



CITY 3 BJP'S SANKALP PATRA IS MODI'S GUARANTEE: YOGI

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Delhi Government's Vigilance Department exposes Kejriwal

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Close on the heels of multi-crore excise and Delhi Jal Board scandal, Arvind Kejriwal's AAP-led Delhi Government's Vigilance Department has found gross irregularities in procurement of certain medical items purchased to favour 'a few individuals' and 'companies' which ultimately favoured the companies, causing huge loss to the Government's exchequer during the Covid pandemic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Kerala under shackles of drug mafia: Modi

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

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

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

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

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Boost for Indian agriculture as IMD predicts above normal monsoon

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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Iran to allow Indian officials to meet seized cargo vessel crew

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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Registration for Amarnath yatra begins

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

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

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

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With the 'mystery' and 'controversy' over the Electoral Bonds yet to settle, the flow of 'unaccounted' money of about ₹5,000 crore by the Election Commission in the last one and a half months has raised eyebrows. In a move to crackdown on black money in form of cash, liquor, drugs, precious metals and freebies supply ahead of the first phase of polling for the 102 Lok Sabha seats on April 19, the poll watchdog has seized ₹4658.167 crore since March 1. So on an average the poll watchdog has seized ₹100 crore per day. What is more concerning is the seizure of drugs worth ₹2,069 crore during this period. Out of the total recoveries worth ₹4,658 crore, freebies and other items stand at over ₹1,142.49 crore, the cash component stands at over ₹395.39 crore, while liquor stands at more than ₹489.31 crore. Significantly, 45 per cent of the seizures are of drugs (₹2,069

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



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

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

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

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

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

Retired Health dept employee's death shrouded in mystery

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A 70-year-old retired employee of the Health department died under mysterious circumstances at her son-in-law's house in Para police station area on Monday. Police said the woman died of age-related reason and started an investigation on this line. The family suspected foul play saying the woman had given threat of being murdered by one of her relatives a couple of days back.

Reports said the woman identified as Meena Singh of New Srinagar Colony under Manaka Nagar police station area was presently staying at the house of her son-in-law Vinay Singh of Para.

Police said she developed health-related complications in the night on Sunday and was brought to Lok Bandhu Hospital around 1.53 am on Monday. Upon examination, the doctors pronounced her dead. Sources said the 70-year-old woman was found lying on the floor. She was found dead when her son-in-law and her daughter reached their home on Sunday night.

Vinay Singh informed the police and also took her to Lok Bandhu Hospital where she was declared dead.

It is alleged that Meena was murdered by her kin who had threatened to kill her for property a day ago. However, police denied the allegation, saying they would

Police clueless after recovery of body from vacant plot

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Police are yet to conclude the case in which a man's body was found buried under a heap of soil in a vacant plot behind an automobile showroom in Chinhat on Sunday. The deceased, identified as Ram Naresh (25) of Balrampur district, had left his house for New Delhi in search of a job and later went missing. His family, when contacted by the police, stated they had no idea how Ram Naresh reached Lucknow. The incident came to light when some labourers, who were levelling the heap of soil dumped at the plot to elevate its level from the road, spotted his head under the soil and fled the scene, crying and halting their work. Initial investigations revealed that a contractor was assigned the task to dump soil at the vacant plot recently, and he was getting the work done after land excavation in a village near the crime scene.

The police are puzzled about how Ram Naresh got buried under the heap of soil or under the land at the vacant plot. "There is a possibility that

someone killed him and then buried him under the plot before covering the area to hide the crime. Another possibility is that he was working at the land mining site and died there, with his body being hidden by colleagues in the soil being brought in a dumper to fill the vacant plot and elevate its level," sources said. They added that if the victim died during the loading of soil from its mining place, the fellow labourers would be aware. "If Ram Naresh was killed and buried at the vacant plot before the heaping of soil there, the culprit is someone else," they added. The police had identified the body based on an Aadhaar card found on him during frisking.

Meanwhile, a woman was electrocuted to death at her house in Bijnor police station area on Monday morning. Sumita Verma of Bijnor suffered a fatal electric shock immediately after touching the iron doors of the bathroom while going to take a bath around 6 am on Monday. It was reported by the family that current had leaked into the iron door of the bathroom, causing the woman to suffer the

fatal shock. "The current leaked from the connection point of a bulb in the bathroom when Sumita switched on the light before entering. She cried out when she suffered the shock and then became silent. Her family members rushed to the scene upon hearing her screams and found her lying on the floor in the room. They rushed her to Lok Bandhu Hospital where doctors pronounced her dead. The family reached the hospital around 6:53 am, and the woman was dead upon arrival," stated the hospital administration. Police sent the body for autopsy.

THEFT

Thieves made off with cash and ornaments from a locked house in Vikas Nagar on the day of Eid. Reports said house owner Khurram Mehdi, along with his family, left for their native house in Sitapur to celebrate Eid. When he returned on Sunday, he found the doors of the staircase ajar. When he entered the house, he found cash and ornaments missing. A case was registered on the basis of his complaint.

investigate the matter first. "The body has been sent for autopsy and only after the

PM report the exact cause of death will be ascertained," the police said, adding there

was no major injury mark on the woman's body, but a small mark was seen on the neck.

Above-normal rainfall likely in UP this year

Lucknow (PNS): Uttar Pradesh is expected to experience above-normal monsoon rainfall this year, according to the forecast from the Indian Meteorological department. Senior scientist Mohammed Danish noted that the western part of UP is likely to receive more rainfall compared to the eastern part.

Last year, Uttar Pradesh received 83 per cent rainfall, and this year is expected to surpass that. The western part of the state received more rainfall last year due to the effect of the Biparjoy cyclone. The forecast for the 2024 southwest monsoon season (June to September) across the country suggests above-normal rainfall. Danish explained three reasons for the expected increase in rainfall this year. First, moderate El Niño conditions prevailing over the equatorial Pacific region are expected to weaken to neutral ENSO conditions early in the monsoon season, with the likelihood of La Niña conditions developing later, leading to better rainfall. Second, neutral Indian Ocean Dipole conditions are currently prevailing, with the forecast indicating the development of positive IOD conditions later in the southwest monsoon season, contributing to good rains.

Third, below-normal snow cover extent in the northern hemisphere during the last three months (January to March) is inversely related to subsequent Indian summer monsoon rainfall, further indicating favorable conditions.

BJP dividing society in name of religion, caste: Mayawati

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati on Monday launched a major attack on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. She said that for the past few years, the country was being divided in the name of religion and caste by harassing Muslims in the guise of Hindutva. Speaking at the jam-packed Ramlaa ground in Moradabad's Linepar, Mayawati said that the magnitude of unemployment in the country due to the wrong policies of the Congress and the BJP was not hidden from anyone and that was why the educated unemployed youth were frustrated and disappointed and the agitating farmers were forced to take to the streets. Today the middle class is troubled, she added. The quota of reservation for Dalits, backward, tribals and other classes in government jobs, which has been incomplete for the past few years, has not been completed, she pointed out.

She said that during the BSP government in UP, the ban on government jobs for the general category was removed and employment opportunities were given to the entire society. She said the backlog posts of reservation were filled by running a special campaign, which benefited lakhs of families. She also highlighted the works done and schemes made in the name of Dr Ambedkar during the BSP government. Attacking BJP and Congress, Mayawati claimed that the people of the country had lost faith in all these parties and alliances.

She said the BSP was contesting the elections alone, and if the party formed the government at the Centre, it would do works as it did in Uttar Pradesh. "Alliances formed in the greed

for power can never work for the welfare of the people, so in the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP, the Congress and their allies have to be stopped from coming to power. The time has come to remove the BJP government from power," she said. Mayawati said that the BSP was standing alone in the election field to protect the rights of the entire society. "The public is fed up with the wrong policies of the Congress and the BJP," she added.

She said that the BJP was a party of capitalists and rich people, and it was working to protect the capitalists like the Congress. She said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi only made hollow promises. "The people of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh are going from village to village and misleading the poor in the name of giving free food grains, whereas the free food grains come from the money of taxes collected from you and us," she pointed out.

Accusing Congress and BJP of protecting capitalists, she said that the public should not be misled by any of their guarantees. "BJP wants to come to power at any cost by adopting all means through media opinion polls and surveys. There is a need to be cautious of them," she said. Mayawati alleged that the present government at the Centre, which was anti-poor, Dalit, anti-tribal and anti-farmer, was working at the behest of capitalists and corporate houses. "BJP's manifesto is nothing more than a paper guarantee. Like Congress, BJP has also politicised all the government investigation agencies of the Centre," she said.

The BSP supremo said that today the country was being divided in the name of religion and caste by implementing

narrow, communal, anti-national policies, which was a matter of serious concern.

"In the part of the country where the BJP is in power, the people there are troubled due to its wrong policies," she said. On the release of BJP's Sankalp Patra, she said that instead of releasing an election manifesto, her party believed in working in the interest of the people. "Without any manifesto, the BSP government has been formed four times in Uttar Pradesh," she added. She said that like in Uttar Pradesh, if the BSP formed a government at the centre, it would work to provide livelihood to the people instead of giving unemployment allowance and work for the whole society without discriminating on the basis of caste and religion.

She said that in the Lok Sabha elections, the right to vote should be exercised keeping in mind the important issues of the country and public interest, so that a Bahujan-friendly government with correct constitutional thinking can be formed in the country. "This will be a true tribute to Dr Ambedkar," she said.

"How is the real development of the country and good days of the people possible without removing poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, helplessness and pain of crores of poor, labourers, deprived, exploited people. Till when will BJP keep praising itself," she said. When Mayawati reached Moradabad after seven years, a huge crowd gathered at the public meeting venue to listen to her. Party's west Uttar Pradesh in-charge Shamsuddin Raini, former MLA Harpal Singh, divisional coordinator Ranvijay Singh, Moradabad candidate Irfan Saifi, Sambhal and others were present on the stage.

Increased demand: UPPTCL gears up to upgrade power transmission

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

To cope with the burgeoning electricity demand, the Uttar Pradesh Power Transmission Corporation Ltd (UPPTCL) has geared up to upgrade power transmission network across the state. The power demand is expected to be close to 44,000 MW by 2028-29. The demand has been projected at 25,379 MW in April, 28,291 MW in May, 29,853 MW in June, 30,581 MW in July, 31,585 MW in August, and 31,917 MW in September. As per the UPPTCL estimates, the state is likely to witness the highest demand in September. The state has been recording the highest demand in August-September for the last few years. The highest peak demand projected for 2024-25 is around 4,000 MW, which is more than that (28,284 MB) this year so far. The demand is expected to come down to 24,299 MW in October, 19,413 MW in

November, and 22,277 MW in December. The peak demand in January, February and March 2025 has been projected at 23,686 MW, 20,686 MW and 21,956 MW, respectively. The Uttar Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission (UPERC) has granted approval to the UPPTCL's five-year plan seeking to augment the transmission capacity in the state from the financial year 2024-25 to 2028-29. With a view to handling the upcoming transmission demand and generation, the utility had submitted a plan to the UPERC, seeking addition of 102 new primary sub-stations with 66,490 MVA transformation capacity and laying of 7,529 km of transmission lines during 2024-25 and 2028-29. The regulator, in its order on March 3, had asked the UPPTCL to ensure compliance of work plan/timelines submitted for relieving the overload of transmission lines, transformers, sub-stations of 220 kv and above by May 31.

It may be pointed out any power produced at power plants is evacuated through the transmission network before the same reached the distribution network and from there to consumer end. Quite often people face load shedding because of the inadequacy of the transmission infrastructure to carry electricity up to the distribution chain. The regulator directed the petitioner to submit the list of 132 transformers and lines having reached 75% and more loading on July 24, 2023 at 21.33 hours (when the peak demand was recorded to the highest that year) within 15 days from the date of issuance of this order along with work plan/timelines for relieving the same. The petitioner was also asked to submit the discom-wise list of 33 kv sub stations which are not yet connected with the distribution system. "A total addition of 4,831 reactors planned to be installed at 765 kv and 400 kv voltage lev-

els from 2024-25-2028-29 as submitted by the petitioner shall be an integral part of STU's transmission plan," ruled the regulator. It said that the petitioner shall in future include in the transmission plan the demand estimation for requirement of reactive power for five-period period along with STU's work plan/timeline for meeting the same and ensure availability of adequate land for expansion of the network in future. While giving approval to the plan, the commission considered its own projections about the future demand in the state instead of going by the Central Electricity Authority's (CEA) forecast which, it said, was on lower side and less practical as seen last year. The UPERC has projected the peak power demand in UP to be 31,590 MW in 2024-25, 34,434 MW in 2025-26, 37,533 MW in 2026-27, 40,535 MW in 2027-28 and 43,778 MW in 2028-29.

CLASSIFIEDS

My Original Deed No 16859 Dt 29.09.2012 of My Property No 3/190 Vivek khand Gomti Nagar Lucknow has lost somewhere. Aditya Khanna

आवश्यकता है

आवश्यकता है (प्राचार्य एवं सहो आचार्य की) उच्च प्रताप सिंह महाविद्यालय अवलकासिमपुर, जी०डी० रोड बाईपास, फतेहपुर, उ०प्र० में व्यक्तिगत/डाक से भेजें। मो०- 7457917619, 7457917620, 7457917621 प्राचार्य/सचिव

आवश्यकता है

आवश्यकता है (प्राचार्य एवं सहो आचार्य की) उच्चल सिंह महाविद्यालय बहादुरपुर खाना, फतेहपुर सम्बद्ध प्रो० राजेन्द्र सिंह (रन्जु भय्या) विद्यापीठालय, प्रयागराज उ०प्र० स्नातक स्तर पर कला संकाय में हिन्दी साहित्य, अंग्रेजी साहित्य, भूगोल, गृह विज्ञान, इतिहास, राजनीति विज्ञान, समाजशास्त्र, अर्थशास्त्र, शिक्षाशास्त्र व संस्कृत विषयों में, स्नातक स्तर पर विज्ञान संकाय में रसायन विज्ञान, जनु विज्ञान, वनस्पति विज्ञान, भौतिक विज्ञान एवं गणित विषयों में एवं स्नातक स्तर पर वाणिज्य संकाय (बी०कॉम)। परस्नातक स्तर पर कला संकाय में हिन्दी, भूगोल एवं गृह विज्ञान। वाणिज्य संकाय के अन्तर्गत एम०कॉम तथा परस्नातक स्तर पर विज्ञान संकाय के अन्तर्गत-भौतिक विज्ञान, रसायन विज्ञान, जनु विज्ञान, वनस्पति विज्ञान एवं गणित। पद प्राचार्य एक पद व सहो आचार्य स्नातक स्तर पर सभी विषयों में एक-एक पद, परस्नातक स्तर पर सभी विषयों में दो-दो पद। योग्यता सहो आचार्य के लिए संबंधित विषयों में स्नातक 50 प्रतिशत, परस्नातक स्तर पर 55 प्रतिशत एवं नेट/स्टेट/डी०एच/पी०एच/डी०। सेवानिवृत्त प्राध्यापकों को वरीयता। प्राचार्य उपयुक्त योग्यता के साथ-साथ पन्द्रह वर्ष का अनुभव। वेतनमान प्राचार्य 30000/- प्रति माह, सहो आचार्य 25000/- प्रति माह। नोट: आवेदन पत्र 5 फोटो एवं सलनको की छायाप्रति विज्ञान तिथि के 21 दिनों के अन्दर उच्च प्रताप सिंह महाविद्यालय अवलकासिमपुर, जी०डी० रोड बाईपास, फतेहपुर, उ०प्र० में व्यक्तिगत/डाक से भेजें। मो०- 7457917614, 7457917613 प्राचार्य/सचिव

CLASSIFIEDS

सूचना

मेरे भूखण्ड संख्या 306 एमरालड गुल्लिस्तान स्थिति भूखण्ड संख्या-02 योजना 39 जाबमऊ कानपुर नगर का मूल कब्जा पत्र दिनांक 25/02/2022 वास्तव में फिर यथा है जिसका प्रयोग अविध होना दित कुशन वेमप पत्नी इंदरीयुल खान नि० 39/65 मेरा बाजार मेस्टन रोड कानपुर नगर

सूचना

मेरा नाम कुछ प्रज्ञो मे वुडिश्न RISHABH MISHRA है। अतः आज से मेने अपना नाम RISHABH MISHRA S/O RAHUL MISHRA कर लिया है। भविष्य में अब मुझे उसी नाम RISHABH MISHRA S/O RAHUL MISHRA से जाना व पहचाना जावे।

NOTICE

I HAVE CHANGED MY NAME FROM SATINDAR SINGH BHATTIA TO SATINDAR SINGH. SATINDAR SINGH S/O WARIYAM SINGH R/O H.NO.98 IBRAHIM GANI, CHHIBRAMAU, KANNAUJ

NOTICE

Original Lease Deed Dated - 21-07-1981 (No-601) of my Property No-127/W/840, Keshav Nagar, Kanpur situated on Plot No-840, Block-W, Scheme-II, Juhli Kalan, Kanpur has been lost some where. Any use of the same shall be illegal. Narendra Kumar Shukla S/O - Late Shyam Lal Shukla R/O- 127/840, W-Block, Keshav Nagar, Kanpur.

