

OPINION 6
IGNORING NEIGHBOURS TO
EMBRACE THE WORLD

WORLD 8
SUNAK FACES RESISTANCE OVER
SMOKING BAN PLANS

MONEY 10
MARKETS SLUMP
FOR THIRD DAY

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Two top Maoists among 29 gunned down in C'garh

STAFF REPORTER ■ KANKER

In a huge blow to Naxalites, security forces on Tuesday killed as many as 29 Maoists including two senior cadres carrying a total of Rs 16 lakh reward money on their heads in Chhattisgarh's Kanker district.

Three security personnel were also injured in the gunfight in the forest of Hapatola between Binaguda and Koronar villages, Kanker Superintendent of Police Indira Kalyan Elesela said.

The District Reserve Guard and the Border Security Force were tipped off about the presence of senior Maoists Shankar, Lalita, Raju and others of the North Bastar Division of the outlawed Maoist organization.

Fierce fighting broke out between the two sides.

When the battle ended, the bodies of 29 Maoists as well as a huge cache of arms including INSAS and AK-47 rifles, SLF rifles, and .303 rifles were recovered from the site.

Two of the deceased were identified as Shankar Rao and Lalita, both Divisional Committee Members of the outlawed



File Photo

Communist Party of India (Maoist).

They carried a bounty of Rs 8 lakhs each on their heads. The 27 other dead are yet to be identified.

Three security personnel

injured in the gunfight were said to be in stable condition. Later, they were shifted to higher medical centre for better treatment.

The Kanker Lok Sabha constituency in the Bastar

region will go to the polls on April 26.

Chhattisgarh Home Minister Vijay Sharma applauded the security forces for killing 29 Maoists in Kanker.

Modi, Mamata faceoff in Bengal



(Left to right): Prime Minister Narendra Modi with BJP candidate Sukanta Majumdar during a public meeting ahead of Lok Sabha elections, in Balurghat and West Bengal on Tuesday; Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during an election campaign rally ahead of Lok Sabha polls, at Hill Cart road in Siliguri on Tuesday

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Bengal witnessed a virtual duel between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee even as the former accused the Bengal Government of stopping Ram Navami celebrations and honouring those who throw stones at Ram Navami processions while the latter asked the people, particularly the minorities not to walk into the trap of the BJP which is trying to trigger communal riots in Bengal. The Prime Minister, who was addressing election rallies at Balurghat and Raiganj in North Bengal, alleged how the Bengal administration has been doing everything to spike the Ram Navami celebrations.

"Tomorrow the entire nation goes to celebrate the Ram Navami ... but here the Trinamool Congress has always tried to stop it from taking place in Bengal ... they tried many conspiracies. And we were forced to get permission from

the High Court and tomorrow, with devotion and faith, we will celebrate Ram Navami," the Prime Minister said. "It has always been that the TMC stops such religious programmes and promotes and honours those people who throw stones at these processions," he said. However, the Chief Minister hit back from a rally at Moinaguri in Jalpaiguri district asking people to remain alert against the "evil designs of the BJP to trigger riots in the name of festivals."

In a statement that most Opposition parties, including the BJP read as a bid to act the messiah of the Muslims before elections, Mamata said, "Bengal is for every religion but here are some people who are trying to play communal politics by triggering riots I ask the people, particularly my minority brothers and sisters to keep your

cool and do not walk into the trap laid by them ... some people are spreading fake videos ... some may raise slogans ... but if you hear such slogans keep your cool and pray to Allah so that things pass off without fuss ... because Ram Navami is a festival of mutual respect and honour."

The BJP sends NIA in Bengal to disturb and victimise the innocent people, she said.

Earlier the High Court had allowed Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Anjani

Putra Sena to take out processions, but under certain conditions, the maximum participants should not be more than 200 and that there would be no play of arms or DJs.

Tuesday's development came against the backdrop of weeks' long riots at Howrah, Serampore and Dalkhola in the days following Ram Navami.

The Modi-Mamata spar came at a time when in a major development the Jadavpur University authorities on Tuesday allowed the celebrations of Ram Navami at the campus even as sources said "if Saraswati Puja can be organised why Ram Navami cannot be celebrated here." This is the first time that such celebrations would be allowed inside the campus.

Elsewhere in North Bengal the Chief Minister warned the people against the Citizenship Amendment Act, comparing it with the head of a big fish which has a tail in the National Register of Citizens. "If it is a big fish then the CAA is the head and NRC is the tail and the Uniform Civil Code is its torso," Mamata said accusing the BJP government of playing "dirty politics of polarisation."

Attacking the Centre for "defaming Bengal with allegations of corruption," she demanded a white paper to be released on the issue.

MNREGA workers turn into political campaigners

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In an unexpected turn during the Uttar Pradesh (UP) election season, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) workers are witnessing heightened demand, not for their traditional manual labour, but as foot soldiers for political campaigners. This trend has ignited a discourse on the exploitation of these workers for political purposes, not by a particular party but by parties of all hues.

Typically earning around ₹250 per day for their labour, MGNREGA workers are now being tempted into election rallies and canvassing with promises of ₹300 wages, supplemented with three meals a day and even evening liquor.

The surge in pay, coupled with additional perks, has resulted in a scarcity of MGNREGA workers willing to partake in their usual tasks, such as pond digging or rural development work, across various regions of UP.

Raja Bhaiya, head of the Vidya Dham Samiti NGO in Banda, UP, noted that in the Bundelkhand region, these workers are engaged in election campaigns for as low as ₹200-250 per day.

