munitions to Russia. Earlier this month, Kim hosted top Chinese official Zhao

Leji, who heads the ceremonial parliament and ranks third in the ruling Communist Party hierarchy. It was the highest-level meeting between the countries in years. On Wednesday, Kim Yo Jong, the North Korean leader's powerful sister, slammed the latest rounds of US-South Korean joint military drills and insisted that the allies will never break the North's determination to build up "our overwhelming and most powerful military muscle." The statement comes a week after US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield called for the international community to be alert to the possibility of military cooperation between North Korea, Iran and Russia. Iran has been accused of providing drones to Russia for use in the war against Ukraine. "We are concerned about ... the Iranians providing weapons to the Russians and the Russians also supporting efforts to help (North Korea) expand their own research into developing weapons."

Ukrainian officials thank US for its latest military aid

AP ■ KYIV

Ukrainian officials on Wednesday expressed thanks for a fresh batch of US military aid that threw Kyiv's armed forces a lifeline in their more than two-year war with Russia, even though the vital new supplies aren't expected to have an immediate impact on the battlefield.

Ukrainian troops have faced acute shortages of shells and air defense systems as political quarrels in Washington held up the aid for months, allowing the Kremlin's forces to edge forward in some parts of eastern Ukraine by sheer weight of troop numbers and firepower in what has largely become a war of attrition. The US decision came as the Kremlin's army extended its bombardment of the Kharkiv region and Ukrainian long-range

drones struck more fuel and energy facilities inside Russia.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked the US Senate for approving the \$61 billion aid package late Tuesday. "Ukraine's long-range capabilities, artillery and air defence are extremely important tools for the quick restoration of a just peace," Zelenskyy said on the social platform X, referring to the aid Kyiv expects to receive in the coming weeks and months. Two Russian S-300 missiles struck Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city near the northeastern border with Russia, during the night, and another two hit the Kharkiv region town of Zolochiv, local officials said. They reported no casualties. Another missile hit the southern city of Odesa, injuring one woman, Mayor Hennadii Trukhanov said.

Nepal Pres seeks Qatar Emir's aid for student held by Hamas

AP ■ KATHMANDU

Nepal President Ram Chandra Poudel has sought the help of Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani to secure the safe release of a Nepali student held hostage since October by the Hamas in the Gaza Strip, an official said on Wednesday.

The emir on Tuesday called on President Poudel at the Shital Niwas where the two leaders discussed matters related to bilateral interests and diplomatic relations, according to a statement issued by the President's Office.

On the occasion, President Poudel requested the emir to help secure the release of Bipin Joshi, who was taken hostage by Hamas during an attack against Israel in October last year, said Kiran Pokharel, press advisor to the president. "Sheikh Tamim assured the president that he would take necessary initiative for the release of the Nepali student," Pokharel told PTI. The emir of Qatar said that he had earlier also taken the initiative for the same. Joshi was among 17 Nepali stu-

dents pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Agriculture at Sudur Paschim University who had gone to Israel under an 11-month learn and earn programme. During the Hamas attack on southern Israel in October, 10 Nepalese students were killed, and six injured while Joshi was abducted and taken to Gaza.

The two sides also discussed the issue of migrant workers' conditions in the Gulf state, an official said.

On Sunday, New York-based Human Rights Watch called on Qatar, Nepal and Bangladesh to prioritise labour protection for migrant workers during the emir's visit.

Qatar hosts about 400,000 Nepali workers, mostly in construction and manual labour. Concerns about working in extreme heat in Qatar - that could reach over 40 degrees Celsius (104 F) - inadequate living facilities and abuse have risen in recent years. "Both leaders expressed happiness over the cordial relations subsisting between the two countries and agreed to further enhancing bilateral relations and cooperation for the mutu-



eral cooperation as the two sides inked eight agreements. Sheikh Tamim, who arrived here on a two-day visit to Nepal on Tuesday, met Prachanda at the Soaltee Hotel where the two leaders discussed the whole gamut of bilateral relationships to expand and deepen their cooperation for mutual benefit, according to the prime minister's office. Prime Minister Prachanda welcomed the emir and the accompanying delegation, highlighting that the emir is the first Arab leader to visit Nepal, which reflects the depth of

relations between the two countries.

On his part, the emir expressed his thanks to Nepal, its leaders and its people for the warm reception and hospitality. He said he discussed with President Poudel and Prime Minister Prachanda about developing bilateral economic relations and strengthening them with various partnerships that raise bilateral cooperation to the desired level.

He also praised the Nepali community residing in Qatar, and its contribution to various development fields in the Gulf country.

During the meeting, the two sides also discussed aspects of cooperation between the two friendly countries, ways to enhance and develop them and exchanged views on the most prominent regional and international issues of common interest.

Following the talks, both leaders witnessed the signing ceremony of bilateral agreements and Memorandums of Understanding. Six agreements are at the government level while the other two are related to the private sector.

"The signing of these documents has paved the way for further enhancing cooperation and collaboration between the two countries on important areas," according to the Foreign Ministry. The deals include a MoU for cooperation in the field of education, higher education and scientific research, an MoU for cooperation between the Public Prosecution in Qatar and the Office of the Attorney General in Nepal, and an MoU for cooperation in the field of youth and sports.

Later, Prime Minister Prachanda hosted a luncheon in honour of Sheikh Tamim which was attended by his delegation members and dignitaries from Nepal.

The emir left Nepal in the evening after successfully concluding the two-day visit. Nepal government conferred the highest honour to the Qatar Emir during his less than 24-hour stay in Kathmandu amidst tight security. The Nepali government declared a public holiday on Tuesday in honour of the emir's visit, the first high-level trip to Nepal from the Gulf nation.

Pak docs advise 'gastroenterology review' to Imran's wife Bushra Bibi

Islamabad (PTI): A three-member medical team from a top institute has advised incarcerated former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's wife Bushra Bibi to get a "gastroenterology review" done to assess any underlying medical conditions related to her health issues, according to a media report. The advice from the doctors of the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) came following their visit to the former first lady's home for a medical examination after she complained of acidity and chest pain, Geo News reported on Wednesday. Bushra Bibi's medical check-up was conducted by the doctors at her Bani Gala residence. The residence has been converted into a sub-jail for the former prime minister's wife. Bushra Bibi, convicted in two different cases, is being held at the Bani Gala home since the couple was sentenced in the 'un-Islamic nikah' case in February. Dr Bushra Liaquat, Dr Hira and Dr Sidra - a cardiologist - examined Khan's spouse, suggesting she make changes in her diet and lifestyle, the report quoted sources as saying. The team of doctors, the sources said, visited Bani Gala Monday night at 11 pm to examine Khan's wife following her health concerns.

They also advised her "gastroenterology review." The team remained at Bani Gala for at least 75 minutes to conduct the medical examination. Last week, a comprehensive medical evaluation of Bushra Bibi was performed under the observation of Khan's family physician, while the doctors at a private hospital declared Bushra Bibi, the former first lady, to be in good health. The former first lady stayed at a private hospital in Islamabad for six hours for diagnostic tests, including endoscopy, but refused to undergo a blood test and did not provide a blood sample, sources told Geo News.