Ram Lalla's darshan hours extended on Ram Navami

Ayodhya (PNS): In a move to accommodate the surge of devotees expected to visit the Ram Lalla temple on the auspicious occasion of Ram Navami, extended darshan hours till 11 pm have been announced.

Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust general secretary Champat Rai shared details of the arrangements aimed at ensuring a seamless experience for pilgrims.

The festivities will commence at 3:30 am in the Brahma Muhurta with Mangala aarti, followed by abhishek, shringar, and darshan conducted simultaneously. Shringar aarti is scheduled for 5:00 am, after which devotees can partake in darshan and witness various worship rituals. Brief intervals will be observed for offerings to the deity throughout the day. The darshan sequence will continue uninterrupted until 11 pm, followed by bhog and Shayan aarti, subject to prevailing circumstances. Following the Shrayan aarti, prasad will be distributed at the temple exit, marking the conclusion of the day's festivities. During the period from April 16 to 19, passes for various darshan timings, including Sugam darshan, VIP darshan, Mangala aarti, Shringar aarti and Shayan aarti will not be issued.

Over 350 city hotels operating sans proper fire-fighting equipment

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

More than 350 hotels across the city are operating without proper fire-fighting equipment, especially in Charbagh, the old parts of the city, Aliganj, Indira Nagar, and other areas. There is a significant risk of a major fire breaking out, potentially claiming lives and injuring many people if the Lucknow Development Authority fails to take necessary action against hoteliers. An intensive exercise was initiated in 2018 by the then vice-chairman PN Singh, following a major fire incident at a hotel in the Charbagh area, which resulted in the loss of seven lives and injuries to a dozen others. However, the survey was halted midway following his transfer.

The current VC, Indramani Tripathi, announced that a renewed effort would be launched to assess the number of such hotels and guesthouses, as the previous survey was conducted six years ago. He assured that the exercise would commence within a fortnight. A fire broke out at a hotel in Charbagh on Sunday, but fortunately, there were no casualties reported as the guests were safely rescued. However, the hotel owner failed to pro-

duce the no-objection certificate issued by LDA personnel. The VC emphasised that fire-fighting devices on premises are essential for the safety of guests and to protect property. He stated that installation should not pose a problem if they are in place. Chief Engineer AK Singh will be tasked with forming a team under the VC's directive to conduct the survey. Strict action will be taken against hoteliers who fail to comply with regulations. The VC clarified that large hotels of international repute will not be exempt from scrutiny and must obtain a new no-objection certificate (NOC) like other establishments. He outlined a phased approach for the proposed drive: first, identifying establishments without fire-fighting equipment over a two-week period, second, issuing notices to defaulting hoteliers, and third, taking strict action. The VC acknowledged that the number of establishments operating without fire-fighting equipment is likely to increase. The exercise will be conducted with the assistance of the fire service and will be stringent, result-oriented, and implemented in phases to ensure compliance with safety standards.

PCS officer's body found hanging

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

An officer of the Provincial Civil Services (PCS) cadre committed suicide. His body was found hanging from the ceiling of his house in Budhanpur under Atraulia police station in Azamgarh district on Sunday night. Reports said that Alok Kumar Singh (43), a PCS officer of 2003 batch, was currently posted as SDM in Ghazipur district and was looking after the work of Ghazipur Nagar Palika in-charge executive officer. He was on leave for about 15 days and had visited his home in Azamgarh. Alok Kumar's wife had died a year ago and since then he was suffering from depression. Alok Kumar was alone at home on Sunday night when he hanged himself to death in the house. He leaves behind two daughters who are studying outside. Meanwhile, two children died after being hit by a train while trying to retrieve a kite stuck on a railway pole in Bareilly.

The incident happened on Sunday evening when Faiz (12) and Sajid (8) were trying to get hold of a kite stuck on a railway pole between Maheshpur Atria, within the CB Ganj police station area, and Milak Rotha village, under the Qila police station area. Both the children died on the spot.

3 COPS SUSPENDED

Three constables deployed at Jahangir Ganj police station in Ambedkar Nagar were suspended after they were accused of assaulting four people in separate incidents and extorting money from them. In the first case, three youths filed a complaint with the Ambedkar Nagar's superintendent of police, alleging that the constables beat them, confined them in a house, and extorted Rs 80,000 from them. In the second complaint, another person alleged that he was detained at a police outpost, beaten up, and forced to pay Rs 30,000. Ambedkar Nagar's Superintendent of Police Kaustubh suspended the three constables -- Saurabh Jatav, Navneet Rana, and Pervaz. He has also initiated an investigation by forming a Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by an ASP-rank officer.

2 KILLED AS ROOF OF UNDER-CONSTRUCTION HOUSE COLLAPSES

Two labourers were killed and 17 injured as the roof of an under-construction house collapsed in Muzaffarnagar, police said on Monday. The incident took place in Talda village on Sunday, when the labourers were working at the site, they added. While two labourers were declared dead, 17 were admitted to a hospital where the condition of one of them is stated to be critical. Additional Director General of Police D K Thakur told reporters that the deceased were identified as Mohit (30) and Piyush (28). "Preliminary investigation suggests that even after the disputes between the accused parties were amicably resolved, the constables demanded money in both cases," the officer said.

The Green India Assurance Company Ltd. (RO : 'NEW ENFORCE' 15/60, CIVIL LINES, KANPUR) Benajhabar M.B.O. (420101), 112/1, Benajhabar, Kanpur-208002 NOTICE TO POLICY HOLDERS This is to inform all policy holders that our Shivrajpur Office (420107) will not be in operation after 60 days of publication of this notice due to unavoidable reasons. Any information related to the policy issued from this Office will be provided by the following Office:- M.B.O. (420101)112/1, Benajhabar, Kanpur-208002 Deputy General Manager, Regional Office, Kanpur

JM FINANCIAL Corporate identify Number: U67190MH2007PLC24287 Registered Office Address: 7th Floor, Cnergy, Appasaher Marathe Marg, Prabhadevi, Mumbai 400025 T: +91 22 6630 3030 F: +911 22 6630 3223, www.Jmfinancialarc.com DEMAND NOTICE Under Section 13(2) of the Securitisation And Reconstruction of Financial Assets And Enforcement Of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with Rule 3 (1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002. The Piramal Capital and Housing Finance Ltd have assigned a pool of Loan (including below mentioned Loans) together with underlying security interest created therefor along with all the rights, title and interest thereon under Section 5 (1) (b) of the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 ("SARFAESI ACT") vide an assignment agreement dated March 29, 2023 ("the Assignment Agreement") in favour of JMFARC (JM) (herein referred as Assignee). The undersigned is the Authorised Officer of (JM) assignee. Under Securitisation And Reconstruction Of Financial Assets And Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (the said Act). In exercise of powers conferred under Section 13(12) of the said Act read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, the Authorised Officer has issued Demand Notices under Section 13(2) of the said Act, calling upon the following Borrower(s) (the "said Borrower(s)"), to repay the amounts mentioned in the respective Demand Notice(s) issued to them that are also given below. In connection with above, Notice is hereby given, once again, to the said Borrower(s) to pay to JM, within 60 days from the publication of this Notice, the amounts indicated herein below, together with further interest as detailed in the said Demand Notice(s), from the date(s) mentioned below till the date of payment and/or realization, payable under the loan agreement read with other documents/writings, if any, executed by the said Borrower(s). As security for due repayment of the loan, with the following assets have been mortgaged to JM by the said Borrower(s) respectively.

Name of the Borrower(s)/ Guarantor(s)	Demand Notice Date and Amount with NPA date	Description of secured asset (immovable property)
(LC No. 06000005402 of Lucknow Branch) Deepak Rastogi (Borrower) Nirmla Rastogi (Co Borrower 1)	22-03-2024/ Rs. 11,58,576/- (Rs. Eleven lakh Fifty Eight Thousand Five Hundred Seventy Six Only) NPA (10-03-2024)	Plot No. 01 Over Kharsa No. 627 Gram Bhahtamau Ward Haiderganj Lucknow Lucknow Uttar Pradesh:- 226020
(LC No. 12000004539 of Varanasi Branch) Gaurav Jaiswal (Borrower) Gayatri Jaiswal (Co Borrower 1)	22-03-2024/ Rs. 16,00,527/- (Rs. Sixteen lakh Five Hundred Twenty Seven Only) NPA (10-03-2024)	Arazi No. 127 MI., Mauza Mahababpur, Pargana Raihpur, Chandauli Chandauli Uttar Pradesh:- 232101
(LC No. 29100001176 of Bareilly Branch) Prashant Kumar Bhardwaj (Borrower) Ashi Thapliyal (Co Borrower 1)	22-03-2024/ Rs. 24,35,207/- (Rs. Twenty Four lakh Thirty Five Thousand Two Hundred Seven Only) NPA (10-03-2024)	Plot No. 108/18, Kharsa No. 650,650/676 Bake Dhoreta Mafi, Mahanagar Bareilly Bareilly Uttar Pradesh:- 243001

If the said Borrowers shall fail to make payment to JM as aforesaid, JM shall proceed against the above secured assets under Section 13(4) of the Act and the applicable Rules, entirely at the risks of the said Borrowers as to the costs and consequences. The said Borrowers are prohibited under the Act from transferring the aforesaid assets, whether by way of sale, lease or otherwise without the prior written consent of JM. Any person who contravenes or abets contravention of the provisions of the said Act or Rules made there under, shall be liable for imprisonment and/or penalty as provided under the Act.

Date: 16-04-2024 Sd/- (Authorised Officer) JM Financial Asset Reconstruction Company Limited Place: Uttar Pradesh

Reject nepotism, caste politics: Yogi

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath launched a blistering attack on the Congress and Rashtriya Janata Dal during his public meetings in Aurangabad and Nawada of Bihar, appealing to people to follow Uttar Pradesh's lead in rejecting nepotism and caste-based politics.

Leading the inaugural Vijay Sankalp rally in the Aurangabad Lok Sabha constituency, Yogi remarked, "This dynastic pattern extends from Bihar to UP. The people of UP have voiced their stance; now it is Bihar's turn. Let's reject divisive caste politics."

The UP chief minister held a public meeting in Aurangabad in support of Bharatiya Janata Party candidate Sushil Kumar Singh, while in Nawada he addressed the Vijay Sankalp rally in favour of Vivek Thakur. Despite the scorching heat, a large number of people had gathered at both the events to see and hear him.

Taking a dig at Lalu Prasad Yadav, Yogi Adityanath said: "Ishwar Lalji ko swasth karein, vah aabadi badhayein aur BJP aawas banane ka karya karegi" (May God bless Lalji with good health and he contributes to increasing the population while the BJP will handle the housing construction). Yogi said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would build houses for three crore poor in the next five years. Yogi Adityanath remarked that with the removal of the Congress and RJD influence from Bihar, the momentum of development would surge.

Continuing his "Nation First versus Family First" diatribe against the opposition parties, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath



Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath at an election rally in Bihar on Monday

said that the Lok Sabha seats in Bihar were not enough to accommodate RJD supremo Lalu Prasad Yadav's own family. Urging people not to anticipate anything from the RJD, Yogi asserted, "It is a party centered around the family, where development, seats and benefits of schemes are all geared towards serving interests of a family, with no consideration for broader societal concerns."

He added: "We have succeeded in fortifying the National Democratic Alliance in Bihar, where previously, seats seemed

reserved solely for Laluji's family, encapsulating their dominance."

Underscoring the end of 500-year long wait with the consecration of Lord Ram's idol in the majestic temple in Ayodhya, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said that the event evoked excitement and enthusiasm both in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, expressing his appreciation for the gifts sent by the people of Bihar for the temple. He stated: "A symbiotic relationship exists between UP and Bihar, which will remain unchanged. We say, Sitaram,

prioritising Mother Sita's name before Shri Ram's, thereby fostering the 'Ek Bharat, Shrestha Bharat' campaign by strengthening the bond between the two states."

Yogi added: "When the people of Bihar were coming from different parts of the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, we ensured that the people from Mother Sita's maternal home were not discriminated against."

Addressing a public meeting in Nawada, Yogi Adityanath said that the funds released from Delhi now directly reach ben-

eficiaries' accounts. Highlighting developmental achievements, Chief Minister Yogi noted that under the Modi government's tenure, four crore impoverished individuals had received homes over the past decade whereas an additional three crore houses were planned to be constructed in the coming five years.

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath highlighted that Nawada is the revered 'karmabhumi' of the late Jayaprakash Narayan, who played a pivotal role in safeguarding the nation's democracy, and the esteemed land of former Chief Minister late Karpuri Thakur. He underscored Bihar's immense contributions to the nation, mentioning notable figures like Constitution Making Committee Chairman Rajendra Babu and former chief minister Krishna Babu who hail from the region.

He commented, "Congress and its allies consistently failed to honour Jayaprakash Narayan and Karpuri Thakur. However, Prime Minister Modi and the BJP demonstrated their respect for Bihar's people by bestowing Bharat Ratna upon Karpuri Thakur. Bihar is revered as the cradle of democracy, shaping the nation's history and imparting invaluable lessons in democracy."

Yogi Adityanath also pointed out that the gravest challenges to democracy include the criminalization of politics and the politicisation of criminals. He added that politics based on caste and family is a major impediment to the democratic process. He criticised RJD for engaging in extortion activities, asserting that such activities are not tolerated under the BJP-NDA government.

BJP's Sankalp Patra is Modi's guarantee: CM

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Emphasising that Bharatiya Janata Party will win 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, on Monday, coined a new slogan ahead of the Lok Sabha elections: '80 banega aadhar, NDA 400 paar, Phir ek bar Modi sarkar'.

Addressing the media in the party office, Yogi said: "The BJP's Sankalp Patra is Modi's guarantee. It reaffirms our dedication to building a developed India while also reinforcing our firm stance against corruption."

He added that the pillars of the BJP Sankalp Patra were the nation's impoverished, youth, farmers and women (Gareeb, Yuva, Annadata and Nari).

Addressing the media in the party office, the chief minister said, "This sankalp patra is Modi's guarantee. It reaffirms our dedication to building a developed India while also declaring a firm stance against corruption."

The chief minister highlighted that on the birth anniversary of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the BJP Sankalp Patra. "Its first four copies are to represent the four social pillars of the country: Gareeb (poor), Yuva (youth), Annadata (farmers), and Nari (women), collectively known as GYAN," he stated.

The chief minister emphasised that the BJP was more than just a political entity today, embodying aspirations of 140 crore people with commitment to realising India's vision on a mission mode. "The aspi-



rations of the nation today align with Prime Minister Modi's vision, which guides our mission. The country places its trust in Modi's Guarantee," he remarked.

Chief Minister Yogi said that the BJP's commitment to continuing and expanding the scope of all the poor welfare schemes, including free ration, Ayushman Bharat Yojana, Ujjwala Yojana, Awas Yojana. The Sankalp Patra also reiterates the party's resolve to achieve a developed and self-reliant India with the spirit of Nation First, he pointed out.

"This marks the inaugural election of the Azaadi Ka Amrit Kaal, where the focus lies on the ideals of a self-reliant and developed India. Modi's assurance concerning the nation's identity, security, faith, and

economy forms the cornerstone of this Sankalp Patra," he stated.

Yogi Adityanath emphasised that the BJP's Sankalp Patra serves as the blueprint for a 'Naya, Shreshth, Atma Nirbhar and Viksit Bharat' (new, great, self-reliant and developed India).

In addition to declaring a resolute war against corruption, it reaffirms the commitment to elevate India from Antyodaya to Sarvodaya and position it as a global leader, he added.

"The sectors that this manifesto represents are based on Modi's guarantees. This general election stands as evidence of nationwide confidence and trust in Modi ji's guarantees. This resolution letter will become the basis of the aspirations of a developed India," Chief Minister Yogi asserted.