"They are attracted by the promise of three meals a day and evening liquor. And this is sufficient incentive for them to work at lower rates," he told The Pioneer, adding "these workers are doubling up as political karyakarta". Sukhai Ram, a MGNREGA job card holder, was assigned to work on a pond and culvert construction project in Gram Sabha Karonda, Barabanki, but has declined, citing the allure of higher wages and "shaam ki diwai", referring to alcohol.

The Department of Rural Development



in Lucknow has received complaints from several districts regarding the disruption of MGNREGA work due to elections. "Labour shortages are common during elections. Diversion is inevitable, and the Government has limited control over it," a senior official informed.

These workers are tasked with carrying election materials, waving flags at rallies, and participating in roadshows.

The exploitation of MGNREGA workers for political ends has drawn condemnation from various quarters, raising concerns about the moral implications of such practices.

Political analyst Dr Rajesh Sharma remarked, "The exploitation of MGNREGA workers for election purposes raises serious ethical questions. These vulnerable workers are being lured with temporary benefits to serve political interests, undermining the essence of the employment guarantee scheme." This issue has reignited debates about

the efficacy of MGNREGA in combating rural unemployment and poverty, with some arguing that the scheme's objectives are being compromised for short-term political gains.

The ramifications of this trend are evident on the ground, as rural development projects suffer from labour shortages, impacting the pace and quality of work in various UP regions.

In response to criticism, political parties have defended their actions, citing the need for manpower during election campaigns and asserting that they are providing job opportunities to MGNREGA workers.

"With soaring temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius, people prefer staying indoors. We require foot soldiers and have recruited some from villages," stated Rupesh Kumar, a BJP leader, although he claimed ignorance about whether these recruits are MGNREGA workers.

Jailed Kejriwal, Sisodia and Jain: AAP's Star Campaigners

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

On a day the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) took a cue from a Bollywood movie and pronounced "My name is Arvind Kejriwal and I am not a terrorist", it has named top leaders who are in jail, including the Chief Minister as the star campaigners for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls, in apparent push to its 'Jail ka Jawab Vote Se' campaign.

AAP leader and a Rājya Sabha member Sanjay Singh said the AAP convener has shared his message

"...Kejriwal...not a terrorist..." from Tihar Jail and slammed the BJP for the treatment being meted out to him in custody.

The AAP on Tuesday announced a list of 40 star campaigners in Gujarat which also mentioned the names of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia, Satyendar Jain all of whom are imprisoned, as the party's star campaigners in Gujarat ahead of the Lok Sabha elections 2024.

The list includes names of Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, Raghav Chadha, Isudan Gadhvi, Atishi, Saurabh



Bharadwaj, Pankaj Gupta, Gopal Rai, Kailash Gahlot, Imran Hussain and Alpesh Kathiriya. However, names of Rājya Sabha MPs Harbhajan Singh who is also an ace cricketer and Swati Maliwal are missing from the list. Meanwhile, the Delhi BJP targeted the AAP over the inclusion of Sunita Kejriwal's name in the list of its star campaigners.

"Along with corruption, nepotism is also welcome in the AAP," said Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva. Notably, Harbhajan Singh is currently busy in IPL 2024. On Tuesday, the party kicked off a mega campaign called Jail ka Jawab vote se Sankalp Sabha.

Congress leads in complaints to EC

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid allegations by Opposition parties that the Government is misusing probe agencies to target its leaders, the Election Commission on Tuesday shared a data saying around 200 complaints have been filed by various political parties and candidates across States.

The Congress is the top in the list of filing complaints to the EC, followed by the BJP for violation of Model Code of Conduct. According to the EC, the BJP has filed 51 complaints, of them, action has been taken in 38 cases while the Congress filed 59 and action taken on 51 cases. Several political parties from the INDIA Bloc had approached the poll panel seeking its intervention in the alleged misuse of probe agencies by the Government to target their leaders over

graft. Following the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate in a money laundering case linked to the alleged excise scam, the Opposition parties had mounted renewed attack on the Government for its alleged bid to silence their leaders ahead of parliamentary elections.

According to the EC, suo motu removal of officers holding dual charges as Principal Secretaries to Chief Ministers in six States namely Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, as they were holding charge of Home/General Administration department also. This was to distance election related senior officers with control over, DMs/DEOs/ROs and SPs, from Chief Minister's offices.

Aditya tops UPSC exams, Animesh second, Donuru third

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The announcement of civil services results 2023 on Tuesday stirred up more excitement than usual. Social media platforms were agog with compliments, best wishes, filmy dialogues, gyan and pravachan on the mother of all examinations conducted by Public Services Commission (UPSC).

Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his entire Council of Ministers, BJP contestants in the Lok Sabha, other political figures from ruling and Opposition sides were first time on the same page wishing the toppers and successful candidates who cleared the exams held last year.

In fact the UPSC results were trending on various media platforms.

Aditya Srivastava, originally selected for the Indian Police Services (IPS) last year, added another feather to his cap as he secured the top rank in the UPSC Civil Services Examination 2023.

Hailing from Lucknow, Srivastava's journey has been remarkable, characterised by his stint in the corporate world before pursuing civil services, reflecting his resilience and dedication. Joining Srivastava in this remarkable achievement are Animesh Pradhan from Odisha, a Bachelor of Technology degree holder in computer science from NIT Rourkela, and Telangana

native Donuru Ananya Reddy, a graduate from Delhi University's Miranda House College with a degree in geography, securing the second and third ranks respectively.