Foreign Secretary Lord David Cameron visits the National Carpet Museum in Ashgabat in Turkmenistan during his five day visit to Central Asia, on Wednesday. AP/PTI

Indonesia declares Subianto president-elect after court rejects rivals' appeal

AP ■ JAKARTA

Indonesia's electoral commission formally declared Prabowo Subianto president-elect in a ceremony on Wednesday, after the country's highest court rejected challenges to his landslide victory lodged by two losing presidential candidates.

Subianto, who is currently defense minister, won the election with 58.6 per cent of the votes, or more than 96 million ballots, more than twice the amount received by either of the other two candidates. But his rivals alleged that his victory had depended on large-scale fraud and widespread state interference. Authorities blocked streets leading to the General Election Commission compound, where more than 4,200 police and soldiers were deployed. Wearing matching long-sleeved



white shirts, Subianto and vice president elect Gibran Rakabuming Raka waved to their supporters as they arrived at the building. "The race has finished ... the tough contest, with sometimes heated debates, is over," Subianto said during the ceremony, attended by the country's political elite, including rival candidate Anies Baswedan and his running mate Muhaimin

Iskandar. "And now our people demand that political leaders must work together and collaborate for the people's welfare and to eliminate poverty and corruption in Indonesia," Subianto said. Subianto will take office in October, succeeding the popular Joko Widodo, the country's first president from outside the Jakarta elite.

The General Election Commission certified the election results on March 20, but the formal declaration ceremony was put on hold following legal challenges from rival candidates, former Jakarta Gov Anies Baswedan and former Central Java Gov Ganjar Pranowo, who sought to annul the result and demand a revote. They also alleged nepotism, challenging the candidacy of outgoing President Joko Widodo's eldest son, Raka, as Subianto's running mate. Baswedan and Pranowo argued

that Raka, 37, should have been disqualified because the minimum age for candidates is 40, and they asked the court to bar him from a revote. Before the election, Raka was granted a controversial exception to that requirement by the Constitutional Court, which was then led by Anwar Usman, Widodo's brother-in-law. Usman was later forced to resign as chief justice for failing to recuse himself.

In a 5-to-3 decision, the Constitutional Court rejected the arguments on Monday, saying the legal teams of the losing candidates had failed to prove allegations that Subianto's victory was the result of widespread fraud. That verdict cannot be appealed. The case was decided by eight justices instead of the full nine-member court because Usman, who is still on the court as an associate justice, was required to recuse himself.

Muizzu further consolidates position after six independents join his party

PTI ■ MALE

President Mohamed Muizzu and his People's National Congress on Wednesday further consolidated their position in Parliament with six independent candidates, elected in Sunday's polls, joining the ruling party. The pro-China Maldivian president led the People's National Congress (PNC) to win a landslide 66 out of 93 seats in parliament and its coalition partners Maldives National Party (MNP) and Maldives Development Alliance (MDA) won one and two seats, respectively. The six independent members joined the PNC at a function attended by President Muizzu, who is also the President of the party. With the addition of the



strong endorsement of his pro-Beijing foreign policy, as both India and China closely watched the outcome of the polls in the strategically-located archipelago nation in the Indian Ocean. According to the news portal Sun.mv, a spokesperson from the PNC confirmed on Wednesday that six independent candidates joined the PNC on Tuesday. The MP-elects, who signed with PNC on Tuesday include former party members who lost the PNC primaries held in January. They later ran in the elections as independent candidates, with the government backing their candidacy over that of the ruling party's own candidates, the report said. Meanwhile, Hassan Zareer, the

incumbent Mathiveri MP, won the 2019 elections on a ticket from the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). But he, along with 13 other lawmakers from MDP, defected to PNC after MDP's Ibrahim Mohamed Solih lost re-election, the portal said. In this year's polls, Zareer ran for re-election as an independent candidate, but with the government's backing. The move by the six independent MP-elects to join PNC comes after the MDP-majority Parliament passed an anti-defection bill on April 1. The bill, which stipulates that parliamentarians will lose their seat for floor crossing, was signed into law by President Dr Mohamed Muizzu last week, it added.

Russian priest who held Navalny's memorial service suspended by Moscow church

AP ■ MOSCOW

A priest who oversaw a memorial for late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny has been suspended for three years by the head of the country's Orthodox Church. Dmitry Sazonov held a memorial service by Navalny's grave in Moscow on March 26 to mark 40 days since the politician's death, an important ritual within Russian Orthodox tradition. An order published Tuesday on the Moscow diocese website publicly demoted Sazonov from his position as priest to that of a psalm-reader and stripped him of the right to give blessings or to wear a cassock for the next three years. He was also transferred to another church within the capital. No reason was given for the decision, which was

signed by Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church and a key ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Navalny died suddenly on Feb 16 in the remote Arctic penal colony where he had been serving a 19-year sentence on extremism charges widely seen as politically motivated. The cause of Navalny's death remains unexplained, although the politician's allies have blamed the Kremlin for his demise. Russian authorities initially refused to release Navalny's body, citing the need for further investigations. The politician's team later said that they had struggled to find a hearse to transport Navalny's body after funeral directors had received threats from unknown individuals. Sazonov was among the clergymen who previously

signed a public letter calling for Navalny's remains to be returned to his family. During his more than two decades in power, Putin has massively boosted the Russian Orthodox Church's standing, increasing its prestige after decades of oppression or indifference under Soviet leaders.

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 Name of the work: "Allotment of 06(Six) nos. of Manual Iron Ore plots." License Fees : Rs.1,18,502/- . Wharfage Fees : Rs.7,18,435/- . Last date & time of Submission of bid : 29.04.2024 up to 15:00 hrs. Date and time of opening (technical bid): 29.04.2024 up to 15:00 hrs.
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India pharma exports rise 10 per cent in FY24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The country's drugs and pharmaceuticals exports increased 9.67 per cent year-on-year to USD 27.9 billion in 2023-24, even as the total exports dipped by 3 per cent in the last fiscal.

According to the commerce ministry data, pharma exports in March grew by 12.73 per cent to USD 2.8 billion.

In 2022-23, the exports stood at USD 25.4 billion.

The top five export markets, for the sector during the last fiscal, are the US, the UK, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Brazil.

The US accounts for over 31 per cent of India's total pharma exports, followed by the UK and Netherlands (about 3 per cent each).

In 2023-24, the outbound shipments also entered new geographies like Montenegro, South Sudan, Chad, Comoros, Brunei, Latvia, Ireland, Chad, Sweden, Haiti and Ethiopia.

An industry expert said that



increasing market opportunities and healthy demand in countries like the US are helping exports to record healthy growth rates month after month. Experts have said that India's pharmaceutical business may exceed USD 130 billion by 2030, supported by expanding market opportunities and heightened demand in the overseas markets. The business stood at over USD 50 billion for the 2022-23. On average, India exports

pharma products worth USD 2-3 billion every month. India's pharmaceutical industry is the third largest by volume and the 13th largest by value in the world, producing more than 60,000 generic drugs across 60 therapeutic categories. The government has rolled out two production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes to promote domestic manufacturing of key pharmaceutical ingredients and generic medicines.