Varun's absence casts a shadow on Pilibhit campaign discourse

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In the electoral battleground of Pilibhit, the conspicuous absence of two-time Member of Parliament Varun Gandhi from the fray has left a palpable void, yet his influence continues to cast a significant shadow over the campaign discourse. While Bharatiya Janata Party candidate Jitin Prasad refrains from direct references to Varun, opposition candidates assert that denial of ticket to him stems from his vocal advocacy for people's issues.

"Varun cannot be overlooked in this election. He and his mother, Maneka Gandhi, have wielded authority in this constituency for six terms. Varun is perceived as an honest person accessible to the people," states Maninder Singh, a local farmer.

Devendra, a resident of Bhangra Mohaddi village, reminisces about the influence of the Gandhis, noting their long-standing support for the BJP symbol.

However, with Varun's replacement by PWD Minister Jitin Prasad, the party's electoral strategy underwent a significant shift. Varun's previous victory with a margin of over

two lakh votes underscores the challenge faced by Prasad in stepping into his shoes. Aware of Varun's enduring influence, Prasad aligns himself closely with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, presenting himself as an emissary of the prime minister during his election campaign. "Your vote for me is a vote for Modi," he asserted during a rally in Mohaddi village.

Declaring his mission to promote development in Pilibhit on behalf of Modi, Prasad emphasises the need for continuity in the BJP's governance. "For the last decade, you have witnessed the transformative initiatives of the Modi government. It is time to entrust your faith in Modi once again," he urges voters.

Downplaying Varun's absence, Prasad emphasises party unity and highlights the numerous projects initiated by the BJP since 2014. "The party's decision to field me has unified leaders and workers in our pursuit of victory," he states.

However, for opposition candidates like Samajwadi Party's Bhagwat Saran Gangwar, Varun's exclusion becomes a rallying point against the BJP. "The denial of ticket to a leader who advocated for farmers

and unemployed youths reflects BJP's disregard for genuine issues," Gangwar asserts, tapping into public discontent. With the Gandhi family's absence, rival candidates see an opportunity to challenge the BJP's dominance.

"Maneka and Varun Gandhi have entrenched BJP's hold on Pilibhit. With their absence, the opposition senses a chance to reclaim the seat," observes Sripal Sharma, a local teacher. Meanwhile, Bahujan Samaj Party candidate Anis Ahmed Khan, known as Phul Babu, capitalises on the "local versus outsider" narrative, portraying BJP and SP candidates as outsiders who, he says, will abandon the constituency post-election. "I am here to stay," declares Khan, emphasising his local roots.

With a diverse electorate comprising Muslims, Lodhs, Kurmis, Sikhs, Dalits and upper castes, Pilibhit braces for a triangular contest between BJP, SP and BSP, promising an intense electoral battle for supremacy. As the campaign intensifies, the absence of Varun Gandhi reverberates through Pilibhit's political landscape, shaping the discourse and dynamics of the upcoming polls.

No big joint rally by INDIA for first phase polls in UP

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

With barely two days left for campaigning for the first phase of polls in Uttar Pradesh, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), a multi-party bloc of opposition parties, has failed to hold a Congress-Samajwadi Party joint rally.

Voting for the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections in UP will take place on April 19 in eight constituencies. But so far, no election rally or public meeting of any big opposition leader from other states, including Rahul Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge and other state leaders, has been scheduled in western Uttar Pradesh.

However, on the last day of campaigning on April 17, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is scheduled to hold a road show in Saharanpur in support of party candidate Imran Masood from Gol Kothi at 10 am. The Congress is contesting elections in UP in alliance with the INDIA bloc. However, in the first phase, the party is contesting only one seat in UP - Saharanpur. Despite all efforts, the party

has not been able to organise even a single rally or meeting of any big leader in the first phase.

The election campaign for the first phase has now reached its final stage. So far, no programme of a big leader has been organised in western Uttar Pradesh. What is more, no big leader of the party from other states has been able to come for campaigning in UP. Chairman of the party's media department, Dr CP Rai, said preparations were on for Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's road show in Saharanpur on April 16 or 17. He said it was expected that soon the central leadership would finalise Priyanka's programme and that of other leaders.

He said in the second phase, there would be meetings of many leaders, rallies and meetings with the leaders of the alliance. There may not be programmes of national leaders in western UP but the state Congress leaders have camped in the area, he added.

On the one hand, party's state in-charge Avinash Pandey is holding Lok Sabha-wide meetings and reviews. UPCC president Ajay Rai and Pramod

Tiwari are reaching out to the public whereas the programme of public relation meetings of Brijlal Khatri, Naseemuddin Siddiqui and others are also on the card. Along with campaigning at the grassroots level, the party has also intensified the campaign on social media. On Sunday, the party prepared and released videos of different leaders on the issues of women, youth and farmers. Party leaders say that every day five to ten videos on major issues will be made and released. It will be delivered through various mediums as well as at the booth level.

CONG FIELDS COUNCILOR MUKESH SINGH CHAUHAN IN LUCKNOW BYPOLL

The Congress on Monday announced corporator Mukesh Singh Chauhan as its candidate in the by-election to Lucknow East assembly seat. The bypoll was necessitated following the death of former minister and senior BJP leader Ashutosh Tandon. The polling will be held simultaneously with the Lok Sabha election on May 20.

ABUVM announces to support PM Modi in Lok Sabha polls

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Akhil Bhartiya Udyog Vyapar Mandal has thrown its weight behind Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. During a meeting of traders, ABUVM national president Sandeep Bansal urged the business community to unite behind the goal of securing a Modi-led government with a decisive majority

Bansal underscored the need for active participation in the democratic process, urging traders to embrace their role as pivotal stakeholders and to diligently prepare for the electoral challenge ahead. He exhorted members to spearhead concerted efforts in every district aimed at achieving an unprecedented 100 per cent voter turnout.

Drawing attention to recent milestones such as the abrogation of Article 370, the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, and the nation's robust economic strides, Bansal expressed unwavering

ABUVM national president urged the business community to unite behind the goal of securing a Modi-led government with a decisive majority

confidence in the transformative potential of Modi's governance.

He rallied members of the organisation to throw their collective weight behind candidates fielded by the Bharatiya Janata Party, thereby ensuring resounding victories in the impending Lok Sabha elections. The meeting steered by state senior general secretary Shobhit Tandon and distinguished organisation member Javed Bagh featured addresses from Ripan Kansal, Pradeep Agarwal, Atul Gupta, Anita Jaiswal, and Akash Gautam.

Jats still rule political roost in western UP

PRABHA SHANKER ■ LUCKNOW

Jats still rule the political roost in western Uttar Pradesh. There was a time when the Jats voted en bloc to elect their leader from their community.

Among the Lok Sabha constituencies of west UP, Baghpat has remained deeply connected with Chaudhary Charan Singh and his family. But the family members also lost their political battle when the Jats became unhappy with them. Chaudhary Charan Singh's signature, in the form of gates of link road in his name, link roads in his name, is visible everywhere in Baghpat. But this is not an endorsement ticket for the victory of a candidate supported by the Chaudhary family, the voters say. And the reason is that only the Jats know who they will vote to win.

This time Rashtriya Lok Dal chief Jayant Chaudhary has fielded his long trusted lieutenant Raj Kumar Sangwan, who has been associated with the party for several decades and is seen as a hard core cadre leader. RLD's arch rival Samajwadi Party has fielded former MLA from Sahibabad,

Amarpal Sharma, a Brahmin, while Bahujan Samaj Party has fielded a Gujjar candidate, Praveen Bainsla, from Baghpat. So the division of votes is sure. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, there were 16.56 lakh voters in Baghpat and Bharatiya Janata Party candidate Satyapal Singh clinched victory by securing 5.25 lakh votes, defeating RLD chief Jayant Chaudhary who secured nearly 5.02 lakh votes. As per a rough estimate, the total voters consisted of four lakh Muslims, 3.5 lakh Jats, 1.25 lakh Gujjars, 1 lakh Kashyaps, 1.8 lakh Dalits, 1 lakh Rajputs and 1.5 lakh Brahmins.

Though numerically the Jats voters come at the second place in the constituency, their dominance is above all. No political party can afford their ire in west UP because their presence is high in almost every Lok Sabha constituency of the region. The recent decision of the National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre to honour late prime minister Chaudhary Charan Singh with Bharat Ratna is being looked at as a ploy to woo the Jats who have a lot of reverence for Chaudhary Charan Singh. Jats

feel that the political appeal of late Chaudhary Charan is unmatched till the date. The Bharatiya Janata Party has succeeded in its bid to win over the Jat community and bring the RLD chief into its fold.

The Jats, who are mostly in farming, have their dominance in Lok Sabha constituencies in west UP. They also have a good sway over the people of other communities and not only have work relations but they are involved in helping the people of other communities. The social fabric of the Jatland is such that one cannot escape the influence of Jats and their friendship.

The history of Jats also binds them together, making them a prominent group. They are considered a mighty group of people who used to help their supporters and those who they trust the most. Former prime minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, who was also the chief minister of UP, had formed Bhartiya Kranti Dal in late 1960s after deserting Congress when he felt being slighted in the grand old party and played Jat sentiment. Then voters, including the Jats, had taught a lesson to the Congress in the elections.

The foundation of Jat domination that Chaudhary Charan Singh had laid further was taken care of by his son Ajit Singh and is now being strengthened by RLD chief Jayant Chaudhary.

Until the Bharatiya Janata Party's roaring success in 2014 Lok Sabha elections in which the saffron party trounced RLD founder Ajit Singh and his son Jayant Chaudhary in Baghpat and Mathura, respectively, the RLD had a good sway over the voters, who were wooed by the BJP in due course of time. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, Ajit Singh and Jayant Chaudhary faced another defeat in Muzaffarnagar and Baghpat. Political analysts say in view of the Jat sentiment and its psyche, the BJP picked the leaders from among the Jats who were familiar with the Jat communities and who used to associate with khaps, and succeeded in getting strong support from the community after the Muzaffarnagar riots when the community fell out with the Muslims. The BJP created a vote base for itself among the Jats by honouring Jat leaders and warriors by opening a university named after Jat freedom fighter Raja Mahendra

Pratap Singh in Aligarh, invoking Gokul Singh, a 17th century Jat warrior who fought Mughal king Aurangzeb.

But at the same time, the rivals of the saffron party were playing the same cards to woo the Jats and this reduced the BJP's share in Jat vote bank. Previous elections show that the Jats voted en bloc for the BJP in 2019 Lok Sabha polls but deserted the party in the 2022 assembly election.

"The RLD's alliance with the NDA will surely help the BJP in saving its Jat vote bank while the RLD chief, who was not happy with 'big' ally SP and wanted to play a bigger role, will also benefit by joining hands with the BJP," said a leader of the RLD. The vote share of RLD increased in 2022 from what it had in 2017 assembly elections. It won eight assembly seats. Also, SP-backed RLD candidate Madan Baiyya had defeated BJP's Rajkumari Saini in Khatauli bypoll in December 2022 and the RLD strength reached to nine MLAs in UP assembly. RLD gained in the alliance with the SP as it succeeded in finding a toehold among the Muslim voters with the help of SP and its vote percentage increased.

Communal rhetoric intensifies

PNS ■ KAIRANA

As the first phase of polling in the Lok Sabha election approaches, western Uttar Pradesh, characterised by a significant Muslim population, is witnessing a troubling surge in communal rhetoric. Contentious issues have come to the forefront of campaigning, exposing the deep-seated communal fault lines in the region. Terms like 'exodus', 'curfew', 'fatwa' and 'riots' dominate the political discourse, setting a charged atmosphere for the upcoming polling in the eight Lok Sabha constituencies of western UP going to polls in the first phase.

"Uttar Pradesh is a hotbed of communal polarisation because it benefits all political parties. If the Bharatiya Janata Party gains from issues like fatwas and curfews, the Samajwadi Party and Congress mobilise Muslims by instilling fear of Hindu majoritarianism," remarks political analyst Rajesh N Bajpai, reflecting on the complex dynamics at play. Communal politics has historically dominated western Uttar Pradesh. This history includes events like the exodus claim made by BJP leader Hukum Singh in 2016-17 and

the handling of the Muzaffarnagar riots by the then ruling SP. "The embers of that riot still singe, and exodus and Muzaffarnagar riots are still part of the political discourse," Bajpai noted.

The BJP has strategically focused on issues such as the alleged Hindu exodus, communal disturbances leading to prolonged curfews, disruptions to religious pilgrimages like the kanwar yatra, issuance of fatwas and obstacles to the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. This approach appears tailored to mobilise Hindu voters in their favour.

Meanwhile, Congress candidate Imran Masood, previously embroiled in controversy for remarks against then-prime minister Narendra Modi in 2014, has been observed publicly visiting temples and engaging in Hindu rituals, signalling a shift in strategy. During a rally in Deoband, an important Islamic centre in Saharanpur, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath alleged that chaos and religious extremism were propagated through fatwas from Deoband, condemning previous governments for fostering religious fanaticism in the seminary. Yogi Adityanath also accused the

Congress and Samajwadi Party of capitulating to mafia elements, highlighting his government's decisive action against them, with individuals like Atiq Ahmad, his brother Ashraf, and Mukhtar Ansari facing consequences.

Addressing a rally in Muzaffarnagar, Union Home Minister Amit Shah referred to the exodus of Hindus from Kairana and other areas before the BJP assumed power in UP in 2017, asserting that the current administration has restored law and order.

Similarly, PM Narendra Modi reiterated blame on the Congress and other opposition parties for obstructing the construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya, positioning the BJP as the champion of Hindu aspirations. Political analyst Manoj Bhadra emphasised the significance of development and law enforcement in favour of the BJP in western UP, noting a fear of polarisation within the Congress-SP alliance due to the increasing consolidation of Hindu voters. He observed a shift in rhetoric among leaders like Imran Masood towards advocating Hindu-Muslim harmony, potentially influenced by changing electoral dynamics.

Arun Singh: Modi's guarantee means fulfilment of promises

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Raja Sabha MP and national general secretary of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Arun Singh said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'guarantee' means guarantee of fulfilment of promises. Addressing a press conference at the BJP office in Gulab Bagh here on Monday, Singh said that the 'Sankalp Patra' (resolution letter) of the party is of 76 pages. "The manifesto committee had received about 15 lakh suggestions, out of which four lakh have been received from Namu App and 10 lakh from video," he said.

According to him, the 'Sankalp Patra' is divided into 24 groups. The 10 social groups include poor, youth, middle class, fishermen, deprived class, senior citizens, backward and weaker sections while governance is divided into 14 sectors. These include India's relations with other countries, internal and external security, prosperous India, ease of living, development of heritage, good governance, healthy India, education, sports, development of all sectors, innovation and technology and environment.

Singh said the entire country has accepted that Modi's guarantee means the guarantee will be fulfilled. "Whatever BJP says, it always fulfils it and the 'Sankalp' presented under the leadership of the PM is going to take a big leap towards developed India. Today the people of the country believe that if Modi's guarantee is there



BJP general secretary Arun Singh addressing a press conference in Varanasi on Monday.

then it will be fulfilled," he said, adding that the PM had dedicated the absolute majority he got in 2014 and 2019 to the farmers, poor, deprived, Dalits, women and youth. "Every particle of his body and every moment of his life is dedicated to the development of the nation and the welfare of the poor," he said. Singh said the 'Sankalp Patra' of BJP is synonymous with the ideological foundations shared by Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in 1952 and carried forward by Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya as party's manifesto provides a comprehensive overview of the achievements of the NDA government and presents a vision of building a Viksit Bharat (developed India) by 2047. "This 'Sankalp Patra' empowers all the four strong pillars of developed India, youth, women, farmers and the poor. Our focus is on dignity of life, quality of life and jobs through investment," Singh said, adding that in this manifesto, a lot of emphasis has been laid on

both quantity of opportunities and quality of opportunities.