Soon after the results were announced, Modi congratulated those who cleared the examination, emphasising their hard work, perseverance, and dedication. "I congratulate all those who have successfully cleared the Civil Services Examination, 2023. Their hard work, perseverance and dedication has paid off, marking the start of a promising career in public service. Their efforts will shape the future of our nation in the times to come. My best wishes to them," the



(Left to right): Aditya Srivastava (All India Rank (AIR 1), Uttar Pradesh; Animesh Pradhan (AIR 2), Odisha's and Donuru Ananya Reddy (AIR 3), Telangana

Prime Minister wrote on X (previously Twitter).

Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi too joined in congratulating the candidates, "Congratulations to all the candidates who have successfully cleared this year's UPSC Civil Services Examination. With dedication and commitment, you are now entrusted with the responsibility of serving our great country. My best wishes for your future endeavours."

Among the 1,016 recommended candidates, comprising 664 men and 352 women, the top five positions are evenly distributed, with three men and two women. An IPS trainee from Kerala PK Sidharth Ramkumar

secured the fourth rank with anthropology as his optional subject, while a Gurugram resident Ruhani secured the fifth rank with economics as her optional subject.

Among the top 25 candidates, there are 10 women and 15 men, reflecting a diverse range of educational backgrounds, including engineering, humanities, science, commerce, business administration, architecture, and law from premier institutions such as IIT, IIM, NIT, University of Delhi, and National Law University.

The selected candidates also include 30 people with benchmark disabilities, reflecting the UPSC's commitment to inclusivity.

Weather changes again in many districts of Madhya Pradesh

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The weather changed in many districts of Madhya Pradesh on Tuesday night. The Meteorological Department has predicted rain, hail and wind speed of 60 km per hour in Betul. At the same time, thunderstorm conditions may also occur in Seoni, Narsinghpur, Mandla, Dindori, Chhindwara, Pandhurna and Balaghat. It was sunny in Jabalpur till Tuesday afternoon, then it started drizzling in the evening. The Meteorological Department told that the effect of heat will increase in the state in the next two days. The day temperature may increase by 3 to 4 degrees Celsius. At the same time, the

nights will also be hot. The period of thunderstorms and rains may start again from April 19. Western Disturbance is becoming active in North India on April 18. Its effect can be seen from April 19. It will be clear in a day or two whether this system will remain strong or not. As of now, there will be an impact of Western Disturbance in some areas of the state. On Monday also, there was light rain in Jabalpur, Betul, Ratlam and Seoni of the state. Meteorologists said that this is the first time that it has rained for 9 consecutive days in April. Never before has it rained so many days continuously in the month of April. April rainfall records were also broken in almost all the districts. The weather remained clear in

The Meteorological Department has predicted rain, hail and wind speed of 60 km per hour in Betul

most cities of the state on Monday. During this period the weather showed different patterns as there was light rain in Jabalpur, Ratlam, Seoni and Betul, while the day temperature crossed 40 degrees Celsius in Khajuraho, Dhar, Satna and Ratlam. The highest mercury was recorded at 40.2 degrees Celsius in Khajuraho and Dhar. The mercury remained below 35 degrees in Pachmarhi, Narsinghpur,

Seoni and Malajkhand of Balaghat. The effect of heat was seen in the remaining districts. Talking about big cities, mercury was recorded at 37 degrees Celsius in Bhopal, 39 degrees in Indore, 38.8 degrees in Gwalior, 38 degrees in Jabalpur and 39 degrees Celsius in Ujjain. The effect of heat is expected to remain on Tuesday also. The day temperature may increase by 2 to 3 degrees. A western disturbance may become active again after a week. Met told that due to Western Disturbance, cyclonic circulation and trough line, the strong system remained active in the state. Due to this, there was a strong storm, hailstorm and rain and light rain is expected only in some districts.

The Meteorological Department has issued an alert of hail and storm with lightning in Seoni and Sagar. Wind speed can be up to 60 km per hour. In Betul, Chhindwara, Mandla and Balaghat, there is a possibility of rain and light thunder along with lightning. There may be thunderstorms and light rain in Bhand, Datia, Vidisha, Raisen, Jabalpur, Mandla, Dindori, Anuppur and Balaghat. Storm, rain and hailstorm have been continuing in the state for the last 8 days. Since April 7, there has been light rain in some places and heavy rain in some places in the state. At the same time, hail is also falling along with the storm. Due to the activity of the system, light rain occurred in some districts on Sunday also.



Union Home Minister Amit Shah during a roadshow ahead of the Lok Sabha election in Chhindwara, Madhya Pradesh on Tuesday. Pioneer photo

Three injured in firecracker factory explosion in Indore

STAFF REPORTER ■ INDORE

Three persons were injured after an explosion in a firecracker factory in Indore in the afternoon on Tuesday; the license of the factory expired last month, said police. An explosion occurred after a fire broke out in a firecracker factory in Amba Chandan village of Mhow police station area of Indore. It was found that there was a fire in the room where chemicals were kept. Three employees sustained burn injuries and were taken to Choithram Hospital by the owner of the factory. The accident happened around 3.30 pm. As soon as the information was received, the police and administration team reached the spot. Relief and rescue operations have been

An explosion occurred after a fire broke out in a firecracker factory in Amba Chandan village of Mhow police station area of Indore

started. Also, investigation into the incident has also been started. It was told that the blast in the firecracker factory was so intense that the people nearby got scared. The three injured in the accident were identified as Rohit of Datoda, Arjun Rathore of Maharashtra and Umesh Chauhan. The license of the factory was valid only till March 31. Firecrackers (Sutli bombs)

are made in the factory where the blast took place. This factory belongs to Sakhir Khan, who is a resident of Rau. ASP Rupesh Dwivedi says that Amba Chandan village is about 8 Km away from Mhow. There is a firecracker factory in a field of 4 bighas, about 5 km away from the village, towards the forest. The work of making firecrackers (Sutli bombs) was going on here. Preliminary information has revealed that the factory was licensed. The license was valid till March 31. Collector Ashish Singh said that in the investigation conducted after the Harda accident, this factory was also investigated. 10 to 15 laborers were working in the factory. Right now our focus is only on the injured. They should get proper treatment.