Indian IT sector staring at second straight year of muted revenue growth: Crisil

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Indian IT services sector is staring at a second consecutive year of muted revenue growth due to modest increase in tech spends in Europe and the US, a domestic rating agency said on Wednesday.

Crisil Ratings said it expects the sector to grow at 5-7 per cent in FY25, after a growth of 6 per cent estimated to have been achieved in FY24. The overall industry size is pegged at USD 250 billion and it creates over 50 lakh direct jobs. "The slowdown in technology spend will continue this fiscal, weighing on the revenue growth of IT service providers," said Aditya Jhaver, director at Crisil.

The industry is, however, expected to sustain in the key metric of profitability, as the operating profit margins will be stable at 22-23 per cent, the agency said, attributing it to prudent management of employee costs.

Crisil said the sectoral revenues achieved a compounded annual growth rate of 12 per cent for the decade through FY24.

High interest rates and



economic slowdown in client markets led to a modest single-digit growth in tech spends by companies in the banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI), retail, technology and communications sectors in FY24, the agency said.

It said these four sectors account for nearly two-thirds of the industry's revenues.

Jhaver said revenue from BFSI and retail segments will continue to be a drag with

subdued growth of 4-5 per cent in FY25.

Manufacturing and healthcare, which contribute a tenth of the revenue, were the only bright spots and continued double-digit growth in tech spend given the focus on process automation and research and development-based analytics, especially in healthcare.

As revenue growth remained subdued, IT service companies pulled back on

addition of fresh talent, resulting in headcount reductions by 4 per cent in 2023 by top 12 companies.

This, along with the decline in attrition to 13 per cent as of December 2023 from the high of 20 per cent in FY23 provided a breather by limiting higher-cost replacement hiring during FY24, it said.

Associate director Joanne Gonsalves said the ratings company expects IT service providers to remain "cautious" on fresh hiring in FY25 too, which will maintain employee utilisation at a healthy level of ~85 per cent. Continued healthy cash generation, strong balance sheets and sizeable cash surplus will keep the credit quality of IT service providers stable, the rating agency said.

Players will continue to eye acquisitions, especially small and mid-sized opportunities that could enhance their product baskets and increase digital capabilities, it said.

An appreciation in the rupee value or sustained delay in economic revival in key markets amid ongoing geopolitical conflicts could pose downside risks, it added.

M&A deal value surged 60 per cent: PwC India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Merger and acquisition (M&A) deal value soared by 60 per cent to USD 19.6 billion in January-March 2024, while that of private equity (PE) experienced a slight dip, according to a PwC India report.

With 455 deals amounting to USD 25.6 billion disclosed value, the first quarter of 2024 showcases a 24 per cent rise in deal volume compared to the fourth quarter of calendar year 2023 - marking a notable resurgence, as per PwC India report 'Deals at a glance'.

"This signals a shift from the declining trend observed throughout 2023," it added. As per the report, there were 143 domestic M&A deals, with the largest one touching USD 4.5 billion. The overall deal value for the first quarter of 2024 stands at USD 25.6 billion, a significant increase from the previous quarter and the corresponding period last year.

Sector-wise, traditional sectors took the lead, drawing significant investments in the changing deal-making scenario.

REITs, InvTs mobilise ₹1.3 lakh crore in four years: RBI data

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Investment vehicles for realty and infrastructure sectors - REITs and InvTs - have garnered Rs 1.3 lakh crore in the past four years till March-end, and are expected to facilitate more pooled funds, Reserve Bank said in a report. Experts and stakeholders are of the view that with India growing at a fast pace, REITs and InvTs are emerging as alternative investment instruments, especially for high net-worth individuals.

"India has been a late adopter of real estate investment trusts (REITs) and infrastructure investment trusts (InvTs). However, the market is flourishing - REITs and InvTs have mobilised Rs 1.3 lakh

crore since 2019-20 (up to March 2024)," said an article on 'State of Economy' published in the RBI's April Bulletin.

March witnessed the listing of an InvIT, which raised Rs 2,500 crore through a public issue, attracting substantial interest from foreign investors.

The article noted that market regulator SEBI has progressively reduced the minimum investment size and trading lot, enabling greater retail participation in these hybrid instruments.

To further develop this space, the market regulator notified regulations for small and medium REITs on March 8, 2024.

"This is expected to facilitate pooled investment in a wider

range of real estate assets as a regulated financial product, thereby facilitating further growth of REITs in India," said the article authored by a team led by RBI deputy governor Michael Debabrata Patra.

Rajeshwar Burla, Senior Vice President and Group Head - Corporate Ratings, ICRA, said the RBI allowed banks to lend to InvTs, which along with security enforcement for lenders under the SARFAESI Act, are some promising steps taken in recent times.

"Thanks to a conducive regulatory framework, and a strong pipeline of good operational assets, the industry was able to mobilise over Rs 1.3 lakh crore since FY2020. InvTs and REITs helped unwind capital blocked

in already operational infrastructure assets - which can be re-invested into under-construction projects and support infrastructure development in India," said Burla.

Indian REITs Association said SEBI's progressive regulations, particularly the reduction in lot size to bringing it on par with other listed companies to buy even single units has transformed REITs into an attractive asset class for retail investors.

"This has not only enhanced accessibility but also ensured liquidity, allowing reach to a broader investor base... We are also actively collaborating with SEBI on multiple fronts, including global benchmarking of best REIT

practices, standardising financial reporting and disclosures, and addressing other regulatory requirements, amongst others," the Association said in a statement.

A REIT is made up of a portfolio of commercial real estate assets, the majority of which are already leased out, and InvTs consist of a portfolio of infrastructure assets like highways.

Co-Founder and CEO of YOURS, a platform for fractional ownership of luxury second homes, Sudeep Chandran said it is true that India was a bit late in allowing REITs, yet in the last couple of years it has gathered momentum particularly from HNIs.

"The continuous rise in monthly inflows reflects this momentum. The recent SEBI guidelines on SM REITs provides another option to savvy investors. We anticipate significant investor interest in SM REITs, driving substantial growth in combined REIT and SM REIT investments over the next 3-5 years," Chandran said. Commenting on these investment instruments, Ritesh Kumar Shyam, Partner, M&A Tax & Regulatory Services, BDO India, said REITs and InvTs have picked up quite some traction in the domestic investment market given that these assets offer fixed income with a secured asset base and the returns are generally better than other secured asset investments.

Rupee settles on flat note, up 1 paise at 83.30 against \$

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee consolidated in a narrow range and settled for the day higher by 1 paise at 83.30 against the US dollar on Wednesday, as the support from positive domestic equities was negated by rising American currency.

Forex traders said elevated crude oil prices and significant foreign fund outflows in the international market dented investors' sentiments.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.29 against the greenback. The unit hit an intra-day high of 83.26 and a low of 83.33 against the greenback.