According to him, Modi's guarantee is that the scheme of free ration to 80 crore people will continue for the next five years. "Now BJP has resolved that every elderly person above 70 years of age will be brought under the ambit of Ayushman Yojana whether he is poor or middle class or upper middle class, will be included in the scheme. Free treatment facility up to Rs 5 lakh will be available. This is the spirit of 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas' and this is also the soul of BJP's 'Sankalp Patra'," he said. "India is showing direction to the world in development focused on women and the last 10 years have been dedicated to the dignity of women and new opportunities for them and the coming five years will be of new participation of women power," he said, adding that the potential of tourism in our country is yet to be unlocked. "The BJP will connect global tourists with our heritage," he

said. Singh said that BJP is strengthening three types of infrastructure, the foundation of 21st century India, first is social infrastructure, second is physical infrastructure and third is digital infrastructure. "In our country, earlier governments considered urbanisation as a challenge whereas BJP sees it as an opportunity. We will create new satellite stations in the country which will become the growth centre of the country's development and create new employment opportunities. The BJP never shies away from taking big and tough decisions in the interest of the country, for us the country is bigger than the party," he said. "Nari Shakti Vandan Act has now become law. Our government removed Article 370 and we have brought CAA. We are following the mantra of 'Reform Perform Transform'. We will vigorously enforce the laws against corruption and will implement One Nation-One Election. We will make provision for common electoral roll for all levels of elections. BJP reiterates its stand to create a Uniform Civil Code which will incorporate the best traditions and integrate them with modern times," he said.

The press conference was conducted by regional media in charge Navratna Rathi and was also attended by regional president Dilip Patel, MLC and BJP district president Hansraj Vishwakarma, city president Vidyasagar Rai, MLC Dharmendra Rai and co-media in charge Santosh Solapurkar.

Woman commits suicide

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A woman committed suicide by hanging herself under mysterious circumstances in Narval police station area on Monday morning. The police sent the body for autopsy and probed the issue. According to a report received here, Rani Devi (33), wife of Prithvi Nath Trivedi of Narval hanged herself from the ceiling on Monday morning. When she did not come out of her room Prithvi Nath rushed to the spot and found her hanging.

The police called the forensic team which collected evidence from the spot. As the blood was oozing from the nose of the deceased and there were blood stains on the bed-sheet, the police found the case suspicious and quizzed the husband and his brother after taking them into custody. The police have started probing the issue.

Narval Station Officer (SO) Rajesh Singh said prima facie it appeared to be a case of suicide. On the basis of complaint received from the parental side of the deceased, autopsy report and spot evidence, further action will be taken in the matter, he said.

WORKSHOP ORGANISED: A district level badminton umpire workshop was organised by the Kanpur district badminton association at the Jainarain Vidya Mandir, Vikas Nagar, on Sunday.

Ajay Rai gets relief from court

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Uttar Pradesh Congress president Ajay Rai has got relief from the court in the case of protesting without permission. The court here on Monday has ordered his release on giving two sureties and bonds of ₹25,000 each.

Ajai Rai is likely to be INDIA candidate against Prime Minister Narendra Modi from Varanasi parliamentary elections where voting will be held on June 1 on seventh and last phase. The PM will seek his third consecutive victory as BJP candidate from this seat where Ajay Rai had also contested unsuccessfully in 2014 and 2019 elections as Congress candidate finishing third both the times. He had also contested in 2009 against Dr Murlu Manohar Joshi of BJP as

Samajwadi Party (SP) candidate, finishing third.

In an old case of protesting without permission, the court of Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate (MP-MLA) Ujjwal Upadhyay ordered the release of state Congress president Ajay Rai on two sureties and a bond of ₹25,000 each. Advocate Anuj Yadav presented the state Congress president's side in the court.

According to the prosecution, Sub-Inspector Jagdish Prasad of Kotwali police station had lodged an FIR in the Kotwali police station on June 13, 2020. The allegation was that as soon as he came to Townhall, Maidagin while patrolling with the police team, he saw that former Congress MLA Ajay Rai, city Congress president Raghavendra Choubey, former district party

chief Prajanath Sharma, district president Rajeshwar Singh Patel, Fasaah Hussain, Ashish Keshari and others were there. About 40-50 people were protesting without permission there. During this time, when the police team, citing the Covid pandemic, asked the people to protest after taking permission from a competent authority, they became furious and started arguing with the police team. In this case, after registering a case at the Kotwali police station under various sections, the police had sent the charge sheets against 40 people to the court. In this case, a bailable warrant was issued by the court against state Congress president Ajay Rai. After which he surrendered in the court through his advocate and applied for bail, which was accepted by the court after the hearing.

Ambedkar's journalism was not class based: MGKV V-C

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth (MGKV) Prof AK Tyagi said Bharat Ratna Baba Saheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar was a very courageous person and his journalism was vocal and clear on the social front. He was speaking as the chief guest at the one-day national conference on 'Ambedkarji's contribution in the field of journalism' organised at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication in Banaras Hindu University (BHU) here on Monday on the occasion of the 133rd birth anniversary of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar.

Prof Tyagi said Dr Ambedkar's journalism was not class based but it was for everyone as he felt that we should not divide the people on the basis of colour, economic, social and geographical basis but should accept them as they are as the class division is not fair. Prof Vishwanath Sharma of Arunodaya Vishwavidyalaya, Arunachal Pradesh also highlighted the contribution of Dr Ambedkar in the field of journalism. Dean, Faculty of Arts, BHU, Prof Shree Kishore Mishra presided over the function. Head of the Journalism department Dr Shobahna Nerlikar, while introducing the



subject, highlighted Baba Saheb's views while presiding over by the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution. A total of 22 research papers were read on the subject during the seminar which was mainly attended by Prof Anurag Dave, Dr Gyan Prakash Mishra, Dr Bala Lakhendra, Dr Neha Pandey, Dr Lalji of Press Information Bureau (PIB), social worker Rajendra Chaudhary, Dr Vikas Anand, Dr Chandan Sagar, Deepak Kharwar and research scholars of the department. The inaugural session was conducted by Samiksha, a student of the department while the vote of thanks was proposed by Dr Bala Lakhendra.

Elsewhere, at Technical Training Centre (TTC) auditorium in Banaras Locomotive Works (BLW), the 133rd birth anniversary celebration of Bharat Ratna Baba Saheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar was organised during the day. The programme was started by the chief guest and General Manager (GM) Basudev Panda and the chief department heads by lighting the lamp and offer-

ing floral tributes on the picture of Baba Saheb.

On this occasion, taking a pledge to learn from the life and thoughts of Baba Saheb and adopt his values and ideals in our conduct, the GM highlighted Baba Saheb's contribution. He said Dr Ambedkar's vision was so deep that he gave us the best Constitution in the world by giving the message of unity in diversity to a complex country like India. "Our country got great men like Baba Saheb at a time when the country was in need. What he has given to the country through his strong determination and willpower through the Constitution can never be forgotten. Baba Saheb worked for the welfare of all classes, along with bringing equality among religions, apart from the progress of women and welfare of labourers.

Principal Chief Personnel Officer Janardan Singh, Chairman of BLW SC-ST Association Sanjay Kumar Ananda, Joint Secretary, Staff Council, Shrikant Yadav and Member Amit Yadav also paid homage to Baba Saheb by giving a brief addresses on life of Baba Saheb. The vote of thanks was proposed by Assistant Personnel Officer (Staff) Piyush Minj and it was conducted by Alok Kumar Pandey.

Lotus will bloom on 80 seats, claims Rajbhar



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

Uttar Pradesh Minister of Labour and Employment Anil Rajbhar while talking to journalists in Civil Lines on Monday gave information about Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s manifesto. He said before the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has prepared a 'Sankalp Patra'. For this, suggestions were sought from people in which 15 lakh of them also gave suggestions. Based on

this the 'Sankalp Patra' has been prepared. Rajbhar said this 'Sankalp Patra' has brought out in detail what we will do in the next five years. In this, the 'guarantee' of Modi has been given on issues including women empowerment, employment to youth, respect for farmers and workers and 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' and others. Efforts are being made to bring the poor, farmers, women and labourers forward. He said the public has faith in Modi's guarantee. Rajbhar

claimed that lotus is going to bloom on 80 seats of UP in this Lok Sabha elections. He said that the candidates of Allahabad and Phulpur Lok Sabha seats, Neeraj Tripathi and Praveen Kumar Patel respectively, are getting public support. He said in the last 10 years, the BJP government has accelerated the pace of development of the country.

RUN: To commemorate the 105th birth anniversary of Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh DFC, Headquarters Central Air Command conducted a 5 km run on Monday. The event was flagged off by Air Marshal RKG Kapoor PVSM AVSM VM, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Central Air Command. All air warriors, including their family members, participated.

Fire in locked house



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A locked dilapidated house caught fire in Generalganj under Badshahi Naka police area late on Sunday evening. On being informed fire brigade rushed to the spot and brought the fire under control after around half an hour. The people also attempted to extinguish the fire and prevented it from spreading to other parts. The house is situated adjacent to Jain Temple in Generalganj. Around 7 pm, this dilapidated house lying closed for the past several years suddenly caught fire. Chief Fire Officer Deepak Sharma said on receipt of information from the mini control room, fire tender from the Latouche Road Fire station rushed to the spot and brought the fire under control. As there were chances of the fire spreading to other parts of the densely populated locality, people made efforts to stop it by the time fire brigade reached the spot, he said.

Meanwhile a woman committed suicide by setting herself afire with her six-month-old daughter in Pahari Ka Dera gram panchayat under Muskara police station area of Hamirpur on Monday. The kin took them to the CHC Muskara from where they were referred to the Medical College Orai. During treatment, both of them succumbed to their burns. Kin did not lodge any complaint with the police so far. After exchange of heated argu-

ments on Monday morning, Kiran (29), wife of Uttam Singh set herself afire with daughter Aradhya. After the first aid, doctors at the Muskara CHC as they had sustained 80 per cent burns and referred them to the Medical College, Orai, where both succumbed to their burns during treatment. On getting information her mother Sukhwati along with family members rushed to the spot. Sukhwati said Kiran had arrived at her in-laws place only two days ago. Inspector Shashi Pandey said he had not received any complaint so far. On receipt of it, further action will be initiated in the matter, he said.

In another incident a youth was feared drowned in the Ganga at Kothi Ghat in Araul under Bilahur Kotwali police station area on Monday morning. In a bid to rescue him, his brother and another person also started drowning but were somehow rescued by people there. The police rushed to the spot and pressed divers into service in search of the youth. Following illness, Satish Singh (65) of Munauwarpur, Vishdhan, Kakwan, had died. On Monday morning, kin and villagers brought the body at Kothi Ghat of Araul for performing the last rites. Prior to cremation and tansuring his head, son of the deceased Vinay Singh (30) had gone for a bath in the Ganga. While bathing there, he slipped deep into water and was feared drowned. Elder brother Vijay Singh and Anshuman Singh of the village also jumped into the water. On seeing them drowning, people standing over there somehow rescued Vijay and Anshuman. Police pressed the divers to trace the drowned youth. Inspector Akhilesh Kumar Pal said efforts are on to trace Vinay Singh.

Carbo flotation may become revolutionary process for sugar industry: Mohan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

Carbo flotation process may become a revolutionary process for the Indian sugar industry in its pursuit of making sulphur-less and refined sugar. The trials conducted on the laboratory scale have shown superiority of the process for producing such sugars over the conventional phosphatation process, said Prof Narendra Mohan, former Director, National Sugar Institute, on Monday.

He said, "Now we have distilleries attached to the sugar refineries, wherein during fermentation of sugars to produce

alcohol, lot of carbon dioxide is evolved and in most of the cases is released to atmosphere. In the novel process conceived, carbon dioxide from distillery fermenters shall be used as a clarification aid and precipitated impurities shall be removed as scum in specially designed floatation clarifiers". In the conventional phosphatation process, even after using significant amount of phosphoric acid and other secondary process chemicals, the colour removal is lower while the cost of production is higher, he said and added that the laboratory trials conducted at the end of some sugar refineries in Uttar

Pradesh, indicate much higher colour removal in the process resulting in consistently better quality sugar at lower cost because of use of carbon dioxide as main clarification aid which otherwise would go waste and also create environmental issues. Thus, it may be cheaper and more environment friendly process too enabling production of superior quality sugar especially for pharmaceutical, beverage, confectionary and bakery sectors. Many reputed sugar groups have shown their inclination to adopt the process and soon may take up pilot plant studies for commercial scale adoption afterwards.

Sangeet Sammelan held

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

Padmashri Pt Umakant Gundecha and Anant Gundecha of Bhopal mesmerised the audience with their presentation in Raag Vihag in Dhrupad style of recital in the two-day Nadopasana Sangeet Sammelan jointly organised by the Ranjana Devi Sangeet Mahavidyalaya, Dhrupad Kendra Kanpur and Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of India. The event saw many other stalwarts of international repute performing on the stage who included the Dhrupad maestro Padmashri Ustad Wasifuddin Dagar and top grade artiste AIR New Delhi Pt Santosh Nahar (Violin). Earlier, the programme started with the students of Dhrupad Kendra - Ashutosh Pandey, Chetan Gupta, Vishal Brijpai, Akshay Shukla and Mridul Awasthi praying before Mata



Bageshwari. They were followed by a budding Dhrupad singer Dhani Gundecha of Bhopal accompanied by Pt Akhilesh Gundecha on Pakhawaj. City's Dhrupad exponent Pt Vinod Kumar Dwivedi presented his show with his disciple son Ayush Dwivedi on the self-authored 'bandishes' and enthralled the audience. They were accompanied by Manoj Solanke of Pune on Pakhawaj. The melodious presentation by Pt Santosh Nahar of Delhi in Raag Jog on violin and the Dhrupad maestro Padmashri Wasifuddin Dagar made the audience glued to their seat. The former was accompanied by the noted tabla player of the city Dr Ankit Parik of Mathura on Pakhawaj.

Film stars walk the ramp to promote Banarasi products

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The evening of this holy city on Sunday was special when Bollywood stars Kriti Sanon and Ranveer Singh walked the ramp for the promotion of Banarasi weaving products at Namu Ghat. Apart from them, 40 famous models of the country participated in the event where Banarasi silk clothes were promoted under the supervision of famous fashion designer Manish Malhotra. It was a part of a mega event 'Prayas : Dharohar Kashi Ki', organised by the Indian Minorities Foundation (IMF), exploring Prime Minister Narendra Modi's constant endeavour to preserve and celebrate India's rich spiritual and cultural legacy with the mantra of 'Vikas Bhi, Virasat Bhi'. Bollywood stars Kriti Sanon, Ranveer Singh, renowned fashion designer Manish Malhotra, Member of Parliament (Rajya



Bollywood stars Kriti Sanon and Ranveer Singh at a fashion show at Namu Ghat in Varanasi on Sunday night (right) at Kashi Vishwanath Corridor

Sabha) and IMF convener Satnam Singh Sandhu and others also visited Kashi Vishwanath Temple on the second day. Both the events were also participated by ambassadors of 20 countries, including Sri

Lanka, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Mali, Togo, Peru, Panama etc. Satnam Singh Sandhu said the fashion show organised here aimed to promote clothes made on handloom and power loom and other craft items here. "There was an effort to give

recognition to Banarasi weavers at the global level. Such events will continue to be organised in the future to make the heritage here available to the international market," he said.

Famous fashion designer Manish Malhotra said the products of Banarasi weavers will be sold at his stores located in the country and abroad. Apart from this, 40 people associated with Banarasi craft industry were also honoured which included 22 weavers, many of them were Padma Shri awardees. According to him, there are also 10 such traders who, on the basis of their business skills, took Banarasi weaving beyond the district to the markets of the country and the world. He said if Banarasi saree and other products get new markets, the economic condition of the weavers here will improve. "When the income of weavers increases, the weaving here will get a new dimension.

If the weaver comes out of the vicious cycle of poverty, then new thinking will develop which will become the identity of developed India in the future," he added. Hindi film stars Ranveer Singh and Kriti Sanon added a lot of colour to the ramp along with models wearing sarees, lehenga chunri, salwar kurta based on Banarasi silk etc. While Ranveer came on the ramp wearing a kurta and dhoti made of Banarasi silk, Kriti was wearing a Banarasi salwar kurta. Earlier, at Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Kriti Sanon, said, "Kashi, which is historically the most sacred place in India, has kept the ancient traditions of Hinduism and the country alive. Over the past decade, the PM has not only developed this holy city but also preserved the essence of Kashi through various initiatives and the transformation witnessed by Kashi over the

past decade is unmatched".

Bollywood actor Ranveer Singh said, "India has not only experienced growth under the leadership of the PM but also deepened the connection between the youth and the country. Today, the spirit of Indian youth towards the country has become stronger, as the PM has made them equal partners in the country's developmental journey, which is a significant step for India to move forward". Patron of Varanasi Vastra Udyog (Textile Industry) and MLC Ashok Dhawan, MLC and Lok Sabha coordinator Ashwani Tyagi, Mayor Ashok Tiwari, former MLA Jagdish Patel, city BJP president Vidyasagar Rai, MLC Dharmendra Rai, Navratna Rathi, Vaibhav Kapoor, Santosh Solapurkar, Pradeep Agrahari, Naven Kapoor Jagdish Tripathi, Gaurav Rathi, Shailendra Mishra, etc were prominently present.