27 selected from MP including 11 from Bhopal in UPSC exams

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) has declared the result of Civil Services Examination 2023 on Tuesday, 27 from Madhya Pradesh including 11 from Bhopal were selected. In this, Chhaya Singh of Bhopal has secured 65th position. Chhaya Singh is the daughter of IAS Chhote Singh. Bhopal's doctor Sachin Goyal has got 209th rank and Sameer Goyal has got 222nd rank. Both are real brothers. Mahi Sharma of Dhar has got 106th rank and Kajal Singh of Satna has got 485th rank. Kajal's father Vijay Singh is a sub inspector at Kolgawan police station in Satna. Chhaya's father Chhote Singh, who secured 65th rank, is posted as Additional Commissioner Revenue, Gwalior. He told that Chhaya is on a Ladakh tour and

was informed about his selection through an acquaintance's phone from Ladakh. Chhaya Singh has succeeded in becoming IAS in the fourth attempt in UPSC exam 2023. Chhaya had cleared CSE 2021 and got 288th rank, then she was selected in IDAS. Before this, she was selected in DANIPS service in UPSC. In the year 2019, she was selected from UPSC for the post of Assistant Commandant in CRPF. In the year 2020, she has also been selected for the post of Women and Child Development Officer. Chhaya has done the five-year BALLB course from Patiala, Punjab through CLAT. Bhopal's Dr Sachin Goyal has got 209th rank and Sameer Goyal has got 222nd rank. Both are real brothers. Sameer and Sachin's father Sanjay Goyal is the executive director of Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited

(BHEL), Bhopal. While mother Dr. Sangeeta Goyal is a pediatrician. Sachin Goyal of Bhopal has got 209th rank and his brother Sameer Goyal has got 222nd rank. Sachin and Sameer feed sweets to each other. Arnav Bhandari of Bhopal has also been selected in UPSC. His rank is 232. With this, it is certain that he will become an IPS. Arnav told that he started studying for UPSAC in February 2020. Last year he was in the reserve list and later he was selected for the Ministry of Railways. Now the selection has taken place for IPS. In UPSC also, three have been selected from Gwalior, in which Manya Singh Chauhan has got 84th rank, Ayushi Bansal has got 97th rank and Madhav Aggarwal has got 211th rank. Manya said - I have completed my entire studies in Gwalior only. She used to study when-

ever she got time. To fulfill his father's dream and make his mark in the public sector, he can do good work for the people. That's why this line has been chosen. Ayushi Bansal told that she is currently an IPS in Karnataka cadre. Currently on leave. Mother Radha Bansal is an officer in LIC. This was Ayushi's second chance. Earlier this IPS has been selected. She has studied in Gwalior till 10th. After this, he completed 12th in Delhi and graduated from IIT Kanpur. Madhav Aggarwal says that he is from Gwalior and he has also completed his education from Gwalior. Belongs to a businessman family. Palak Goyal of Narmadapuram has secured 479th rank. She is the daughter of colonizer Narendra Ranjana Goyal, associated with the Rotary Club, and the granddaughter of KK Goyal,

retired from SPM. Shubham Raghuvanshi from Morkha village of Betul has got 556th rank in UPSC. He is the son of advocate Bhojraj Singh Raghuvanshi and teacher Anita Raghuvanshi. Shubham's primary education took place in the village. After this, he took law from Excellence School, Betul. After going to Delhi and doing UPSC coaching for two years, he got success only in his third attempt. Two youth from Guna have been selected in UPSC. Sandeep Raghuvanshi (rank 277) resident of SEJI and Manav Jain Modi (rank 634) resident of Guna city have been selected. Sandeep Raghuvanshi's father Mahendra Raghuvanshi is a farmer and mother Janaki Bai is a government teacher. He has done IIT and IIM from Delhi. After this, without working, he started UPSC coaching in Guna itself.



Bharatiya Shakti Chetna Party candidate from Bhopal Lok Sabha constituency Balram Singh Tomar arrives to file his nomination papers ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in Bhopal on Tuesday. Pioneer photo

1st phase campaign to end today

Bhopal: In the first phase of Lok Sabha Elections-2024, the election campaign will stop at 6 pm on April 17 in the 6 Lok Sabha constituencies of Madhya Pradesh where voting is to be held from 7 am to 6 pm on April 19. Voting is to be held in 3 assembly constituencies of Balaghat Lok Sabha constituency Baihar, Lanji and Paraswada only from 7 am to 4 pm, hence election campaigning in these areas will stop at 4 pm on April 17. Chief Electoral Officer Anupam Rajan has said that there is a provision to stop the election campaign in the Lok Sabha constituency 48 hours before the scheduled end of voting. After the deadline for campaigning ends, persons from outside the area who are not voters in that constituency have to leave that area. An intensive campaign is run for this.

Jyotiraditya Scindia files nomination papers

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Union Minister and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Jyotiraditya Scindia filed his nomination papers for the Guna parliamentary seat on Tuesday for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. After worshipping, Mr Scindia told news agency ANI, "I have just taken the blessings of the 'Tekri sarkar' and now we are moving forward on the path of public service." The Congress party has fielded Rao Yadavendra Singh against Mr Scindia for the seat. The Guna Lok Sabha constituency in Madhya Pradesh has long been synonymous with the Scindia family's political dominance. It is regarded as their stronghold, second only to Gwalior, and has been represented by prominent Scindia family members over the years.