The domestic unit finally settled at 83.30 (provisional) against the dollar, 1 paise higher from its previous close. On Tuesday, the rupee closed at 83.31 against the American currency.

Forex traders said the rupee is expected to trade with a slight positive bias on improved global risk sentiments and easing of geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. However, any fresh aggressions in the Middle East may cap gains for the local unit.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.34 per cent to USD 88.12 per barrel. "Geopolitical risks in the Middle East and talks of fresh energy sanctions on Iran could see some occasional hiccups in prices to move

higher but we don't expect prices to sustain USD 85 for a short duration," said Mohammed Imran - Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was at 105.84, higher by 0.16 per cent.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a slight positive bias on rise in risk appetite in global markets and easing geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. However, hawkish comments from the Fed may support the dollar at lower levels," said Anuj Choudhary Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas. However, any fresh aggressions in the Middle East may cap sharp upside. Traders may take cues from durable goods orders data from the US. Investors may remain cautious ahead of inflation data later this week. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.05 to Rs 83.50, Choudhary added.

On the domestic equity market front, Sensex advanced 114.49 points, or 0.16 per cent, to settle at 73,852.94 points. The Nifty rose 34.40 points, or 0.15 per cent, to close at 22,402.40 points.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Tuesday as they offloaded shares worth Rs 3,044.54 crore, according to exchange data.

Sensex, Nifty climb on firm trend in global markets

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ticked higher for the fourth straight session on Wednesday, helped by buying in metal and commodity stocks amid a positive trend in global equities.

However, intense selling pressure on telecom, IT and tech counters capped the upside, traders said.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 114.49 points or 0.16 per cent to settle at 73,852.94. During the day, it jumped 383.16 points or 0.51 per cent to 74,121.61.

The NSE Nifty advanced 34.40 points or 0.15 per cent



to 22,402.40. The indices witnessed some selling pressure towards the fag-end of the session that erased some initial gains.

From the Sensex basket, JSW Steel, Tata Steel, Power Grid, Kotak Mahindra Bank, UltraTech Cement, NTPC and Bajaj Finance were the major gainers.

Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, Maruti, Reliance Industries and Titan were among the laggards.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo,

Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory.

European markets were trading mostly with gains. Wall Street ended with gains on Tuesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.35 per cent to USD 88.11 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 3,044.54 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

The BSE benchmark ended 89.83 points or 0.12 per cent higher at 73,738.45 on Tuesday. Trimming most of its early gains, the NSE Nifty ended 31.60 points or 0.14 per cent up at 22,368.

Nippon Life Q4 profit jumps to ₹343 crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Nippon Life India Asset Management Ltd on Wednesday reported its highest-ever quarterly profit after tax (PAT) at Rs 343 crore for the March quarter, marking a 73 per cent jump from the year-ago period.

The company had posted a PAT of Rs 198 crore in the year-ago period, the asset management firm said in a stock exchange filing.

Total income rose to Rs 560.57 crore during the fourth quarter of FY24 from Rs 388.03 crore in the year-ago period.

IGX launches ssLNG contracts, to take gas availability beyond national grid

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Close on the heels of receiving approval from the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB), the Indian Gas Exchange (IGX) has launched contracts for small-scale liquefied natural gas (ssLNG) on its platform in a bid to address the demand for fuel in areas not connected to the national gas grid.

"The introduction of ssLNG contracts on IGX aims to address the growing gas demand from industries and CGD (City Gas Distribution) companies that do not have access to pipeline networks," IGX said in a statement.

Through ssLNG, they can now procure liquefied gas through LNG tankers at competitive rates under daily, fortnightly and monthly contracts. Initially, this contract is launched at Dahej and Hazira LNG terminals in Gujarat. Later, it will be launched at other terminals namely Dhamra in Odisha, Mundra in Gujarat, Ennore in Tamil



Nadu, Kochi in Kerala, and on-land ssLNG stations at Vijaipur.

Natural gas is primarily supplied through pipelines in the country. As a result, industries and commercial establishments without access to the grid primarily rely on trucks for LNG transportation. The demand for road-transported LNG is projected to increase to 5 million standard cubic metre per day over the next five years. Small-scale LNG contracts present a win-win situation for both the buyers as well as sellers. It would serve as a platform for sellers, who can

come and trade LNG. Transporting natural gas in liquefied form via trucks will allow larger volumes to be transported, potentially making it economically viable for buyers not connected to pipelines. Further, it will also ensure a transparent and fair procurement process with enhanced payment security.

Speaking at the occasion, PNGRB member Anjali Kumar Tiwari said, "Small-scale LNG serves as the cornerstone for our gas-based economy, enabling us to expand our reach beyond traditional pipelines. On the supply side, it can bring gas from remote and difficult fields and on the demand side, it can help an industry source gas which is not connected to the gas grid."

"With this vision, we provided approval to IGX for launching ssLNG contracts on their platform. PNGRB endeavours to be a facilitator to support the growth of ssLNG in India by providing a comprehensive regulatory framework," he said.

Students take part in engineering entrance exam

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The SRM Joint Examinations for Engineering (SRMJEEE) 2024-Phase I for admission to B.Tech and Integrated M.Tech programmes of SRM Institute of Science and Technology - SRMIST (Kattankulathur, Ramapuram, Vadapalani, Ghaziabad, and Tiruchirappalli campuses), SRM University - Sonepat and SRM University - Andhra Pradesh was held from 20th April to 23rd April 2024.

The examination was conducted in Remote Proctored Online Mode (RPO), where students took part in the examination from their comfort of their homes through their laptop or desktop. Students from all over India and rest of the world took part in SRMJEEE. The examinations were conducted in 3 slots per day on April 20th, 21st, 22nd and 23rd. The slot booking for the same was held on April 16th, 17th and the mock test was conducted on 18th April to help students familiarise with RPO.

AIMA sees 20 per cent growth in registrations for MAT entrance exam

PTI ■ MUMBAI

All India Management Association, a federation of Local Management Associations (LMAs), has witnessed a 20 per cent growth in registration for MAT (management aptitude test) in 2023 compared to the pre-Covid year. MAT has actively expanded its test centers across the country, making the examination more accessible to aspiring candidates and increasing the number of locations where the test is conducted, eliminating geographical barriers, which allowed students from diverse regions to participate.

"This strategic expansion has undoubtedly contributed to the significant rise in the applicant count. MAT has seen a significant 20 per cent growth in candidate registrations post-Covid. "There has been a rise in the number of women candidates registering for MAT. With 45 per cent of



women candidates in 2023, there is a growth of approximately 3 per cent compared to 2019," AIMA Director Daljeet Singh told PTI.

There has also been a 3 per cent growth in registration by women candidates for MAT last year compared to 2019. The rise in popularity of MAT has led to an increasing number of registrations in tier II and III cities.

"Providing candidates from tier II and III cities an opportunity to pursue their management dream from B-Schools of choice has also played a part in increase in MAT popularity and registrations.