Manifesto recognises aspirations, needs of rising middle class: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP asserted on Monday its manifesto recognises the aspirations and needs of the rising middle class, and identifies opportunities for them and promises to create conditions for a better quality of life. The ruling party has promised better cities, higher quality infrastructure, faster and better digital infrastructure, controlling pollution, investment in technologies of tomorrow and better living conditions, it said, adding that the middle class will benefit a lot from these, it said. Its promise of encouraging the creation of new satellite townships near metro cities, boosting transit-oriented development, building unified metropolitan transport systems, ensuring water-secure cities, leveraging best practices for waste water treatment and eliminating open landfills will address immediate liveability



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

Global Capability Centres (GCCs), Global Tech Centres (GTCs) and Global Engineering Centres (GECs) and making the country a global hub will also help the middle class, who will benefit also from the resolve to make housing more affordable. Noting that medical treatment for senior citizens, and those 70 years and above, is costly and can be a financial drain on middle class families as getting

insurance for them is not always easy, the party said its promise of bringing them under the 'Ayushman Bharat' cover for health cost up to Rs 5 lakh irrespective of their family income will be a big help to them. The party also cited its promise of zero electricity bill through solar rooftops, including in housing societies, and the expansion of IITs, IIMs and AIIMS to make its point. The BJP's promise of new investments in agricultural storage will lead to not only farmers getting more remunerative prices but also lower and more predictable food prices for the consuming middle class, it said. The manifesto's details on India's proposed foreign policy initiatives, promoting the country's ideas and values to the world and carving a place for it at the global level, also benefits the middle class the most as they will play a key role as its ambassadors to the world.

21 retired judges write to CJI against attempts to undermine judiciary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A group of 21 retired judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts have written to the Chief Justice of India on the escalating attempts by "certain factions to undermine the judiciary through calculated pressure, misinformation, and public disparagement". Congress alleged that the letter by 21 judges to the Chief Justice of India was part of an "orchestrated campaign of the prime minister" to "threaten, browbeat and intimidate" the judiciary that has flexed its muscles in recent months. These critics are motivated by narrow political interests and personal gains and are striving to erode public confidence in the judicial system, they said. Though the retired judges, including four from the apex court, did not specify the incidents which prompted them to write to the CJI, their letter came amid a war of words between the ruling BJP and opposition parties over



the actions against some opposition leaders in corruption cases. With affected leaders and their parties moving courts to seek relief, the BJP has often accused them of using judicial decisions selectively and cited any lack of relief for several arrested leaders to rebut the opposition's criticism. The retired judges, including justices (retired) Deepak Verma, Krishna Murari, Dinesh Maheshwari and M R Shah, accused the critics of having insidious methods with clear attempts to sway judicial processes by casting aspersions

on the integrity of courts and the judges. "Such actions not only disrespect the sanctity of our judiciary but also pose a direct challenge to the principles of fairness and impartiality that judges, as guardians of the law, have sworn to uphold," they said in the letter titled "Need to safeguard judiciary from unwarranted pressures". The strategy employed by these groups is deeply troubling, ranging from the propagation of baseless theories intended to malign the judiciary's reputation to engaging in overt and covert attempts to influence judicial outcomes to their favour, they said. "This behaviour, we observe, is particularly pronounced in the cases and causes of social, economic and political significance, including the cases involving certain individuals, wherein the lines between advocacy and manoeuvring are blurred to the detriment of judicial independence," they added. The letter writers said they are particularly concerned about

the tactics of misinformation and the orchestration of public sentiment against the judiciary. "The practice of selectively praising judicial decisions that align with one's views while vehemently criticising those that do not, undermines the very essence of judicial review and the rule of law," they said. They urged the judiciary led by the Supreme Court to fortify against such pressures and ensure that the sanctity and autonomy of the legal system are preserved. "It is imperative that the judiciary remains a pillar of democracy, immune to the whims and fancies of transient political interests," they said. Asked about the letter at a Press conference at the AICC headquarters, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh alleged that the "greatest threat" to judicial independence comes from the BJP. He also referred to name on that list and said it will give away the whole objective, background and authorship of the letter.

Government issues high risk warning for Indian Microsoft users

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Government has issued a high risk warning for Microsoft services users in India after multiple vulnerabilities were found in various Microsoft products. Vulnerabilities could allow hackers to gain control, steal information remotely. The caution note issued by the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) is for users of Windows OS, Microsoft Office, Bing, Outlook and other Microsoft services. The Indian cyber security agency has found multiple vulnerabilities in Microsoft products and has issued a high severity rating to the issue. The vulnerabilities affect a number of Microsoft software, including Microsoft Windows, Microsoft Office, Microsoft Developer Tools, its Azure services, Bing, System Center, Microsoft Dynamics, and Exchange Server. Microsoft Exchange Server is a tool used by businesses to help them work together. It has things like email, calendars, contacts, and schedules all in one place. People can check their emails using programs like Microsoft Outlook Plus, it works well with other Microsoft Office programs. And the current set of vulnerabilities that have been found



by CERT-In affect all these services mentioned above. Which means, anyone using any of these services could be a possible target of vulnerability. The CERT-In website reveals that multiple vulnerabilities were reported in Microsoft Products. Reportedly, these security loopholes could allow an attacker to "gain elevated privileges, obtain Information Disclosure, Bypass Security restriction, conduct remote code execution attacks, perform spoofing attacks, or cause denial of service conditions". This basically means that these vulnerabilities might let a hacker do things like get more power, find out secret info, get around security rules, control your computer remotely, trick you with fake links, or even stop your computer from working. The vulnerabilities in Microsoft Windows could allow an attacker into your

computer and take charge or steal information remotely. Such vulnerabilities take place because the computer does not protect itself well enough. One problem, according to CERT-In, is with a feature called Smart Screen, which is supposed to keep a device safe of malware. However, due to the vulnerability, it is actually letting the malware in. This means, a hacker can take advantage of these security loopholes by sending special requests. If they succeed, they can take control of your computer or make it do things it should not. How do you keep yourself safe from such vulnerabilities, you ask? Always ensure your device is up-to-date with the latest updates. These timely updates are meant to patch vulnerabilities or any security loophole that may exist in a product or software that you are using.

X bans over two lakh accounts in India over policy violations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Elon Musk-led X Corp has banned a staggering 212,627 accounts in India within the span of a month, marking a significant crackdown on content promoting child sexual exploitation and non-consensual nudity. The micro-blogging platform also took down 1,235 accounts for promoting terrorism on its platform in the country. X said it has implemented several measures that relate to the mitigation of child sexual exploitation and terrorism. X, in its monthly report, said that it received 5,158 complaints from users in India in the same time frame through its grievance redressal mechanisms. Most complaints from India were about ban evasion (3,074), followed by sensitive adult content (953), hateful conduct (412), and abuse/harassment (359). In addition, X processed 86 grievances which were appealing account suspensions. "We overturned 7 of these account suspensions after reviewing the specifics of the situation. The remaining reported accounts remain suspended," said the company. "We received 29 requests related to general questions about accounts during this



reporting period," it added. This information was released by Elon Musk-owned X (formerly Twitter) in its monthly compliance report. The company banned over 213,000 accounts in India between February 26 and March 25. It cited violations related to promoting child sexual exploitation and non-consensual nudity as the primary reasons for ban. "There are many measures that have been in place for a long time on our platform that relate to the mitigation of child sexual exploitation and terrorism activity. X does not tolerate any material that features or promotes child sexual exploitation. This includes

media, text, illustrations, or computer-generated images," the report stated. Amid growing concerns over the proliferation of harmful content online, platforms like X seem to be intensifying efforts to combat such activities and maintain a conducive environment for healthy discourse. In response to user complaints, the social media platform also reported receiving 5,158 grievances from users in India during the same reporting period. The ban is to highlight the platform's initiative to address user concerns promptly and effectively through its grievance redressal mechanisms.

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Lieutenant Commander L Bhaskar Rajvanshi was on Sunday awarded a gallantry medal by the Navy for his exemplary professionalism and courage in recovering an advanced light helicopter (ALH) from a state of "catastrophic control failure", according to an official statement. A Navy spokesperson in a statement said this was the "first ever documented instance" of a safe recovery from collective control failure emergency in the "entire ALH fleet across all services". "The pilot with his limited flying experience ensured safe recovery of the helicopter and aircrew in an extremely challenging scenario, thereby saving an asset worth over Rs 100 crore. The recovery of the aircraft has enabled the services to undertake accurate investigation of the failure towards putting remedial measures in place for the entire ALH fleet," read his citation for the Nao Sena Medal (Gallantry). On March 8, 2023, IN 709, ALH MK III (MR) helicopter was disembarking from the aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant, to Mumbai with three personnel onboard. Flying at altitude 500 ft above mean sea level, the pilot suddenly encountered a

catastrophic control failure, wherein the aircraft suffered uncommanded loss of collective power, rapid descent without any warning or failure indication in cockpit," read the citation. With no collective control available, the situation was likely to turn into a "fatal disaster," it said. However, Rajvanshi, captain of the 321 Shikra ALH flight, did not surrender to the given circumstances, displaying tremendous courage and extraordinary piloting skills, he manoeuvred the helicopter with limited control available to effect an "extraordinary ditching at sea," the citation said. "The pilot ensured that the helicopter ditched clear of merchant and fishing traffic and thereby avoided loss of civil property or lives. Even after effecting safe touchdown over the sea surface, the helicopter remained extremely vulnerable to unbalanced aerodynamic forces that could lead to toppling and sure loss of machine or lives, it added. "The pilot observed utmost discipline, maintained composure and guided his crew to safety by swift deployment of emergency floatation gear and safety equipment," the citation further said. The singular act of bravery, grit and presence of mind in the face of danger has upheld the Indian Navy's ethos, it said.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday appreciated the steps taken by the Indian Railways to prevent train accidents, including the automatic train protection system 'Kavach', to avoid collisions. A bench of Justices Surya Kant and K V Viswanathan disposed of a petition that raised several issues related to passenger safety after taking note of multiple steps taken by the public sector behemoth to prevent accidents and promote safe travel. "We appreciate the steps taken by the Railways," the bench said, while taking note of the status report filed by Attorney General R Venkataramani. While hearing the plea filed by petitioner Vishal Tiwari on January 2, the apex court had sought to know about the protective measures, steps implemented so far or proposed to be taken by the Centre, including the 'Kavach' system. It had asked the petitioner to hand over a copy of his plea to the office of the Attorney General. Referring to the train accident in Odisha's Balasore district in June last year that had left 288 people dead, the petitioner had claimed non-implementation of the 'Kavach' scheme was resulting in accidents. He had said a lot of accidents have taken place in the past due to collision between trains.



The plea had sought directions to the Centre to set up an expert commission headed by a retired judge of the apex court and consisting of technical members to analyse and review the risk and safety parameters in the railway system and to suggest systematic safety modifications for strengthening the safety mechanism. It claimed that non-implementation of 'Kavach' at the earliest had resulted in a massive loss of life and damage to public property which imputed direct liability of gross negligence and breach of duty of care to respondent authorities. It had also sought issuance of guidelines for implementation of the 'Kavach' system with immediate effect. The petition was filed days after the crash involving Bengaluru-Howrah Superfast Express and Shalimar-Chennai Central Coromandel Express, which were carrying around 2,500 passengers, and a goods train in June last year near Bahanaga Bazar station in Balasore.

Army Chief on visit to Uzbekistan to enhance bilateral collaboration

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Army Chief General Manoj Pande on Monday embarked on a four-day visit to Uzbekistan to explore new avenues of bilateral military collaboration. He is scheduled to hold wide-ranging talks with the top military brass of the Central Asian nation besides visiting a number of defence establishments. The defence ministry described the Army Chief's visit to Uzbekistan as a "significant step" in bolstering defence cooperation between the two countries. "The visit by General Pande aims at strengthening military cooperation between India and Uzbekistan besides exploring new avenues of collaboration between the two nations," it said. Pande will hold talks with Lieutenant General Bakhodir Kurbanov, the Defence Minister of Uzbekistan; Major General Khalmukhamedov Shukhrat Gayratjanovich, the First Deputy Minister of Defence and Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. "These dialogues are pivotal in fostering stronger military cooperation," it said in a statement. On Tuesday, General Pande will visit late prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's memorial in Tashkent and pay homage to him, it said. Thereafter, he will visit the Victory Park, commemorat-



ing Uzbekistan's contributions and sacrifices in the Second World War. On Wednesday, the Army Chief will travel to Samarkand where he will meet Commander of the Central Military District. "The visit will culminate in Termez, on April 18, where the Army Chief is also scheduled to witness the joint exercise DUSTLIK between the armed forces of India and Uzbekistan, highlighting the interoperability and camaraderie developed between the two countries," the ministry said. Meanwhile, the Indian Army contingent departed on Monday for the 5th edition of India-Uzbekistan joint military Exercise DUSTLIK. The Exercise is scheduled to be conducted from April 15-28 at Termez. Exercise DUSTLIK is a yearly event conducted alternatively in India and Uzbekistan. Last edition was conducted at Pithoragarh (India) in February 2023. The Indian Armed Forces contingent comprising 60 personnel is being represented by 45 personnel from the Indian

Army, majorly from a battalion of the Jat Regiment, and 15 personnel from the Indian Air Force. The Uzbekistan contingent comprising approximately 100 personnel, from Uzbekistan Army and Air Force, will be represented by personnel from Southern Operational Command, part of South-West Military District. Aim of Exercise DUSTLIK is to foster military cooperation and enhance combined capabilities to execute joint operations in mountainous as well as semi urban terrain. It would focus on high degree of physical fitness, joint planning, joint tactical drills and basics of special arms skills. Tactical drills to be practiced during the exercise will include creation of a Joint Command Post, establishing an Intelligence and Surveillance Centre, securing of landing site, Small Team Insertion & Extraction, Special Heliborne Operations, Cordon and Search Operations, Room Intervention Drills and Demolition of illegal structures. The complexity of this edition of Exercise DUSTLIK has been enhanced with conduct of multi domain operations as the contingent comprises of personnel from combat support arms and services besides Infantry. Two Women Officers also form part of the Indian Army contingent, including one from the Regiment of Artillery and the second from the Army Medical Corps.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Israel is "strong and resilient" land, if needed, it will "confront Iran" after the recent attack, the Israeli envoy here asserted on Monday and said India should play a role in bringing stability in the West Asia region. In an interview to PTI at the Israeli Embassy here, the country's ambassador to India Naor Gilon said that Israeli defence forces with the support of the US and "other friends in the region" were able to "intercept 99 per cent" of the UAVs and missiles fired by Iranians. However, there was "minor damage" suffered at Nevatim air base in the attack late Saturday, he said. With Iran's attack on Israel triggering the spectre of a wider conflict in West Asia, India on Sunday said it is seriously concerned over the escalating hostilities between the two sides and called for an immediate halt to violence and return to the path of diplomacy. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held separate telephonic conversations with his Iranian and Israeli counterparts and underlined the importance of avoiding escalation and exercising restraint. Iran carried out the attack on Israel in response to a suspected Israeli strike on its consulate in Damascus on April 1 that killed seven Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards including a senior general. Ambassador Gilon, in the



interview, said India as a "very respected player in the international arena should put its influence and weight" in bringing things back to normal. He was asked what role he expected from India in the present situation, given the telephonic conversations of Jaishankar with his counterparts in Israel and Iran. "I think that we expect from India, as a friend, to be very strong in international community in making sure that Iran stops its destabilisation of West Asia. "I think West Asia as a region is also very important for India because there are millions of Indians working in that region. Many business connections, strong ones with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar. And, I think, this is very important that India will be active as a part of the international community, in stopping Iran," he said. Gilon said the Iranians had shot about "350 different UAVs to cruise missiles to surface to surface missiles, all in all about

60 tonnes of explosives", trying to overcome the Israeli defence system by shooting simultaneously. "Thanks to the US and other friends in the region, and the huge capacity of our air defence and air force, we were able to intercept 99 per cent of these missiles and UAVs and luckily, no casualty. There was one young, seven-year-old girl, a Bedouin Muslim girl from the south of Israel, who was severely wounded, I hope she comes out of it," the Israeli envoy said. Gilon alleged that the attack was a "clear continuation of the behaviour of Iran" for a very long time, bringing instability in West Asia. Two days ago, they "changed mould and attacked Israel directly from the territory of Iran" and other territories and also proxies, he said. "Iran cannot continue this behaviour, if we need we will confront Iran. It is not a choice of ours. We are merely the receiving side here, and we will probably find the right time and moment to retaliate or send back a message to Iran that this is unacceptable. "We should send the retaliating message that this is unacceptable," the envoy said. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in a post on X on Sunday night had said that the close cooperation between the US military and the IDF has led to the "formation of a strong coalition that proved itself last night in the face of Iran's aerial attack".