Notably, Vijayaraje Scindia, Madhavrao Scindia, and Jyotiraditya Scindia have all seen electoral success here. Jyotiraditya Scindia of the Congress emerged victorious in four elections here before losing to BJP's Krishnapal Singh Yadav in 2019 Lok Sabha polls by 1.25 lakh votes. Mr Scindia's defeat on his own turf by 1.25 lakh votes set in motion a series of events, including an internal party struggle, eventually resulting in Scindia's exit from the party in 2020. He took 22 MLAs with him, causing the collapse of the then Congress government led by Kamal Nath that had come to power in 2018. The BJP brought Scindia into Parliament via the Rajya Sabha and made him a Union minister. Mr Scindia is contesting again from the same Guna seat on the BJP symbol this time, while the

rival congress candidate Rao Yadavendra Singh is also a former BJP leader and is contesting against the union minister. Guna will go to the polls in the third phase on May 7, along with eight other parliamentary seats in the state. Lok Sabha elections in Madhya Pradesh will be conducted in four phases. The first phase of polling would be held on April 19, followed by April 26, May 7 and May 13. Madhya Pradesh has a total of 29 Lok Sabha constituencies, making it the sixth-largest state in terms of parliamentary representation. Out of these, 10 seats are reserved for SC and ST candidates, while the remaining 19 are unreserved. In the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, the BJP secured a massive victory in Madhya Pradesh, winning 28 out of the 29 seats. The Indian National Congress (INC) managed to win only one seat.

Leopard movement spotted twice in Bhoj University campus

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Sensation prevailed after movement of leopard in Bhoj University campus of Bhopal was spotted, leopard was seen roaming around the houses twice in the night, but disappeared during the search. Leopard has not been seen yet on Tuesday. A few days ago also a leopard was seen here. DFO Alok Pathak told that the leopard is chased and cages have also been installed to trap. Bhoj University campus is spread over 25 acres. It is between Chunabhatti and Sarwa-Dharma Bridge (Kolar Road). Kaliyasot river passes through its middle. There is Walmi hill behind. The Kerwa area is also some distance away. The area of Kerwa and Kaliyasot is a tiger area, hence there is often movement of tigers and leopards here. About 50 families live in the campus. Team of 10 employees kept searching throughout the night after the movement of the leopard, teams of 10 employees kept searching throughout the night in the university campus. DFO Pathak and other officers also reached the spot. Officers told that there is a forest behind

the campus from where the leopard came. There are many tigers and leopards in that area. The focus is on driving away the leopard. DFO Pathak said, the number of dogs in the campus is also high. Probably the leopard came to the campus in search of prey. The forest department team remained deployed in the university throughout the night. DFO Pathak said, people have been asked to stay in their homes after evening. The possibility of leopard attack increases when it gets dark. People living on campus should also keep windows and doors closed. Do not let children play outside the house or in the park. If necessary, go out only in groups of 3-4 people. Tiger was seen roaming here in February 2022. When the recording of the CCTV camera installed at the gate of the bungalow of the then Vice Chancellor Jayant Sonwalkar came to light, everyone was shocked. Tiger kept roaming inside the boundary wall of the bungalow for an hour. Some footprints of the animal were found on the wet soil. During investigation it was found to be that of Tiger.

Swarn Prashan Ceremony Conducted

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The AYUSH Department of AIIMS Bhopal organized a Swarn Prashan ceremony on Tuesday. This ceremony aimed at enhancing the overall health and well-being of children through the administration of Swarna Bhasma, a traditional Ayurvedic formulation. The event witnessed the participation of 86 children, who eagerly gathered at the AYUSH Department of AIIMS Bhopal. Swarn Prashan is an ancient Ayurvedic practice that involves administering Swarna Bhasma to children to boost their immunity and promote overall growth and development. Swarna Bhasma, prepared from purified gold, is known for its therapeutic properties in Ayurveda.

Jayant Smriti lecture on 'India's Knowledge Science Tradition'

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Vigyan Bharti Madhya Bharat Prant will organize a lecture on "India's Knowledge Science Tradition" on the birthday of Late Jayantrao Sahastrabuddhe on Wednesday at Rajya Animal Husbandry Training Institute Auditorium, Poultry Bhawan, Vaishali Nagar Bhopal from 5 pm onwards. The keynote speaker of this program will be renowned archaeologist, founder of South Asian Archeology Society and former Vice Chancellor of Deccan College, Dr. Vasant Shinde. Dr. Vasant Shinde is also world famous for DNA testing of Rakhigarhi site of Harappan culture. In this program, Chairman of the Admission and Fee Regulatory Committee, Prof. Ravindra Ramachandra Kanherre will be the special guest. The program will be presided over by Ashok Pandey, Prant Sangchalak Madhyambharat Province. It is known that Late. Jayantrao Sahastrabuddhe was a famous thinker and philosopher, who worked till his last days on making science accessible to the com-

The keynote speaker of this program will be renowned archaeologist, founder of South Asian Archeology Society Vasant Shinde

mon people as an indigenous movement. This lecture series is being organized in his memory. The book "Contribution of Indian Scientists in the Indian Independence Movement" written by Sahastrabuddhe and his lectures on it have been discussed in the entire country. Vigyan Bharti Madhya Pradesh through media appeals to the enlightened citizens of the society, dignitaries, teachers, professors and students to be present in this program and expects you to send your representative to the program venue so that this program becomes popular among the society. Can be widely disseminated and propagated before the public.