"There is more participation of candidates from smaller cities including Agra, Asansol, Aurangabad, Balasore, Bhalai, Darbhanga, Durgapur, Ernakulam, Erode, Salem among others," he said. The growth was notable in southern states like Tamil Nadu (52 per cent), Karnataka (22 per cent), and Kerala (20 per cent), as well as in states like West Bengal (15 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (8 per cent), and Bihar (4 per cent).

Top B-Schools participation in MAT and acceptance of its score for MBA (Master of Business Administration) and PGDM (Post Graduate Diploma in Management) admissions has further contributed significantly for surge in candidate registrations and MAT popularity, he added.

VIT AP University honoured



Amaravati: VIT-AP University proudly announces its receipt of the esteemed CSR Outstanding University in Education Excellence Award for the year 2024. This accolade, bestowed by Competition Success Review (CSR), a revered publication with a legacy of more than 60 years in India, recognizes VIT-AP University's relentless commitment to academic excellence and holistic development. VIT-AP University's selection for the CSR Outstanding University in Education Excellence Award underscores its dedication to fostering a culture of learning, innovation, and societal impact. PNS

Indian golfers Aditi, Diksha set to participate in Paris Olympics

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Indian golfers Aditi Ashok (46) and Diksha Dagar (138) are set to participate in the Paris Olympics whereas Shubhankar Sharma (197) and Gaganjeet Bhullar (232) also have a strong chance of making it to the Games. While it will be a third appearance for Aditi at the Olympics which is also the most for an Indian, Diksha will be competing for the second time. For Sharma and Bhullar, it would be their maiden appearance at the Olympics. India's best performance at the Olympics came from Aditi who finished fourth in the Tokyo Games 2020. The Olympic entries are sent by the Indian Golf Union. Qualification for Olympics is determined by rankings, limited to 60 men's and as many women's players through the Official World Golf Rankings (OWGR). The top 15 players in the



OWGR are eligible for the Olympics with a maximum limit of four golfers allowed from a single country. The Olympic Golf Rankings (OGR) after the top 15 players consists of up to two top eligible players per country, as long as it does not have at least two golfers in the top 15.



Meanwhile, Sahith Theegala and Akshay Bhatia, the two Indian-Americans making waves on the PGA Tour, have both reached career-high rankings this week. Theegala, who logged a second runner-up finish in 2024 and Bhatia, who won his second PGA Tour title

and qualified for the Masters, are now ranked No 12 and No 33 respectively. However, neither Theegala nor Bhatia have a possibility of making an Olympic appearance since the top 15 in the world rankings have as many as eight Americans.

In 11 starts, Theegala has been a runner-up at the season-opener The Sentry and at the RBC Heritage and was fifth at WM Phoenix Open and tied-sixth at the Arnold Palmer Invitational. Bhatia, in his 12 starts, has won once at the Texas Open and been in top 20 as many as six times. He also missed cut four times. The top four Americans are Scottie Scheffler (1), Wyndham Clark (3), defending Olympic champion Xander Schauffele (5) and Patrick Cantlay (8). Two other Americans, Max Homa (9) and Brian Haran (10), are also ahead of Theegala, who is the seventh best American in the world rankings. While only four players can be entered for the Olympic Games, provided they in world's top 15, only US has four or more in the list. All other countries can send a maximum of two players provided both are in top 60 of the Olympic qualifiers. Meanwhile, in the women's

section, Aditi, despite a modest 2024 so far, stays on in top 50. Diksha, who has been solid form, has been in top 10 thrice in five starts on the Ladies European Tour, and also been tied-26 or better in her two starts on the Epson Tour. Diksha has also touched 138 in the women's world rankings, her best so far. The next two Indian women are Pranavi Urs, playing her rookie season on LET, at 403 and amateur Avani Prashanth at 531. Among Indian men, Sharma, the lone Indian in top 200, has a best finish of tied-seventh at the Singapore Classic and tied-16 at Dubai Desert Classic. Bhullar's best in 2024 has been tied-43 in Oman on Asian Tour, but he also won once at Chandigarh Open on the Indian Tour, for his second win in four months in India. The next best after Sharma and Bhullar are Veer Ahlawat at 380 and Karandeep Kochhar at 434.

Contingent of 33 to represent India in South Asian Triathlon Championship

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The experienced duo of Adarsh Muralidharan Sinimol and Pragnya Mohan will spearhead a 33-strong Indian challenge at the South Asian Triathlon Championship to be held alongside the Asia Triathlon Cup in Pokhara, Nepal on April 27. Pragnya had won her third straight South Asian title in the last edition while also taking the ninth spot in the women's overall category. Maharashtra duo of Sanjana Joshi and Mansi Mohite, who bagged silver and bronze respectively behind Gujarat's Pragnya last year, are a part of 13 Indian athletes in the women's field. Services' Muralidharan Sinimol, who finished third last year and was the winner in 2022, will headline a 20-member strong Indian challenge in the men's field that includes the Manipuri duo of Telheiba Soram and Kshetrimayum Kabidash Singh. The competition is a sprint race comprising 750m swim, 20km cycling and a 5km run.



Patel, Koushik Vinayak Malandkar, Sai Lohitaksh Kd, Dev Ambokar, Raj Kumar Pawar, Puskar Das, Vishwanath Yadav, Adarsh Muralidharan Nair Sinimol, Ankan Bhattacharjee, Arnab Bhattacharya, Safa Musthafa Sheick. Women: Durvisha Pawar, Dolly Devidas Patil, Dhriti Koujalgi, Rama Sonkar, Hemy Zalavadiya, Prerana Sravan Kumar, Riddhi Kadam, Sanjana Joshi, Snehal Joshi, Mansi Mohite, Nafisa Millwala, Pragnya Mohan, Punam Biswas.

Indians in fray:
Men: Telheiba Soram, Kshetrimayum Kabidash Singh, Tushar Deka, Anagh Wankhade, Parth Sankhla, Angad Ingalekar, Abhishek Modanwal, Ankur Chahar, Parth Mirage, Krishiv



Football: Former player Langam Devi set to be national women coach

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former player Langam Chaoba Devi is set to take over as the national women's football coach after the I M Vijayan-led AIFF technical committee recommended her name for the position on Wednesday. The 51-year-old Devi, who captained the national side in the 1999 Asian Championships in Philippines, has earlier been an assistant coach of the Indian team. The Manipuri has also represented the country in the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games.

"After extensive deliberations, the committee recommended Ms. Langam Chaoba Devi as the head coach of the Indian senior women's national team," the All India Football Federation (AIFF) said in a statement. Devi is the only female coach from the north-east region to have an AFC 'A' License coaching badge. The recommendation is as good as an appointment given that the AIFF executive committee will approve it in its next meeting. The technical committee meet, chaired by Vijayan, was



held virtually and was attended by Pinky Bompal Magar, Shabbir Ali, Victor Amalraj, Santosh Singh, and Climax Lawrence. Syed Sabir Pasha, the Technical Director of AIFF, was also present. The committee also recommended Priya PV and Ronibala Chanu as the assistant and goalkeeping coaches respectively for the team. All three coaches recommended by the Technical Committee did duty for the team during the Turkish Women's Cup in Alanya, Turkey, in February

this year. The committee also discussed the appointments of the coaches for the men's U-16 and U-19 teams. After going through the applications received, the committee recommended the following names:
U16 Men's National Team:
Head Coach: Ishfaq Ahmed
Assistant Coach: Yan Cheng Law, Goalkeeping Coach: Mohammed Zakeer Hussain
U19 Men's National Team:
Head Coach: Ranjan Chaudhuri, Goalkeeping Coach: Sandip Nandy.