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Damage control

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

The fragile peace equilibrium in West Asia has been hit once again, with Iran launching a direct attack on Israel and escalating tensions. Fresh apprehensions reverberated globally, prompting swift diplomatic action from President Joe Biden who, besides conveying to Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US will not be part of any retaliatory action, has convened the G7 nations to address the urgent matter. The missiles-and-drones attack, which targeted strategic locations including military installations and civilian areas in Israel, has escalated the situation to a dangerous level. While casualties and damages are still being assessed, the brazenness of this assault has sent shockwaves across the region and beyond. Iran, a key player in the region, has often found itself at odds with Israel, citing ideological differences and regional power struggles. However, the direct military engagement between the countries represents a dangerous escalation that could have far-reaching consequences. Israel, known for its robust defence capabilities, has vowed to respond to Iran's aggression, raising concerns of a prolonged and devastating conflict. The events of April 1 in Damascus marked the onset of a fresh chapter in the ongoing regional strife between the countries. That assault, resulting in the loss of several high-ranking Iranian military officials, signified a shift from indirect hostilities to confrontation. Subsequently, Iran initiated its long-anticipated reprisal against Israel, deploying numerous drones and ballistic missiles. Despite indications of this impending attack during discreet negotiations between the US and Iran, most of the strikes were intercepted en route Israel.



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

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PICTALK



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

Avoiding icebergs in troubled times

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



DEEPAK SINHA

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

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



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



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

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

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICAL CHESSBOARD

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

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

Abhijeet Nand | Bhopal

EXPLORING HUMAN LEARNING

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

Urban farming



Apropos the news article, "Cultivating sustainability through urban farming", published on April 11, this is my response. The Pioneer's succinct write-up of urban farming as a climate change solution is commendable. Climate change's urgency demands immediate action and urban farming offers a multifaceted response. It not only addresses food security but also mitigates environmental degradation and fosters community cohesion. The article rightly emphasises the need for supportive policies to scale up urban farming initiatives. Governments must incentivise and facilitate urban agriculture to make it accessible to all communities. Additionally, community engagement plays a pivotal role in its success, fostering social bonds and economic opportunities.

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

Khirabdi Tanya Nayak | Noida

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

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

Shihaab Khan | Hyderabad

A CHAMPION OF JUSTICE

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

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

Priyanka Sharma | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Screenwriters as architects of emotion

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



PAWAN SONY



FIRST COLUMN

BALANCING WELLBEING IN WORK AND LIFE

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



SAKSHI SETHI

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

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



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

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Challenges galore for NATO@75



K S TOMAR

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



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



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

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

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

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

A call to vote responsibly beyond party lines

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

India is undeniably a youthful nation, with a significant portion of our population comprising the younger generation. Every year, countless young individuals come of age, reaching 18 years and gaining eligibility to vote. This message is directed not only to those who have recently attained this milestone but also to those who did so in the past few years. With the power to vote comes a profound responsibility—the responsibility to elect leaders who possess the competence and integrity to effectively govern our nation. As citizens, it is imperative that we transcend party lines and critically evaluate the progress of our nation. Are we moving in the right direction? Are there tangible improvements



RAVI KOCHHAR

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



accountable for their actions. We must evaluate their performance across various sectors, including:-
1. Infrastructure Development: Assess the improvement in infrastructure, particularly in terms of connectivity by rail, road and waterways, which directly impacts ease of doing business and facilitates movement across the country.
2. Industrial Growth and Policies: Evaluate the government's plans and policies for industrial growth and decision-making processes, ensur-

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

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

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



Ram Rajya taking roots in country, says Rajnath in JK

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

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

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

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

Dr Singh specially invited the Defence Minister to address an



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

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

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

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

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

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

nered contest. Interestingly enough, the development came on a day when the ruling BJP's former MLA Vilas Jagtap resigned from the primary membership of his party and announced his support to Vishal Patil. "For several years now, I have been working for the growth of the BJP at Sangli. But, the party leadership has not taken cognisance of efforts. Instead, the group opposed to me within the party has complained to the BJP leadership. I cannot tolerate this kind of thing," Jagtap said, after announcing his resignation from the BJP. Meanwhile, sources close to Vishal Patil - who is still hopeful of getting the Congress ticket to contest the Lok Sabha polls - said that if allowed to do so, he might file a second set of nomination as a Congress candidate on Tuesday.

However, party sources said that the Congress leadership - after having given up its claim on the Sangli seat - is quite unlikely to give Vishal Patil Form-B, authorising him to contest the Lok Sabha polls from Sangli constituency. In case, Vishal Patil decides to contest as an Independent candidate, the Congress may not do much except expelling him from the party. It may be recalled that Vishal Patil - who along with

Congress MLA Dr. Vishwajeet Kadam from Palus-Kadegaon in Sangli and other senior district party leaders had met Congress President Mallikarjun Karge and other top brass in New Delhi several times insisting that the Congress should not give up its claim on the Sangli.

Last week Vishal Patil and Kadam also made a public appeal to Shiv Sena (UBT) President and former chief minister Uddhav Thackeray to forsake the Sangli seat to the Congress. However, the Shiv Sena (UBT) chief - who had staked claim for the Sangli seat and even announced the candidate even when the MVA was in the midst of the seat-sharing talks - is no mood to oblige the Congress on Sangli seat. Following the refusal by the Shiv Sena (UBT) to give up the Sangli seat, the Congress workers have been threatening not to campaign for the Sena (UBT) nominee Chandrarah Patil, who is a wrestling champion.

The Sangli Lok Sabha seat has been a major bone of contention for several weeks now. So much so that state Congress chief Nana Patole had made an issue of Sena (UBT) unilaterally 'grabbing' the Sangli seat even when the seat-sharing negotiations were in progress last month.

Firing near Salman home: Cops identify shooters, trace bike

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

A day after the sensational shoot-out witnessed in front of Bollywood super star Salman Khan's Bandra residence, the Mumbai police on Monday traced the motorbike used in the incident to the adjoining Raigad district and identified the two shooters involved in the incident. Two unidentified motorcycle-borne miscreants, who were covering their faces with helmets, had opened four rounds of fire outside his Bandra (west) residence "Galaxy Apartment" in north-west Mumbai in the early hours of Sunday, before speeding away immediately after the shoot-out.

The investigations, being carried out by the Mumbai police crime branch sleuths, have revealed that the motorcycle used in the crime carried a Raigad registration number plate - as could be seen in the CCTV footage. The investigators are trying to ascertain if the motorbike was bought by the suspects from someone or were they using a "missing" or "stolen" bike. Of the two suspects involved in Sunday's shoot-out, one of whom has been identified as Vishal alias Kalu, from

Gurugram in Haryana, while the other one is said to be from Rajasthan.

Vishal, a member of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang, had been arrested in a motorbike theft case for the first time in 2020 and sent to Tihar jail. After Sunday's shooting, Anmol Bishnoi, the younger brother of incarcerated gangster Lawrence Bishnoi, had in a Facebook post claimed responsibility for the firing at Salman Khan's home. Lawrence Bishnoi is currently lodged in a Gujarat jail.

Meanwhile, after the shooting incident that took place at 5 am on Sunday, the police have beefed up security in and around "Galaxy Apartments", where Salman lives with his parents, brothers and other family members. Fifty-eight-year-old Salman and his father Salim Khan have been facing threats to their lives allegedly from the Lawrence Bishnoi gang, after the 1998 blackbuck poaching incident in Rajasthan.

It may be recalled that on November 29, 2023, the Mumbai police had reviewed the security provided to Bollywood super star Salman Khan after he allegedly received yet another threat from gangster Lawrence Bishnoi.

Bengal CM Mamata attacks Modi

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

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

Even as her wrath fell on Prime Minister Narendra Modi she also accused the Election Commission of India for acting in a biased manner even as she asked why the State officials were being transferred when their central counterparts were not being touched. Wondering as to why the I-T officials would search the helicopters of the BJP leaders Banerjee told a rally at Cooch Behar on Monday, "if things continued like this and if the people did not wake up at right moment then nothing will be left of a democratic India," because "If this government returns to power, there will be no election in this country.



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

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

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

shor hai, BJP chor hai (there is a word in every by-lane that BJP is a thief)" during the saffron government to "publish comparative details of corruptions that took place in Bengal, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra."

Threatening to go on a hunger strike if the Election Commission continued to act in a biased manner Banerjee said how State officials were being transferred at the drop of hat whereas their central counterparts were being allowed to act partially. Referring to the transfer of the Deputy Inspector General of Murshidabad range Banerjee said how "even today, they have transferred the DIG of Murshidabad just following the directions of the BJP... adding, if a single riot took place anywhere then it was the ECI that would be responsible. To register her protest she said that if the situation would not improve then she would go on yet another hunger strike as the one she did during the Singur movement.

"In Singur days I went on a hunger strike for 26 days ... now if this continues then I will do it for 55 days," she said.

Court gives conditional nod to Ramnavami procession

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

With general elections to commence in a few days from now the Calcutta High Court on Monday gave a conditional permission to the organize Ramnavami procession. Passing a conditional order Justice Joy Sengupta directed petitioners Anjani Putra Sena and another such organization apparently backed by some larger saffron outfits to take a rally that would not consist more than 200 men and that asked them to provide the name of five people that would lead the procession.

The Court also said that during the procession neither any weapon should be carried nor inflammatory speech should be given, nor DJs would be played. The Court order against the backdrop of riots last year at Howrah and Serampore. Incidentally the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and some other organisations have planned to celebrate the Ramnavami Mahotsav in a grand manner from April 9 to April 23 throughout Bengal.



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

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

Online food delivery menus fail to provide nutritional labelling: Study

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

Boost for Indian...

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

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

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

Kerala under shackles of...

From Page 1

"Once Ahmedabad is linked with Mumbai through the high speed bullet train, we will launch the works to link the North, East and South with bullet trains and this will see India making a quantum jump in infrastructure development. Works are in full swing to complete highways, expressways and super express highways which would connect the entire length and breadth of the country. The parties that ruled the State all these years failed to exploit the tourism potential of Kerala," said Modi. He came down heavily on the CPI(M) and Congress Governments for their callousness towards the needs of the common man. "The Communists have made Kerala a quagmire of corruption and nepotism. Though the Central Government offered 3.6 million water connections to the State, the CPI(M) was not interested in implementing the scheme. Now, the people of Kerala are struggling to get drinking water. The Central Government is providing free ration to 1.5 crore people in the State and this would be continued for the next five years. What the LDF and the UDF were doing was to retard the progress of the State. Wherever the LDF was in power, (West Bengal and Tripura) there is nothing left and they have done nothing right," said the Prime Minister.

Giving enough indications that Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his family members were in for major trouble in connection with the Cooperative Bank scam and the sand mining scam, Modi said whatever money swindled by the Marxist leaders from the cooperative banks would be returned to the poor and middle class people who had invested the hard earned money with these banks. "The cooperative bank scam is being investigated and we will not allow the misappropriation of the poor account holders' cash," said the Prime Minister.

Iran to allow Indian officials...

From Page 1

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

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

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

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

Registration for Amarnath yatra...

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Of these, they said 76 doctors are to be deployed in Kashmir division and 162 in Jammu division while certificates will also be issued in district hospitals, and community medical centers including health centres, NTPHC and UPHC. "The permit to each pilgrim will be issued from the bank on the payment of Rs 150," sources said and added that for group registration the facility has been provided for five or more pilgrims and the applications for the same will be issued by May 31. Sources said this time track has been improved up to the holy cave to a standard size as per the directives of the Supreme Court. The Shrine Board will also provide medical facilities along both the routes at Chandanwari and another at Baltal.



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

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

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

The Congress is contesting three of the total seven seats in the national Capital under a seat-sharing agreement with its Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) partner AAP, and announced its candidates on Monday. Tiwari, who is representing the North East Delhi seat for a second consecutive term, questioned, without naming Kumar, "how responsible could be those who led a tukde-tukde gang and who cannot respect the country and its army."

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

The BJP MP alleged the Congress always "ignored"



North East Delhi, and hoped Kumar will be able to see how an MP can do development works worth Rs 14,600 crore in his constituency. North East Delhi was hit by a riot in February 2020 in which over 50 people died and hundreds were injured besides a massive loss of public and private property. The constituency having a sizeable population of minorities, also has dominance of people from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, loosely called as Purvanchalis. Both Tiwari and Kumar hail from Bihar. An interesting one to one contest in North East

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

INDIA Bloc has nothing to do with general public: Nadda

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

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

Addressing a poll rally in Mussoorie in support of BJP candidate from Tehri Garhwal Mala Rajya Laxmi Shah, Nadda said on one side there is the BJP's manifesto (Sankalp Patra) which lays the roadmap for a developed India and on the other side the INDIA bloc constituents who have their separate manifestos. "What will they do for development when they cannot even come together," he said. Describing the INDIA bloc as a conglomeration of the corrupt who are either in jail or on bail, he said that all they are concerned with is saving their families.

Naming Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and P Chidambaram, and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leaders Sanjay Singh, Arvind Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia and Satyendra Jain, Nadda said all of them are either in jail or on bail.

The BJP president asked the general public whether they would vote for such people. "They (INDIA bloc) have nothing to do with you. They are only concerned with their

families and saving themselves," he said. Nadda said that all constituents of the opposition bloc have been involved in scams be it Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Yadav's fodder scam, Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav's laptop scam or the numerous scams committed during the UPA.

The BJP president said it is also a gathering of family centred parties led by Lalu Yadav, Akhilesh Yadav, Mamata Banerjee (TMC) or Stalin (DMK).

"The only ones who care about you are your Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party," he added. Nadda said this election is not as much about electing a local MP as about electing a government under the leadership of Narendra Modi for a developed India.

The BJP president spoke of a changing India under Prime Minister Modi's leadership.

He said that Prime Minister Modi has changed the definition of politics in the last ten years.

Even Europe could not deal with the challenge of the Covid 19 pandemic as efficiently as Modi. Within nine months India developed two anti-covid vaccines under Prime Minister Modi's leadership and gave it to 100 countries, he said.

Tripura's tribal areas priority for BJP: Shah

PTI ■ AGARTALA

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

Measures for harmony between communities and the development of the state have been ensured in the agreement, he said, accusing the CPI(M)-led Left Front of spreading misinformation.

Addressing an election rally in Kumarghat, Shah alleged the Congress and CPI(M) which had ruled the state for several years tried to belittle the contribution of the erstwhile 'Maharaja' of the state, Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya.

"It was PM Narendra Modi who gave due respect to Maharaja Bir Bikram by naming the Agartala airport after him, and installing his statue," he said.

Shah claimed that the Congress and the Left never allowed anyone from the tribal community to hold a higher position in government.

"PM Modi, for the first time, honoured tribals by giving India a president from the community," he said.

"Before 2014, the budget for the Ministry of Tribal Affairs was



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

Listing the development initiatives undertaken by the BJP-led government at the Centre, Shah said Tripura got Rs 40,183 crore during 10 years of the UPA's rule, and during PM Modi's tenure, it got Rs 98,000 crore. The union minister said the

40,000-odd Bru tribe people, who had fled their homeland Mizoram following ethnic violence in the late 1990s, were resettled in 2022 in Tripura after living there for years in penury. He noted that under the Modi government's leadership, efforts were made to establish well-equipped villages to improve their living conditions. The Union home minister criticized the communists for allegedly instigating conflict among the people of Tripura and failing to foster development in the state.

The CPI(M) ruled the state first for a decade from 1978 to 1988, and then for 25 years - between 1993 and 2018. Alleging that the Left provided shelter to illegal immigrants in Tripura, Shah urged the people to ensure a third term for PM Modi to stop cross-border infiltration completely. Responding to the Union minister's statement on the agreement with the 'Tipra Motha, CPI(M) state secretary Jitendra Chaudhury sought to know the roadmap of the pact and what exactly the Centre is committing to the indigenous people.

"Nothing is clear in the agreement, except a proposal for setting up a joint working group. I appeal to the Union minister to throw light on the agreement since he visited the state for the first time after signing the accord," he said.