Union Minister and BJP candidate from Guna Lok Sabha constituency Jyotiraditya Scindia files his nomination papers in presence of Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, former Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and BJP State President VD Sharma ahead of the Lok Sabha election in Shivpur, Madhya Pradesh on Tuesday. Pioneer photo

AIIMS Bhopal to host undergraduate physiology quiz

Bhopal: The Department of Physiology at AIIMS Bhopal proudly announces the commencement of the "National Undergraduate Physiology Quiz at AIIMS Bhopal-5th edition." Scheduled for April 18, 19, and 25, 2024, the event promises to be an exhilarating showcase of intellectual prowess and academic camaraderie. The screening rounds will kick off on

April 18 and continue through April 19, presenting a rigorous test of participants' knowledge and acumen in the field of physiology. The response to the event has been overwhelming, with around 50 teams from across India registering their participation. This robust turnout underscores the growing enthusiasm and commitment of students towards academic

excellence and collaborative learning. The top 5 teams emerging victorious from the screening rounds will advance to the prestigious main event, slated to take place at AIIMS Bhopal on April 25th, 2024. This culminating showdown will witness these teams vying for supremacy in a battle of intellect and wit, under the keen observation of judges and spectators.

Polling teams airlifted for remote Bastar

Bastar to go for poll in the first phase on April 19

STAFF REPORTER ■
SUKMA/BIJAPUR

Election officials on Tuesday began moving by helicopters to Chhattisgarh's Maoist-hit Bastar Lok Sabha constituency where voting will take place on April 19.

The authorities have started dispatching electronic voting machines (EVMs) and polling parties to booths in sensitive areas of Bijapur and Sukma districts, a senior official said.

Located in the southern part of the constituency, the two districts have reported multiple incidents of Maoist attacks on security personnel during elections in the past.

A total of 245 polling booths have been set up in Bijapur, of which 99 in the



interior areas have been relocated to safer places, Bijapur Collector Anurag Pandey said.

A total of 76 polling parties will be ferried to their destinations in

helicopters, and the exercise began on Tuesday from the Bijapur district headquarters, three days before the polling, he said.

The teams that reach their destinations ahead of

the polling day will stay in the nearest camp of the security forces, he said.

All preparations have been made to ensure peaceful polling, Pandey said.

Talking about security arrangements, Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Yadav said sufficient security personnel were deployed in the district.

Polling parties were also being dispatched to the neighbouring Sukma district, another official said.

At least 27 polling teams and EVMs will be transported in choppers from Sukma district headquarters, he said.

A total of 255 polling booths have been set up in Sukma district, and polling parties for 42 booths will be shifted in choppers, Sukma Collector Haris S said.

Elections to 11 Lok Sabha seats in Chhattisgarh will be held in three phases.

Bastar is the only Lok Sabha constituency to go to polls in the first phase on April 19. Earlier, an officer

said helicopters will ferry polling personnel for 167 polling booths in the constituencies of Bastar (ST), Kanker (ST) and Mahasamund considering the Maoist threat and geographical location.

As per plan, 919 polling personnel will be sent to 156 polling stations by helicopters in Bastar and 84 personnel to nine booths in Kanker seat and two in the Gariaband area of Mahasamund seat, he said.

During Assembly elections last year, the Indian Air Force conducted 404 sorties with eight MI-17 choppers for six days, facilitating the deployment and evacuation of 853 polling team members in five districts of Bastar division Sukma, Bijapur, Kanker, Dantewada and Narayanpur.

Phase-3 LS polls get 91 nominations so far



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

As many as 39 candidates have submitted 56 nominations on Tuesday for the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections in Chhattisgarh which raises the tally to 91, the Election Commission said.

Three candidates submitted five nominations for the Surguja constituency, three submitted five nominations for Raigarh, five submitted eight nominations

for Janjgir-Champa, six submitted as many nominations for Bilaspur, five submitted eight nominations for Durg, 13 submitted 16 nominations for Raipur and four have submitted eight nominations for Korba. Nominations will be accepted until April 19. They will be scrutinized on April 20 and withdrawals will be accepted until April 22.

The seven constituencies will see polling on May 7. The results will be announced on June 4 across the country.

PNB donates wheelchairs under CSR



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The Punjab National Bank has donated wheelchairs under the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to facilitate patients at the Medical College Hospital Raipur. A press communiqué from the bank

on Tuesday said it gave away the wheelchairs to mark its 130th foundation day.

Regional Head of the bank V Srinivas inaugurated the foundation day function.

Deputy Regional Head P. Arun Rao and Dean of Medical College Hospital Dr Tripti Nagaria were present on the occasion.

Lok Sabha poll results to be surprising: Bhupesh



STAFF REPORTER ■
KORBA

Former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel on Tuesday said the results of the Lok Sabha elections will be a surprise.

Baghel said this to reporters after the nomination rally of Congress candidate from Korba, Jyotsana Mahant.

"Despite all the efforts, the BJP and NDA alliance had failed to create any

wave. The situation for them is not good," said the Congress leader.

"Not only in Chhattisgarh but in the entire country the Congress will succeed and an INDIA group will form a government at the Centre," he said.

Jyotsana Mahant is in direct contest with BJP's incumbent Rajya Sabha member Saroj Pandey. Korba will go for polls on May 7.

'Congress will get befitting reply for derogatory remarks against Modi'

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Tuesday said that sensing their possible defeat in the Lok Sabha polls, Congress leaders in Chhattisgarh are making derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Addressing a nomination rally of BJP candidate from here Radheshyam Rathia, Sai said: "They are baffled over their certain defeat and are making shameful comments."