Juventus requires a late goal to beat Lazio 3-2 on aggregate

AP ■ ROME

A late goal that Timothy Weah set up for Arkadiusz Milik earned Juventus a spot in the Italian Cup final - keeping alive the Turin squad's chances of winning its first trophy in three years. While Lazio won the second leg of their semifinal 2-1, Juventus advanced 3-2 on aggregate. Weah sent in a cross seven minutes from time that Milik tapped in. Taty Castellanos scored a goal in each half for Lazio. Juventus won the first leg 2-0 with goals from Federico Chiesa and Dusan Vlahovic. In the May 15 final back in Rome, Juventus will face either Atalanta or Fiorentina. Fiorentina takes a 1-0 advantage into the second leg of the other semifinal on Wednesday. Juventus has won the Italian

Cup a record 14 times, with its title in 2021 the most recent trophy the Bianconeri have claimed. By reaching the final, Juventus also qualified for next season's four-team Italian Super Cup. Castellanos is no stranger to coming up big in important matches, having scored four against Real Madrid last April while with Girona. His first goal came 12 minutes in at the Stadio Olimpico when he leapt over Alex Sandro to head in a corner. Then shortly after the break, he muscled off Gleison Bremer to finish off a counterattack. Juventus midfielder and United States international Weston McKennie limped off with an apparent left ankle issue after Castellanos' second goal but then came back on before eventually being substituted in the 81st.

PTI ■ SHANGHAI

The Indian men's and women's compound archery teams assured the country of a podium finish by nailing down final berths in the season-opening Hyundai Archery World Cup here on Wednesday. The fourth-seeded men's team comprising the experienced Abhishek Verma, newcomer Prathamesh Bhalchandra Fuge and reigning U-21 world champion Priyansh defeated the Philippines and Denmark before displaying ominous form to upset top qualifiers South Korea to book a title showdown against the Netherlands on Saturday. The Indian women, who are the reigning world champions and seeded No.1 here, set up a title clash with Italy, defeating Turkey and Estonia to confirm their status as the



leading side in the category. The trio of reigning U-18 and senior champion Aditi Swami, Asian Games gold-medallist Jyothi Surekha Vennam and Parneet Kaur dropped just 10 points through the two matches to confirm their superiority. The Indian men's team created a major upset defeating Korea by just two

points at 235-233. Tied at even after two ends, the Indians grabbed a point after the third and finished with a 59 to secure the final spot. "Our coordination was good today and we read the wind well," said Abhishek after the nerve-wracking semifinal contest against the Koreans. "The semifinals are always tight matches. We were prepared to shoot well and happy to make it to gold," he added. An elated Priyansh said after the match against Korea that he was thrilled to be competing against the strong opponents, who he had so far seen only on social media. "We played alongside players that we used to watch on YouTube," said Priyansh, who trains with Abhishek in Delhi. "We could have shot even better," he added. The Indian women's team defeated Estonia 235-230 and Aditi attributed the performance to the process the side has been following for long. "We maintained our shooting process and it worked well," said Aditi. "I hope we can repeat the success of the World Cup in Paris last year where both the Indian men and women won the team gold medals."

ARCHERY WORLD CUP Indian men, women compound teams eye gold in Shanghai

Sreeshankar undergoes knee surgery in Doha

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Star Indian long jumper Sreeshankar has undergone a surgery on his injured knee that ruled him out of the Paris Olympics in July-August. The 25-year-old, who is a silver medallist at the Asian and Commonwealth Games, underwent the surgery in Doha. "The surgery was successful under Dr. Bruno Olory at the Aspetar Hospital, Doha. Thank you everyone for all your love and blessings during this tough phase. 18 hours post surgery and I am already walking," wrote Sreeshankar on Instagram. Dr. Olory is a French orthopaedic surgeon. Sreeshankar had injured his left knee while training in Palakkad earlier this month. He had made the cut for the Paris Olympics as early as July 2023 when he secured a silver at the Asian Championship in Bangkok with a 8.37m jump (Olympic entry standard 8.27m).



In June last year, Sreeshankar had become only the third Indian to finish in the top three in a Diamond League Meeting with a third-place finish. "Life writes strange scripts, and some times there is courage in accepting it and moving on. That's what I will do. My journey to a comeback began the minute I injured my knee. "The road is going to be long, difficult and will take a lot out of me," Sreeshankar had stated while announcing his withdrawal from the Olympics.

Olympic bound boxer Preeti to spearhead India's challenge

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Paris Olympic-bound boxer Preeti Pawar will spearhead a 50-member Indian team at the ASBC Asian U22 & Youth Boxing Championship, starting April 27 in Astana, Kazakhstan. The 20-year-old Asian Games bronze medallist, who has secured a Paris Olympic quota in the 54kg weight class, will have the company of former youth world champion and 2022 Asian elite boxing championship gold medallist Alfiya Pathan (81kg) in the U-22 category. Reigning youth world champions Devika Ghorpade (52kg) and Vishvanath Suresh (48kg), and senior national champions Prachi (63kg), Akash Gorkha (60kg) and Jugnoo (86kg) are also part of the U-22 squad announced by the Boxing Federation of India (BFI) on Wednesday. Both U-22 and Youth

competitions will see the participation of 25 Indian boxers each as the men's and women's sections will have 13 and 12 categories respectively. The players have been selected based on their strong performances in the trials conducted by the BFI at the Army Institute of Sports Pune from April 6 to 10 for the U-22 category and at the NCOE Rohtak from April 12-15 for the youth category. "The boxers were selected from across the country through highly competitive trials. The tournament is a significant opportunity for these young boxers to demonstrate their skills and gain invaluable international exposure in one of Asia's most prestigious tournaments," said BFI Secretary General Hemanta Kalita. The reigning junior world champions Nisha (52kg) and



Akansha (70kg) will lead the country's challenge in the youth women's section along with the Asian youth champion Nikita Chand (60kg). The youth men's section, on the other hand, will see the participation of the junior world championships silver medallists Jatin (57kg), Sahil (80kg) and Hemant Sangwan (86kg). The prestigious tournament will have 400-plus boxers from more than 24 countries fighting for the medals across 25 weight categories.