Rajkot LS seat to remain BJP fortress: Analysts

PTI ■ RAJKOT

Even as Parshottam Rupala, the BJP's nominee from Gujarat's Rajkot Lok Sabha seat, is facing agitation by Kshatriya community members, political analysts and voters believe the Union minister will emerge victorious. While the analysts claim Rajkot is an "unbreachable fortress" of the BJP, voters laud the development works done by the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

Rupala recently claimed the erstwhile 'maharajas' succumbed to the persecution of foreign rulers, including the Britishers. Despite Rupala's apology, the Kshatriyas, also called Rajputs, see his remarks as an insult to them and have asked the BJP to withdraw his candidature or face defeat in Rajkot, a Patidar-dominated seat considered as BJP's stronghold.

Elections to all the 26 Lok Sabha seats in Gujarat will be held on May 7.

The BJP has dropped two-time MP Mohan Kundariya and nominated Rupala, belonging to the Kadva sub-sect of Patidar community. The Congress has fielded former MLA Paresh Dhanani, a Leuva Patidar. Rupala and Dhanani belong to neighbouring Amreli district. Three-term Rajya Sabha member Rupala is contesting the Lok Sabha election for the first time. He was an MLA from Amreli in 1991, 1995 and 1998. In the 2022 assembly polls, Dhanani defeated Rupala from Amreli. Dhanani also won the assembly seat in 2012 and 2017 but lost to BJP's Kaushik Vekaria in 2022. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Dhanani contested from Amreli but lost to BJP's Naran Kachhadia.

Rajkot Lok Sabha seat has nearly 23 lakh voters. The Patidars - Kadva and Leuva - are a decisive force with around 5.8 lakh electors. There are also 3.5 lakh Koli voters, 2.3 lakh Maladharis (both OBCs), 1.5 lakh Rajputs, 1.8

lakh Dalits, around 2 lakh voters from minorities and 3 lakh from Brahmin and Lohana communities.

Talking to PTI, political analyst Jagdish Acharya claimed the maximum damage Rajputs can do to Rupala is reduce his winning lead by around 50,000 votes. On the possibility of Dhanani's win with the help of nearly 4 lakh Leuva Patidars and a few thousand anti-BJP Rajput voters, Acharya said the chances are remote.

"It will not make much difference if a few thousand Rajput voters go with Congress. Moreover, all Patidars, be it Kadva or Leuva, are largely united and committed to the BJP. The Leuva Patidars would not opt for Congress just because its candidate is a Leuva and BJP's is Kadva," he opined. For voters, PM Modi's name and developmental works here are enough reasons to support the BJP, he said.

Rajkot Lok Sabha seat com-

prises seven assembly segments, all currently held by the BJP. The saffron party has been winning Rajkot Lok Sabha seat since 1989, barring 2009 when BJP's Kiran Patel lost to Congress' Kunvarji Bavaliya. Koli leader and Jasan MLA Bavaliya joined the BJP in 2018 and is currently a state cabinet minister.

"In 2019, BJP's Kundariya won from Rajkot by over 3.68 lakh votes and by 2.46 lakh votes in 2014. This seat is like an unbreachable fortress of the BJP," said Acharya. "Even if the agitation against Rupala continues, Rajput voters don't have that power to make any difference to the end result. The BJP won with huge margins in the last two elections. A dent of 40,000 to 50,000 votes due to Rajput anger cannot stop the BJP from winning," he claimed.

The general view of voters across all castes is that Rupala should be forgiven as he has apologised, Acharya said.

"Koli voters are also in large numbers and have shifted to the BJP since some time. Jasan is a Koli stronghold and Bavaliya can play a crucial role in getting these votes in BJP's kitty. The maximum damage Rajputs can do is to reduce Rupala's lead," Acharya said. Unfazed by the controversy, the people of Rajkot seem to have already made up their mind.

Pragnesh Thakkar, a local senior citizen, said the Ram temple inauguration in Ayodhya and development of Rajkot city are the key issues on which many people like him will vote for the BJP. The issue of water shortage in Rajkot is a thing of the past now, he said. "Look at the number of flyovers and underpasses here today. What does the common man have to do with this controversy? People like me vote for the BJP, irrespective of the candidate. And, how can we forget the inauguration of Ram temple by PM Modi," said Thakkar.

Congress Ghoshna Patra visionless: Rajasthan CM

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Rajasthan Chief Minister R Bhajanlal Sharma on Monday said the BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' is a vision document whereas the Congress' 'Ghoshna Patra' is visionless.

He said the Congress does not open its 'Ghoshna Patra' after formation of the government and its claims in the manifesto seems like fantasies.

"Congress has its 'Ghoshna Patra' whereas the BJP has 'Sankalp Patra'. Congress does not open its manifesto after formation of the government. You might remember that during UPA rule the condition of people had turned from bad to worse," Sharma told reporters at a press conference here.

"On one side the BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' is full of vision whereas the Congress' 'Ghoshna Patra' is visionless," he added.

He said that Congress had

given 'Gareebi Hatao' slogan during its 55 years of rule but did not eliminate poverty.

"In a similar manner, the claims made by them in the 'Ghoshna Patra' seems to be fantasies," he said.

The chief minister said the BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' has been prepared after collecting expectations of crores of people. He said the BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' is a guarantee to fulfill all promises. Sharma said it is an election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guarantees.

Till now, the political parties only made announcements and never fulfilled them but Prime Minister Modi has fulfilled the promises made in 2014 and 2019, he added.

"We have a proof of 10 years of golden tenure and leadership of PM Modi ji whereas the 'Ghamandiya Gathbandhan' has no intention, no leader and no policy," he said. The Chief

Minister said the Centre has worked considering service, good governance and poor welfare as its aim in the last 10 years.

India was 11th largest economy in 2014 and it is the fifth largest economy today and will turn out to be the third largest economy in the third term of PM Modi, he added.

"Modi ji's guarantee is like 24 carat gold guarantee," he said. Sharma said the BJP government has fulfilled all promises, including abrogation of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir or building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya or upliftment of poor from below poverty line.

He said the BJP government has now promised to implement the Uniform Civil Code, One Nation - One Election and action on corruption in its 2024 Lok Sabha polls manifesto.

Mandaviya files nomination from Porbandar in Gujarat

PTI ■ PORBANDAR

Union Health and Family Welfare minister Mansukh Mandaviya, who is making his debut in the Lok Sabha elections, filed his nomination papers on Monday from the Porbandar constituency after leading a 2-km road show in the historic town.

He was accompanied to the district collector's (DC) office by BJP leader Arjun Modhwadia, formerly of the Congress and who also filed his nomination for the bye-election of Porbandar assembly constituency.

Mandaviya began his day around 9.15 am by offering prayers at four prominent temples -- Bhojeshwar Temple, Kharwa Samaj (Panchayat Mandir), Kirti Mandir, Hanuman temple at Sudama Chowk -- before he set out to address a public gathering at Sudama Chowk.

Wearing a traditional Gujarati headgear 'pheta', the minister was accompanied by his wife, daughter and daughter-in-law. His son also joined later.

At Kirti Mandir, Mahatma Gandhi's birth place, Mandaviya said, "I am visiting the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi before filing the nomination. We have to take inspiration from his life."

Mandaviya's cavalcade then proceeded to Sudama Chowk, next to Sudama temple, where he addressed a nearly 2,000-strong crowd.



"The whole world has acknowledged India's management of the Covid crisis and the vaccination programme," said Mandaviya, who also holds the chemical and fertilisers portfolio.

People from different communities waving saffron flags thronged the five popular intersections of the city through which his road show passed and felicitated him at regular intervals. Mandaviya and Modhwadia were travelling together in a top open SUV.

People from different communities such as Kharva, Lohana, Dalit, Mher and Brahma as well as traders garlanded him.

The cavalcade, which started from Sudama Chowk, passed through Khadi Bhandar, Baluba Kanya Vidyalaya, Old Fountain Chowk, Birla Hall, Tajavala Hall, Bhaveshwar Mahadev temple, Khijadi plot,

before culminating at Kamla Baug. "We hope that such a high profile candidate will spur Porbandar's development and create employment opportunities and bring industries here," said 27-year-old Deveraj. He along with Modhwadia then went to the DC office where he filed his nomination papers.

Modhwadia, who was an MLA from the Porbandar constituency, resigned from the Congress last month and joined the BJP.

The proposers on the four nomination forms for Mandaviya, who belongs to the government's four priority groups -- gareeb, yuva, annadatta and nari (GYAN) (poor, youth, farmers and women) -- accompanied Mandaviya throughout the road show.

These four are beneficiaries of the government's various public welfare schemes including Ayushman Bharat.

Ready to support Congress if it scraps Mhadei project: RGP

PTI ■ PANAJI

The Revolutionary Goans Party (RGP) on Monday said it is ready to ally with the Congress for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections if it works to scrap the Mhadei project and demolishes illegal slums in the state.

The Congress had appealed to the RGP to withdraw its candidates from the fray and support the INDIA bloc.

The Congress has already announced the names of former Union minister Ramakant Khalap and Viriato Fernandes as candidates for the North and South Goa Lok Sabha seats.

Addressing a press conference here, RGP Chief Manoj Parab said the party is ready for "seat sharing" with the INDIA bloc if it is ready to fulfil its conditions about the Mhadei river, illegal slums and People of Goan Origin Bill.

"The RGP will offer support to the INDIA bloc but on the condition that it works towards scrapping the Kalasa-Bandura project on the Mhadei river and adds in its state manifesto that the river will remain with Goans," he said.

The Congress high command should give an assurance that the government in Karnataka will not allow diversion of water from the river, he said. Parab further said that the party should also assure that



illegal slums in the state will be demolished and policies will be drafted to check the influx of migrants.

The RGP leader demanded that the INDIA bloc accept the Person of Goan Origin (POGO) Bill. The RGP has been demanding that all Goans who were born or whose family members were born in Goa before 1961, when the state was liberated from Portuguese rule, should be declared as "People of Goan Origin" and should be given priority in the government sector for employment and other purposes.

RGP MLA Viresh Borkar had tried to table the bill in the House, but other parties, including Congress, rejected it. "If they don't accept the POGO Bill, the Congress should define who is Goan according to them," Parab said. Parab said that the RGP will wait for the response from INDIA Alliance till April 20. Goa will go to polls on May 7, and the counting of votes will be held on June 4.

BJP manifesto road map for developed India, says Dhami

PTI ■ DEHRADUN



Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on Monday said the BJP's manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls provides the road map for a developed India with the upliftment of every section of society.

At a press conference held here on the party's 'Sankalp Patra' released on Sunday, Dhami said the document also states the need for a Uniform Civil Code for the entire country on the lines of the one passed by the Uttarakhand Assembly.

It is a manifesto which provides Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guarantee of service, good governance, welfare of the poor, infrastructure development, women empowerment, taking the youth forward and taking development to the last

person, Dhami said.

It also resolves to implement a stringent law to put an end to paper leaks across India as done in Uttarakhand which has introduced the "strictest" anti-copying law in the country, he said.

Implementation of the anti-copying law in Uttarakhand has led to positive results with thousands of youth getting jobs in a fair and transparent manner, the chief minister said, adding the game of copying mafia is over in the state.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, India will fulfil the vision of Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, he said. Dhami said 'one nation, one election' guaranteed in the BJP's manifesto will lead to a "welcome change" as frequent elections and imposition of the model code of conduct hamper development.

BJP unveils Sankalp Patra in Andaman and Nicobar Islands



PTI ■ PORT BLAIR

The BJP in Andaman and Nicobar Islands unveiled its 'Sankalp Patra' (election manifesto) here on Monday in the presence of senior party leaders including its candidate Bishnu Pada Ray.

The party unit in the Union Territory (UT) has pledged to provide round-the-clock clean water and electricity to every household, regardless of its remoteness.

Additionally, the party promised to improve road transport infrastructure, including the completion of pending work on National Highway-4, which connects Port Blair to Diglipur.

Other commitments include initiating land conversion for commercial to residential purposes, ensuring 100 per cent job reservation for Islanders, advocating for the inclusion of certain settler communities in Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the OBC category, enhancing sports facilities to state-of-the-art standards, promoting tourism activities to meet international standards, and improving the quality of education.

Israeli military warns Palestinians not to return to Gaza

AP ■ DEIR-AL-BALAH

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anaam Mohammad, who was



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

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

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

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

threw smoke bombs, dispersing the crowd.

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

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

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

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

while Hamas says it wants a free flow of returnees.

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

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

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

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

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

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

PM Sunak's Rwanda bill returns to House of Commons

PTI ■ LONDON

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

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

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

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

"We remain committed to building on the successes that saw arrivals drop by more than a third last year, including tougher legislation and agreements with international partners, in order to save lives and stop the boats," said a UK Home Office spokesperson.

Flying out these migrants to Rwanda while their asylum claims are assessed is a key aspect of the Sunak-led government's immigration strategy and expected to act as a significant deterrent for migrants making treacherous journeys to arrive at UK shores.

Blinken calls Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi FMs

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

Blinken thanked Fidan for Turkey's ongoing engagement to prevent further escalation in the region, and discussed with Shoukry the importance of ongoing efforts to increase humanitarian assistance to Gaza and protecting Palestinian civilians, as well as achieve an immediate ceasefire that secures the release of all hostages.

Blinken thanked Jordan for its leadership in providing life-saving humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians, including through joint US-Jordan air-drops and overland deliveries," Miller said.

In his call with Saudi Arabia

Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, Blinken reiterated that while the US does not seek escalation, it will continue to help Israel defend itself. The secretary and the foreign minister agreed on the importance of a coordinated diplomatic response, Miller said.

According to Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Austin, in his call with Saudi Minister of Defense, Khalid bin Salman, emphasized that US does not seek escalation, and will continue to defend Israel and U.S. personnel.

Austin underscored the importance of the enduring US defence partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and reiterated the US commitment to working with the Kingdom and other partners to deescalate tensions in the region, Ryder said.

"Austin also briefed Gallant on his consultations with partners and allies to reinforce international resolve in the face of Iranian aggression," Ryder said.

Meanwhile, Biden reached out to the Congressional leaders on the greatest foreign policy crisis of his presidency. "Biden convened a call this afternoon with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer,

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

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

"Regional and indeed global peace and security are being undermined by the hour. Neither the region nor the world can afford more war," he said.

Schumer told reporters in New York that Iran is becoming more and more isolated due to its "evil" actions.

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

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

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

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

FBI opens probe into Baltimore bridge collapse

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

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

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

The report said that federal agents appeared to board the ship on Monday morning to search.

"Less than an hour after the sun rose at 6:30 a.m., a succession of three boats pulled to the port side of the Dali," it said.

"About 6:50 a.m. Monday, people wearing yellow or orange life jackets entered the Dali through a lower door and climbed a ladder to the ship's bow. About a half-hour later, nearly a dozen more people wearing dark clothing pulled up in a smaller boat and climbed aboard," it said.

"The FBI is present aboard the cargo ship Dali conducting court-authorized law enforcement activity," the report said, quoting a statement by the FBI. US attorney for Maryland Erik Barron said in a statement in the Washington Post report that his office will not confirm the existence of or otherwise comment about investigations.

"However, the public should know, whether it's gun violence, civil rights abuse, financial fraud, or any other threat to public safety or property, we will seek accountability for anyone who may be responsible," he said.

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

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

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

The officers found the vehicle at the home and saw what appeared to be guns inside the auto. They then "heard what sounded like someone manipulating a firearm from inside the residence," Cecile said.

At least one person then exchanged gunfire with the officers. The Syracuse officer, sheriff's deputy and the suspect were shot and brought to Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse.

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

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

Man arrested after stabbing at church service in Sydney

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

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

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

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

"A large police response is underway and the public is urged to avoid the area," police said. Crowds gathered outside the church and the hospital.

The premier of New South Wales, Chris Minns, described the scenes as "disturbing" on social media and urged the community to remain calm and "stick together." Religious leaders expressed shock and condolences.

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

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

US Prez Biden to host Iraqi leader

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

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

The US in recent months has urged Iraq to do more to prevent attacks on US bases in Iraq

and Syria that have further roiled the Middle East in the aftermath of Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel. Iran's weekend attacks on Israel through Iraqi airspace have further underscored US concerns, although al-Sudani had already left Baghdad and was en route to Washington when the drones and missiles were launched.

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

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

Al-Sudani came to power in late 2022 after a power struggle between prominent Shiite cleric and political leader Muqtada Sadr and opposing Shiite factions that are close to Iran after the 2021 elections. Sadr ultimately withdrew from the political process, giving the opportunity to the remaining Shia politicians to form a government headed by al-Sudani.