"The comments on Modiji is humiliating and a befitting reply would be given to them to teach the Congress a lesson", he said. Sai said that none of



the 36 promises made by the Congress during the 2018 Assembly polls were completely fulfilled.

Citing works done in his four months tenure, Sai said the BJP government led by him

was committed for fulfilling all the promises made during 2023 Assembly polls.



Under the SVEEP programme, awareness activities aimed at rural people were held in the insurgency-hit Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh on Tuesday and officials demonstrated the working of the EVM.

EC acts against MCC violations



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The Election Commission in Chhattisgarh has addressed 390 complaints of breach of the Model Code of Conduct received through the eVigil (Citizen Vigil App) app, an official statement said on Tuesday. A total of 4,21,905 illegal political promotional materials have also been removed since the model code was implemented.

Citizens can complain about violations such as illegal political promotional materials through the application by taking a photo or making a two-minute video or audio recording.

1,410 children get immunity boost



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The Government Ayurveda College in Raipur administered an immunity booster called Suvarnaprashan to a total of 1,410 children under the age of 16 on Tuesday.

The college holds camps for this on every Pushya

The college holds camps for this on every Pushya Nakshatra date. A total of 4,357 children were given the medicine in the previous camps this year.

Nakshatra date. A total of 4,357 children were given the medicine in the previous camps this year.

The medicine also protects children from respiratory diseases and boosts their concentration and memory, an official communiqué said.

The future camps are scheduled for May 13, June

10, July 8, August 3 and 30, September 26, October 24, November 20 and December 18.

Why India is seeing a rise in oral cancer cases

AGENCIES ■

India bears a significant burden of oral cancers, and the country contributes to about 30 per cent of all global cases, said doctors on Tuesday.

April is Oral Cancer Awareness Month.

Also known as mouth cancer, the disease is the most common form of head and neck cancer and includes cancers of the mouth and the back of the throat.

Traditionally known to affect older adults, the disease is seeing an early onset, Dr. Sowrabh Arora, Senior Director - Surgical Oncology (Head & Neck), Max Hospital, Vaishali, told IANS.

"Oral cancer is a significant health concern in India, ranking as the second

most common cancer overall and the most common among males.

Annually, there are over 100,000 new cases diagnosed. One emerging trend is the increasing incidence of oral cancer among young adults," he said.

"Alarmingly, the incidence of oral cancer is on the rise, with approximately 70 per cent of cases diagnosed at an advanced stage, complicating treatment efforts," added Dr. Mohit Saxena, Senior Consultant - Medical Oncology, Marengo Asia Hospital, Gurugram.

The doctors attributed the rise to the use of tobacco, chewing betel nuts, or smoke, accounting for 80-90 per cent of cases. Other contributing



factors include excessive alcohol consumption, human papillomavirus (HPV) infection, weakened immune system, poor nutrition, excess body

weight, and excessive sun exposure. "This highlights the

pressing need for awareness campaigns and preventive measures to curb the rising

prevalence of oral cancer, particularly among the younger population, and to address the root causes," Dr. Sowrabh said.

"Alarmingly, the incidence of oral cancer is on the rise, with approximately 70 per cent of cases diagnosed at an advanced stage, complicating treatment efforts"

The doctors also advised to be vigilant of symptoms to help in crucial early detection and better outcomes.

"Recognising the symptoms of oral cancer is crucial for early detection and intervention. These include persistent mouth ulcers, red or white patches, intraoral swelling or lumps, difficulty in swallowing, hoarseness of voice, neck or throat swelling, and unexplained weight loss," Dr Mohit told IANS.

He also called for prevention strategies such as abstaining from tobacco, and alcohol, practising safe sex to minimise HPV exposure, using sunscreen to protect against sun damage, and undergoing regular oral screenings for early detection.

BJP releases fresh list of seven more candidates for Lok Sabha polls

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Tuesday released the 12th list of seven more candidates for the Lok Sabha polls, fielding Udayanraje Bhosale, a descendant of Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji, from Satara in Maharashtra and Abhijit Das Bobby as the candidate for the Diamond Harbour constituency in West Bengal. The BJP dropped Union Minister Som Parkash from Hoshiarpur in Punjab but decided to field his wife Anita Som Parkash to keep the influential local leader's support intact. With the new list, the party has named its candidates for around 430 seats for the polls to 543 seats starting from April

19. The BJP's 12th list has focused on Maharashtra, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal seats. The party also released its second list of 21 candidates for the Odisha assembly polls, fielding former minister Dilip Ray from Rourkela. The BJP has fielded Abhijit Das Bobby from Diamond Harbour Parliamentary constituency in West Bengal against Trinamool Congress candidate Abhishek Banerjee, nephew of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Diamond Harbour has been Abhishek Banerjee's stronghold since 2014. Previously known as Hajipur, its name was changed to Diamond Harbour by the British. According to the 2011 census, the population of this

parliamentary constituency, which is part of the South 24 Parganas district, is 2,221,470. Among these, 49.07% live in villages and 50.93% are urban dwellers. The proportion of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes among them is 20.63% and 0.18% respectively. There are seven Assembly seats under Diamond Harbour, including Falta, Satgachhia, Bishnupur, Maheshtala, Budge Budge, Metiabruz and Diamond Harbour. It is among the keenly watched match-ups with the BJP's Das squaring off against the incumbent TMC MP Abhishek Banerjee. In both the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Banerjee won with huge vote margins, proving his popularity and influence in