Women: Annu (48kg), Laxmi (50kg), Nisha (52kg), Tamanna (54kg), Yatri Patel (57kg), Nikita Chand (60kg), Shrushti Sathe (63kg), Parthavi Grewal (66kg), Akansha Phalasalwal (70kg), Rudrika (75kg), Khushi Pooniya (81kg), Nirjhara Bana (+81kg).
U 22 Men: Vishvanath Suresh (48kg), Jadumani Singh M (51kg), Adhuni (54kg), Nikhil (57kg), Akash Gorkha (60kg), Ajay Kumar (63.5kg), Preet Malik (67kg), Ankush (71kg), Kunal (75kg), Dhruv Singh (80kg), Jugnoo (86kg), Yuvraj (92kg), Rhythim (+92kg).
Women: Guddi (48kg), Tammana (50kg), Devika Ghorpade (52kg), Preeti (54kg), Poonam (57kg), Priyanka (60kg), Prachi (63kg), Kajal Devi A (66kg), Saneh (70kg), Muskan (75kg), Alfiya Pathan (81kg), Ritika (81+kg).



Rampant Sunrisers Hyderabad eye another run fest against bottom placed RCB

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Sunrisers Hyderabad will look to unleash their brute batting power on struggling Royal Challengers Bengaluru when the two teams face off in their return-leg fixture of the IPL here on Thursday. Having breached the 250-run mark thrice in this IPL edition itself, Sunrisers Hyderabad are pushing the boundaries of T20 batting with their no holds barred approach. While Mumbai Indians were the first victim of SRH's new-found batting strength this season, RCB bore the maximum brunt when the Travis Head-led batting lineup powered the 2016 winners to IPL's highest-ever total of 287/3 in Bengaluru. If this was not enough, SRH's carnage against Delhi Capitals - which included a record 125/0 being scored in the powerplay - brought forth the possibility of the 300-run mark being breached for the first time ever in the IPL. And it won't be surprising if

SRH manage to do the unthinkable and that too against a bowling attack as frail as RCB's, whose struggles with in the bowling department could be gauged with the fact that their best bowler, Yash Dayal, is at 24th spot in the overall list with seven wickets. Placed at the bottom of the pool, RCB have conceded at least 180 in their last five matches. In the last two games, the opponents have raked up totals in excess of 200. RCB batters have worked hard to make up for their severe shortcomings in bowling, but for such a lopsided squad in terms of balance, the task to produce an all-round performance looks nearly impossible. To their credit, RCB fought incredibly hard with the bat but were unfortunate to have lost to Kolkata Knight Riders by a mere one run after conceding 222/6. Moreover, a collective batting effort must have pleased the RCB management to a large extent. He was a victim of a contentious call but Virat Kohli



remains RCB's best batter in the tournament so far, having scored 379 runs to keep the Orange Cap in possession. But hot on his heels are a few others including SRH's Head, who is making most of his purple patch. Head's game is designed not only on aggressiveness and ability to cash in on every opportunity, his ability to find gaps at will makes him a compulsory watch. Abhishek Sharma has flourished in Head's company and Heinrich Klaasen too has made merry with the bat this season. Overall, SRH's compelling shows with the bat have made the job of their bowlers and skipper Pat Cummins easier. SRH are placed comfortably at the third position in the table with 10 points from seven matches. While the journey so far has been fuelled by the batters' fire, SRH would know their bowling would be tested along the way and Cummins' men could do well to watch out against a hurting RCB side.

TEAMS (FROM):
Royal Challengers Bengaluru: Faf du Plessis (c), Glenn Maxwell, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Anuj Rawat (wk), Dinesh Karthik (wk), Suyash Prabhudessai, Will Jacks, Mahipal Lomror, Karn Sharma, Manoj Bhandage, Mayank Dagar, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj, Reece Topley, Himanshu Sharma, Rajan Kumar, Cameron Green, Alzarri Joseph, Yash Dayal, Tom Curran, Lockie Ferguson, Swapnil, Saurav Chauhan.
Sunrisers Hyderabad: Pat Cummins (c), Abdul Samad, Abhishek Sharma, Aiden Markram, Marco Jansen, Rahul Tripathi, Washington Sundar, Glenn Phillips, Sanvir Singh, Heinrich Klaasen (wk), Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mayank Agarwal, T. Natarajan, Anmolpreet Singh, Mayank Markande, Upendra Singh Yadav (wk), Umran Malik, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Shahbaz Ahmed, Travis Head, Jaydev Unadkat, Akash Singh, Jhathavedh Subramanyan.

Stoinis eager to play for Australia despite missing CA central contract



PTI ■ CHENNAI

Despite missing out on Cricket Australia's central contract for the 2024-25 season, all-rounder Marcus Stoinis wants to use the impact hundred against Chennai Super Kings as a leverage to extend his white ball career beyond the upcoming T20 World Cup. Stoinis, who was not included in the 23-player central contract list, made an unbeaten 124 off 63 balls for Lucknow Super Giants here on Tuesday. However, Stoinis didn't read much into him missing the CA contract which was announced on March 28. "I've got a great relationship with the (Australia) coach (Andrew McDonald). Me not getting a contract, I knew that a while ago. "I think it is great to give younger kids a crack and let them take my spot. I'm absolutely fine with that on the contract list," Stoinis said after guiding LSG to a six-wicket

win over CSK. But the 34-year-old was firm in thoughts about his career with the national team. "But on the playing front, obviously, I want to make sure that I'm there and that's also why it's so lucky for us and for me particularly to have this competition (IPL), that's why I love it so much," he said. The Perth-born player was omitted from Australia's ODIs against the West Indies in January, but he is set to be part of the country's T20I World Cup campaign in the West Indies and the USA in June. Stoinis is most likely to be slotted into No. 5 in the Australian line-up during the marquee event. Stoinis is eligible for Australian selection for the tournament because his current contract for the 2023-24 season will run its course only on June 30. However, Stoinis was clear that he wanted to play for Australia in the white ball series against England (away) in September and against Pakistan at home in November.

Impact player rule: Entertaining cricket but takes all rounders out of game, says Voges

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Joining the raging debate around Impact Players in the IPL, Lucknow Super Giants consultant Adam Voges said he prefers something like the 'Power Surge' rule in the Australian Big Bash League where the batting team gets to decide a two-over phase of fielding restrictions. The Impact Player substitution rule, introduced last season, has been a heavy topic of debate this season with lot of players, including India captain Rohit Sharma calling it detrimental to the growth of all-rounders. Voges agreed and said while the rule makes for entertaining cricket, it hurts all-rounders. "The scores have been going up, and the teams have got genuine batters coming in at number seven or eight, while the batters have gone hard right from the start," the Australian said after the six-wicket win over Chennai Super Kings here on Tuesday night. "Certainly makes for entertaining cricket, but it takes the all-rounders out of the game for a little bit and

their effectiveness. The all-rounder always balances the side and perhaps it is not as important with the Impact Sub," he explained. Asked if the rule is comparable to Power Surge in Australia's Big Bash League, Voges said the latter adds to the contest, and he is a fan of it. Unlike the IPL, which has a six-over power play at the start of the innings, the BBL features a four-over power play. Power Surge is then a two-over phase of only two fielders outside the circle, sought by the batting team at any point following the 11th over of its innings. "I like the Power Surge back at home. It just adds another element to the game. "While chasing, you never feel like you are out of the game. But we have also seen multiple wickets fall during that period," he said. **STOINIS GRABBED CHANCE WITH BOTH HANDS:** Marcus Stoinis' unbeaten 124 ensured that Lucknow Super Giants pulled off a double over defending champion



Chennai Super Kings in the ongoing edition. Stoinis, who has been promising with the bat, was promoted to number three in this clash. Voges said the decision was easy given his successful outing as a top-order batter for Melbourne Stars in the Big Bash League.