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



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

Trump in court for historic hush money trial

AP ■ NEW YORK

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

There could be some legal arguments and housekeeping before jury selection begins. When it does, scores of people are due to be called into the courtroom to start the process of finding 12 jurors, plus six alternates.

Judge Juan M. Merchan has written that the key is "whether

the prospective juror can assure us that they will set aside any personal feelings or biases and render a decision that is based on the evidence and the law."

Trump has pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records.

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

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

Prosecutors say the payments to Cohen were falsely logged as legal fees in order to cloak their

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BAYER LEVERKUSEN WINS FIRST BUNDESLIGA TITLE

AP ■ LEVERKUSEN (GERMANY)

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

scored its fourth goal with seven minutes to go, and the final minutes were played in thick red smoke from supporters' pyrotechnics while players on Leverkusen's bench clapped along to songs, danced and hugged one another. The fifth goal in the 90th brought more fans onto the field - hundreds this time - and the referee ended the game amid confusion and jubilation. Thousands of supporters crowded the field waving flags, flares and cardboard copies of the Bundesliga trophy. Leverkusen finally shed its reputation as perennial runner-up after five second-place finishes in the league and one in the Champions League. Alonso, who took over as coach when Leverkusen was in the relegation zone in October 2022, reflected on ending Bayern's dominance. "Perhaps it's healthy for the Bundesliga, also for German football, for another team to win," said Alonso, who won three Bundesliga titles with Bayern as a player from 2015-17. "It's a great joy and we have to enjoy it. We need a bit more

ENDING BAYERN MUNICH'S 11 YEARS REIGN



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

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



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

AP ■ PARIS

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

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

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

PTI ■ MISANO (ITALY)

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

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



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

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

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

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

AP ■ DUESSELDORF (GERMANY)

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

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



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

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

Another ankle injury rules Dortmund forward Haller out of Champions League

AP ■ DORTMUND (GERMANY)

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

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

PTI ■ AUGUSTA

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

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



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

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

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

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

PTI ■ FARIDABAD

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

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



Head hundred, bowlers' resolve power SRH to 25-run win over RCB

PTI ■ BEGALURU

Travis Head's destructive hundred fused splendidly with skipper Pat Cummins' resolve as Sunrisers Hyderabad registered a well-crafted 25-run victory over Royal Challengers Bengaluru in a high-scoring affair here on Monday. Head's maiden T20 hundred (102, 41b, 9x4, 8x6) and Heinrich Klaasen's pillaging 67 (31b, 2x4, 7x6) drove Sunrisers to a record-breaking 287 for three, also going past their own 277/3 against Mumbai Indians at Hyderabad this March 27. The visiting bowlers led by Cummins (3/43) showed superb skill level on a barren pitch, something their counterparts lacked, to restrict RCB to 262 for seven. This IPL match also witnessed the highest cumulative runs scored —549 in any single T20 match. Skipper Faf du Plessis (62, 28b, 7x4, 4x6) and the super-improving Dinesh Karthik (83, 35b, 5x4, 7x6) played fine hands

but on the night they ended as mere footnotes. However, RCB began their chase of 288 with gusto with Du Plessis and Virat Kohli (42, 20b, 6x4, 2x6) making 50 in just 3.5 overs, bettering SRH's timing for their 50 in 4.3 overs. The Faf-Kohli pair reached 79 in the Power Play overs and 80 in 6.2 overs but the introduction of leg-spinner Mayank Markande changed the complexion of the game. Kohli's attempt to slog sweep Markande saw the ball sneaking under his bat to rattle the stumps. From that point, the Royal Challengers lost four wickets in the span of 41 runs to slip to 121 for four that also saw a steep climb in the asking rate. The fourth wicket to fall during that phase was that of Du Plessis. The South African batter smashed Cummins for a four and six in successive balls but feathered a well-directed slower bouncer to Klaasen behind the stumps. In the same over, the Aussie pacer also trapped Saurav Chauhan in



front of the wicket for a naught. Karthik and Mahipal Lomror (19), who together punished Markande for 25 runs in his last over, milked 59 runs off 29 balls for the sixth wicket, and the former also made 63 for the seventh wicket with Anuj Rawat as RCB moved along

briskly. But in the end, it was sufficient only to provide some artificial excitement to the full house. Earlier, Head's destructive hundred was the driving force behind Hyderabad's imposing total.

The South Australian added 108 runs off 49 balls with his opening partner Abhishek Sharma (34, 22b) and 57 off 26 balls with Klaasen for the second wicket as the hosts' bowlers wilted under sustained firing. Head's batting does not carry the

traditional elegance of a left-hander but he more than compensates it with effectiveness. His innings at the Chinnaswamy Stadium was a telltale example of the simple principles he follows in batting — anything in his hitting arc will disappear far and wide. The 30-year-old displayed that chilling efficiency against RCB pacers Reece Topley and debutant Lockie Ferguson, who walked in for out-of-form of Glenn Maxwell. But Ferguson's first over was an eminently forgettable one, conceding 18 runs. The Kiwi pacer slanted one to Head's pads and it was flicked over square leg for a six. Ferguson tried for course correction in the next ball, going a wee bit short. But Head was up for the challenge, hoisting the ball over mid-on for a massive maximum. In between, Abhishek, who also played a couple of fine shots, fell to Topley, an upish flick snaffled by Ferguson at square leg. But that brought together Head and Klaasen together as RCB were

put under the cosh further by SRH's second-wicket pair. Head soon fetched his hundred with a brutally-driven boundary off pacer Vysakh Vijayakumar. However, he perished soon as a mistimed slice off Ferguson was taken by Du Plessis at mid-off. But the dismissal did not slow down Hyderabad as Klaasen assumed the role of battering ram, bringing up his fifty in just 23 balls. As is his wont, the South African was eminently forgettable one, clobbered the part-time left-arm spin of Mahipal Lomror for 18 runs in his only over. SRH soon went past their own record score of 277 despite Klaasen getting dismissed by Ferguson. The landmark moment came when Aiden Markram (32, 17b) took a single off Vysakh to long-off. Markram also added 56 runs for the unbroken fourth wicket alliance with Abdul Samad (37, 10b, 4x4, 3x6) as Hyderabad also smoked 22 sixes, the highest in an IPL innings.



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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya could not hide his appreciation for Mahendra Singh Dhoni's tactical acumen following his team's 20-run loss to Chennai Super Kings at the Wankhede Stadium here on Sunday. While Dhoni's barrage of three sixes and a hurriedly-completed two runs off the fourth and last delivery was something that gave CSK the winning cushion, it was the former India skipper's reading of the game from behind the stumps that Pandya felt made the difference on a belter of a track. "They (CSK) were smart with their plans and used the longer boundary well. They got the hang of it and they have a man behind the stumps telling them what's working," said Pandya after his side failed to chase 206 despite Rohit Sharma smashing his second IPL

century and batting from start to finish. CSK skipper Rututaj Gaikwad gave Dhoni a huge compliment, saying his power-hitting with just four balls remaining made the difference between victory and defeat. Dhoni, 42, scored 20 off four deliveries, which in the end made the difference to the match's outcome. "Our young wicketkeeper (MSD) scoring three sixes down the order helped a lot and I think that was the difference. To start off, on this kind of ground, you need 10-15 extra runs. We were looking at 215-220, but Bumrah bowled well," said Gaikwad, who took over the captaincy duties from Dhoni this season. "Bowling-wise, we were spot-on with our execution. Even in powerplay, I would have taken six overs for 60. These kinds of venues demand both skills: batting and bowling. Our (Lasith) Malinga (Matheesha Pathirana)

bowled exceptionally well and nailed those yorkers," he said. On why he did not open the innings and instead sent Ajinkya Rahane with Rachin Ravindra, Gaikwad said, "Nothing, Jinks (Rahane) was carrying a bit of a niggles. Thought it was better for him to open and get away quick runs. I'm fine batting anywhere." Player of the Match, Pathirana, who grabbed his best IPL figures of 4/28, said he was a bit nervous as he was coming back into the side after recovering from a niggles. "When we bowled in powerplay, I was nervous. I don't think about results and I just think about execution. First of all, I was having a niggles before two weeks and all support staff and players helped me. "That's the main thing to have my form," said the Sri Lankan, who has modelled his action on the lines of the legendary Malinga.

RR BRACE FOR NARINE SPIN TREAT AS KKR EYE TOP SPOT

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Rajasthan Royals' star-studded batting will face the serious challenge of decoding Sunil Narine's mystery at Eden Gardens when they take on two-time champions Kolkata Knight Riders in a top-of-the-table IPL clash here on Tuesday. Narine, who is one month shy of turning 36, had played a pivotal role in KKR's twin triumphs under former skipper Gautam Gambhir in 2012 and 2014. Ever since joining the side way back in 2012, Narine has sizzled at Eden Gardens with his crafty bowling, proving to be a big threat to opposition batters. Now after reuniting with Gambhir, who returned to the team as their mentor, Narine dished out an all-round show, reigniting their title hopes again and a win against RR will hand them the pole

position in the 10-team standings ahead of the halfway stage of the season. His 1/19 against the Sunrisers Hyderabad or 1/17 against Lucknow Super Giants may have failed to grab attention but those eight overs where he did not concede a single boundary made all the difference in the end for KKR. Phil Salt may have walked away with the player-of-the-match award in their solid eight-wicket win over LSG here on Sunday, but it was Narine, who choked LSG in the middle overs to limit them to a below-par 161 for 7. Come Tuesday, the likes of Sanju Samson, Riyan Parag and Shimron Hetmyer -- who all have struck at the rate of more than 155 this season -- will be up against the Narine challenge. It remains to be seen if Jos Buttler is fit to be included in the playing XI after missing their last fixture against



Punjab Kings. With his ability to express himself at the top, Narine, who has a strike-rate of 183.51 and averages 33-plus this season, has a Rashid Khan-like aura at KKR. Their IPL record buy Mitchell Starc has also shut all the

noise to return to his elements, claiming two wickets in the last over for his 3/28 against LSG. In such a scenario, the top-of-the-table contest may well boil down to KKR's bowling versus RR's batting. KKR's only weaklink could be

their skipper Shreyas Iyer's poor form with the bat. Even though he remained unbeaten on a run-a-ball 38 in their 162-run chase against LSG, Shreyas looked tentative both against the pacers and spinners and KKR's batting may well get exposed if RR manage to give early breakthroughs. KKR's batting has largely depended this season on Salt-Narine's fireworks at the top and Andre Russell's blitz at the death, as their Indian batters have not been tested much. Rinku Singh has had a quiet season with 63 runs from four innings and has not got much opportunity, while team vice-captain Nitish Rana is sidelined with an injury. RR have a formidable bowling lineup in Trent Boult, Avesh Khan, Yuzvendra Chahal and Keshav Maharaj, while it remains to be seen if Ravichandran Ashwin is fit for the match.

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Mumbai Indians batting coach Kieron Pollard is "sick and fed up" of people pinpointing particular individuals for the team's losses as he urged fans not to "nitpick" struggling captain Hardik Pandya after MI lost to Chennai Super Kings by 20 runs in their Indian Premier League match here. CSK legend MS Dhoni took 26 runs off Pandya's final over with the help of three consecutive sixes as the MI skipper struggled for right line and length while also bowling two wides at a crucial time. Pandya finished with figures of 2 for 43 from his three overs and also had a tough time with the bat, managing a mere two runs off six balls at a crucial juncture of the game.

"You're going to have those days. I'm sick and fed up of just looking to pinpoint at individuals. Cricket is a team sport at the end of the day," Pollard said at the post-match press conference Sunday night. "He (Pandya) is a confident guy. He has been great around the group. In cricket, you have good days and you have bad days. I'm seeing an individual who's working bloody hard to continue his skill and to play his trade." Pollard reminded fans about the possibility of Pandya being picked for India's T20 World Cup campaign, saying if that happens everyone would be singing his praises. "This is an individual that's going to represent the country in less than six weeks' time. We're all going to be cheering for him and want him to do well," said



the West Indian who himself is a MI legend. "It's about high time that we try to encourage and try to stop nitpick. See if we can get the best out of one of the great all-rounders India could ever produce. "He can bat, he can bowl, he can field. He has an X factor about him. I hope very well deep

down within my heart that when he comes out on top, I'll sit back and I'll watch everyone sing his praises." The match witnessed intermittent booing of Pandya who struggled with both bat and ball and also received criticism from former England captain Kevin Pietersen who claimed that the

MI skipper has been 'smiling too much'. Pollard said he is seeing Pandya evolving and backed him to turn things around. "As an individual, you have to evolve as well. When you're young and there's that youthful exuberance, you go out and you do things in a certain manner. But the older that you get, at times, responsibility sort of kicks in, accountability to teams sort of kicks in," he said. "What I'm seeing is a guy that is evolving. Obviously, we as individuals, we want to see certain things, but sometimes the game does not demand certain things," Pollard said while Mumbai Indians would revisit their plans on Dhoni but added that anyone could have been at the receiving end of the former CSK skipper's onslaught, like Pandya experienced Sunday night.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

"You can't do anything about it," Rashid Khan conceded as he tried to make sense of Australia's refusal to play bilateral cricket with Afghanistan men's team, which he believes, achieves nothing beyond denying happiness to his people. Cricket Australia cancelled an ODI series Down Under in 2023 and as recent as last month, refused to play a T20 series scheduled in the UAE later this year due to its government's concerns over "marked deterioration" of treatment of women in the Taliban-ruled state. But Afghan players, including Rashid, continue to be welcome in the Big Bash League.

"I want, all the players want, to play cricket because that is the only source of happiness for people back home in Afghanistan and if you take that away, there is nothing that people could celebrate or enjoy," Rashid told PTI during an exclusive interview on Monday. In 2023, Rashid had threatened to pull out of the Big Bash League over Australia's refusal to play bilateral cricket with them. The 25-year-old has many Australian friends but he hasn't actually spoken to any of them about the issue. "Well, I have never discussed it with anybody (Australian cricketers) as I haven't had that opportunity to discuss all those things with them, something which is not in your hands or you have no control over, you

can't do anything about it. "It's not a cricketing reason or matter that you think about it, it is about two governments and as a player you can't do anything about it. What we can do is whenever we get an opportunity to play cricket, we go with full pride while representing our country." Having played over 400 T20 games and being the most sought after freelancer in the T20 universe, Rashid feels privileged about being the face of Afghanistan cricket. "Before 2017, we never thought about playing the IPL. It was hard (far-fetched) thought for us to even think of playing in the biggest T20 league in the world. "The hardest part is to get into the system and when I (first)



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

Ahmed and Azmatullah Omrzi are playing for Gujarat Titans in the ongoing IPL. Mohammed Nabi is representing Mumbai Indians and Rahmanullah Gurbaz is part of the KKR squad. "Back in 2017, it was only me and (Mohd) Nabi, who were there and now we have 7-8

players who are with different franchises, and it is so good to see them not just being a part of the team but also performing," he said. "At the end of the day, it is helping Afghanistan cricket and youngsters back home. So I am quite happy, and blessed to be one of those who brought about this change in mindset of people about cricket in Afghanistan." **DIFFICULT TO HIT RHYTHM IMMEDIATELY AFTER SURGERY:** Rashid had undergone a major back surgery last year, which didn't allow him to play the India series in January. It was a hard time but now he feels he is back in rhythm. "For me, those three to four months were hard but I tried to make sure that I am relaxed and

when I get back on field, I am fully ready and prepared for it," the champion spinner said. "The main focus for first four months was on getting back on track, it is hard when you are not playing but these are things which are attached to your career, and it is important as a player that you take (accept) that process, you make sure that you look after yourself. "I made sure that I spent time with my family and looked after my body." **MISSING SHAMI BUT HAPPY WITH GT BOWLING UNIT:** Gujarat Titans have had a bumpy ride with three wins and an equal number of defeats in the season thus far. While the absence of a game-changer like Mohammed Shami is being felt massively,

Rashid stood by the bowling unit. "Shami played a main role for us in last two seasons, both with new ball and old ball, and the way he has delivered for the team actually made mine and others job easier, especially in the middle overs," he had no hesitation in admitting. "We have started the season with a positive mindset and everyone is taking responsibility and delivering best for team but sometimes result doesn't go your way but we are quite happy with bowling unit. "T20 is all about making right decisions at the right time. Spencer Johnson, Darshan Nalkande, Azmat, Umesh have all delivered and most importantly, Mohit (Sharma) bhai as well."

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