"In the first half of the tournament, the number three batting position is something that did not work for us. We gave Marcus the opportunity since he has performed well in the top order in Big Bash," he told reporters here. "He has certainly made the most of it.

He has been hitting the ball well the whole tournament and has always been threatening." LSG's victory was heavily aided by the dew settling in at Chepauk on Tuesday, and Voges felt it was a good toss to win. "At the halfway stage, we could feel the dew on the outfield, and it played a part in the back end of the game. In the end, it was a good toss to win," he added. Voges lauded the hosts for keeping his team under pressure until the final over. "It was a tremendous game of cricket. The batting from both sides was outstanding," he continued. "CSK did put us under pressure with the ball, but it was our best night execution-wise. We needed someone to stand up, and Stoinis played an outstanding innings," he said. The CSK batters did a great job by setting a challenging total of 210 for four, thanks to skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad's unbeaten 108, which was also aided by a 27-ball 66 from the in-form Shivam Dube.

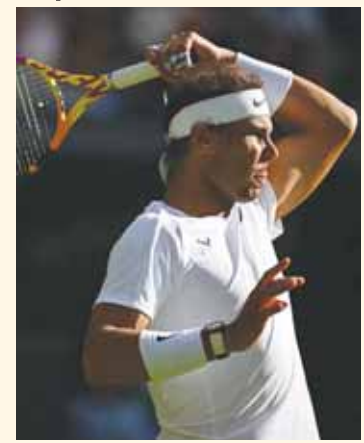
OTHER SPORTS

Nadal says he is not 100 per cent fit ahead of Madrid debut

AP ■ MADRID

Rafael Nadal will play in the RMadrid Open despite not being fully fit and didn't seem too optimistic about his chances of being ready for the French Open later this month. Nadal said Wednesday he would not play in Paris if he arrives there feeling the same way that he is feeling ahead of his debut in Madrid this week. "The sensations haven't been perfect this week. If it wasn't Madrid, maybe I wouldn't play. But there are a lot of emotions involved," Nadal said. "I don't

know what's going to happen in the following three weeks. I'll keep fighting and doing the things that I think I need to do to play in Paris. And if it's possible, then it's possible. If not, then not. I'm not going to play in Paris the way I'm feeling today. It was Paris, I wouldn't be playing." The 37-year-old Nadal has said this is likely his farewell year on tour, and is hoping to be competitive one last time at Roland Garros, where he is a 14-time champion. The 22-time Grand Slam winner is a record five-time champion in Madrid, with his last title in the



Spanish capital coming in 2017. He is scheduled to debut on Thursday against 16-year-old American Darwin Blanch. "Hopefully I can play without many limitations," Nadal said. "Then we'll see what happens. If I play without limitations, even if I lose, that will be positive." Nadal, who had hip surgery last summer, lost to Alex de Minaur in the second round in Barcelona in what was his first tournament in more than three months. "The goal is be on court. Enjoy as long as possible," he said. "I mean, that's the thing. Try to finish the tournament alive in terms of body

issues, and enjoy the fact that I will be able to compete one more time in the professional tour and here at home in Madrid, a place that give me everything, no, in terms of support." He said he is giving himself "a chance" and hopes to "find better feelings" in his body going forward. "I don't lose hope. I just accept the situation that I have today," he said. "I mean, I am not playing bad. It's about more body limitations." He said the "body feelings are not enough good to feel myself playing with free enough in terms of body issues.

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Chennai Super Kings are not looking for a "quick fix" to their issues in the batting department and head coach Stephen Fleming is ready to give the likes of Daryl Mitchell time to get settled in top-three after their fourth loss in eight games. CSK have been juggling batters in the top three through the season. On Tuesday against Lucknow Super Giants, Ajinkya Rahane and Ruturaj Gaikwad came to open while Mitchell was promoted to number three from five. In the previous game, Gaikwad pushed himself down to number three to accommodate Rahane and Rachin Ravindra. Following their dramatic loss to LSG at home, Fleming said they need to get their batting combinations right. "It's a mixture of trying to find that (combination) and also form. We're a little bit

Trying to find batting combination that does well for us at back end of IPL: Fleming

uncomfortable with some areas, so we're trying to find not a quick fix, but the right combination where players are going to contribute for the back end of this tournament," said Fleming after first loss of the season at home. Mitchell, who was bought for Rs 14 crore at the auction, has totalled 146 runs in seven innings. Fleming insisted that number three is the ideal spot for the fellow New Zealander. "There's a lot of pressure, obviously. Getting up the order is more comfortable for him. Me putting him down the order in the hitting role wasn't his best position. "So, we've looked to rectify that and get him up the order

where he has had his best performances internationally. That might take a little time, but the top three need to contribute the majority of runs. "Ruturaj did that today, so hopefully, he can continue his form, and the others can pick that up... We're not firing on all cylinders by any means, but we're in each game asking teams to play well to beat us. We just got to get a little bit better," he said referring to skipper's unbeaten hundred in a losing cause. While Mitchell's promotion did not yield the desired result, LSG sending Marcus Stoinis to number three proved to be a game changer as he singlehandedly pulled off a



memorable win for his team with an unbeaten 124 off 63 balls. Fleming, who has worked alongside the Aussie all-rounder in the Big Bash League for Melbourne Stars, recalled how impactful he had been at the top, especially as an opener. "He's got power, but he's also got good batsmanship. For Stars, we got him to open the batting, and he was quite prolific," he remembered. "Today, we saw the quality of his work. His 50 came up in about mid-20 balls (26), and then he just controlled the innings. "What more could you ask from your top three? They needed someone to answer for

what Ruturaj did, and Stoinis did that beautifully." **BEEN LUCKY TO EXPERIENCE DHONI MANIA FOR PAST 16-17 YEARS:** Though it has been close to four years since the great M S Dhoni retired from international cricket, the unconditional love he gets from his legion of fans remain undiminished. The World Cup winning captain is batting like the Dhoni of old this season, finding sixes and fours at will. Fleming considers himself among the lucky ones to witness fans' unparalleled admiration for Dhoni across venues. "It's an experience you like to have in the stadium every time

he plays. It's been lucky for me to have this magical experience for 16-17 years. "The love for him throughout the world is a testimony to the way he has played the game. People talk about MS as a person, but he is also a great player, and he has done some great things for India and Chennai (Super Kings). "People take time to appreciate it, and we do that every day. We are lucky to have him in our side for so long. So, it's not lost on us, and we enjoy every moment." The CSK-LSG clash witnessed a huge amount of dew coming and Fleming and his team had anticipated it. "(Apart from Gaikwad) We saw another great hundred from Marcus Stoinis, and they (GT) answered pretty well. It was a good game of cricket, and we felt we played well given the conditions in the backend, but we did some little things wrong under pressure."