the seat. In 2019, he beat his nearest rival by a staggering margin of 3.20 lakh votes. Bhosale is the 17th holder of the title of Chhatrapati which was founded by the Maratha emperor Chhatrapati Shivaji on his coronation in 1674. In 2019, Bhosale was elected to the Lok Sabha from Satara on an NCP ticket. In Uttar Pradesh, the party has

fielded Vishwadeep Singh from Firozabad and Shashank Mani Tripathi from Deoria, dropping its sitting MPs from the two seats. The party fielded Anita Som Parkash from the Hoshiarpur reserve parliamentary constituency, according to the list of candidates. Anita thanked the party leadership for entrusting her with the responsibility. The BJP won the seat in the 2014 and 2019 polls. The party's Vijay Sampla had won it in 2014 while Som Parkash had defeated Congress nominee Raj Kumar Chhabwal in 2019. Hoshiarpur is one of the three seats which BJP had been fighting when it was in alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal. But the saffron party is fighting the 2024 Lok Sabha polls on

its own. Anita Som Parkash will face AAP nominee Raj Kumar Chhabwal in the coming polls. The Congress and the SAD are yet to name their candidates from Hoshiarpur. As expected, the BJP fielded former IAS officer Parampal Kaur Sidhu from Bathinda parliamentary seat, currently held by SAD MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal. Sidhu is the daughter-in-law of senior Akali leader Sinkar Singh Maluka. She recently joined the BJP along with her husband Gurpreet Singh Maluka in Delhi. Before joining the saffron party, Sidhu, a 2011-batch IAS officer, had put in her papers. She is pitted against Congress candidate Jeet Mohinder Sidhu and AAP's Gurmeet Singh Khudian. The Shiromani Akali

Dal is yet to name its candidate from Bathinda seat. The Bathinda seat is considered a SAD stronghold. Harsimrat won the Bathinda seat in 2009, 2014 and 2019. In the last Lok Sabha polls, she had defeated Congress candidate Amrinder Singh Raja Warring. The BJP fielded former MLA from Baba Bakala seat Manjit Singh Manna Mianwala from the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat. Khadoor Sahib seat is currently held by Congress MP Jasbir Singh. The AAP has fielded Laljit Singh Bhullar from this seat. The electoral process spans from April 19 to June 1, 2024, across seven phases, with results slated for June 4, ahead of the 17th Lok Sabha's term conclusion on June 16, 2024.

West Asia: Airlines told to make risk assessment for flights

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid escalating tensions in the Middle East, the Ministry of Civil Aviation has asked airlines to carry out their own risk assessment on international flight operations. Air India, Vistara, IndiGo and various international airlines have opted for alternative flight paths to the West and are avoiding the Iranian airspace against the backdrop of tensions flaring up between Iran and Israel.



Civil Aviation Secretary Vumlungam Vualnam on Tuesday said that airlines have been asked to make their own risk assessment with respect to their flight operations. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is handling and interacting with the airlines, and also in touch with the external affairs ministry, he added. The secretary was responding to a query on whether there is an advisory by the ministry or the DGCA to airlines amid the crisis in the Middle East. Air India is operating some of its international flights on alternative flight paths to and from India, and Vistara has also made changes to flight paths for some of its flights due to the Middle East situation.

Also, Air India has temporarily suspended its flights to Tel Aviv. The alternative flight paths have increased the duration of some of the international flights by around half an hour. About the Middle East crisis, Suprio Banerjee, Vice President & Sector Head, Corporate Ratings at ICRA, said commercial airlines may have to take a longer route in order to comply with no-fly regulations, leading to higher fuel expenses. "This will also impact international air travel to the directly affected and potentially affected nearby geographies during the upcoming summer holiday season if the issue persists," Banerjee said. Manan Bajoria, Group VP Growth at travel portal ixigo, said re-routing of flights due to

Court upheld Centre decision to dissolve Maulana Azad Education Foundation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Tuesday upheld the Centre's decision to dissolve the Maulana Azad Education Foundation (MAEF), which was set up in 1989 for promoting education among educationally backward minorities, holding there was no impropriety or irregularity in arriving at it.



A bench headed by Acting Chief Justice Manmohan dismissed a PIL by Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, John Dayal and Daya Singh and said several welfare programmes for the minority communities are being carried out devotedly by the Ministry of Minority Affairs and it could not be said that the interest of the minority communities was being hampered due to the dissolution. Maintaining that the decision to dissolve the MAEF was "well considered" and in accordance with the legal framework, the said it cannot sit in appeal and examine the appropriateness of a policy of the government. "The decision to dissolve the MAEF has been duly taken by the General Body of the MAEF and this court finds no impropriety or irregularity in the process adopted by the

said General Body in arriving at the said decision," the bench, also comprising Justice Mini Pushkarna, said. "This Court finds no merit in the present petition and is not inclined to interfere in the considered decision taken by the respondents. Accordingly, the present petition is dismissed," the court said. The petitioners had approached the high court against the February 7 order of the Ministry of Minority Affairs which instructed the MAEF to carry out the closure process at the earliest and submit copy of the closure certificate issued by the Registrar of Societies of the Delhi government on completion of all procedures, as per extant laws. The Centre had defended its decision in the court, saying

MAEF has become "obsolete" when there is a dedicated ministry holistically executing schemes for the benefit of the minorities. The ministry's order was issued in reference to a proposal received from the Central Waqf Council (CWC) on January 21 to close the MAEF. The court had reserved its verdict on the PIL on March 13 after hearing both the sides. The petitioners had said in their PIL that the ministry's order not only deprived the deserving students, especially girls, from availing the benefits of the schemes of the MAEF but is also without jurisdiction, completely mala fide, arbitrary and a colourable exercise by authorities.

President expresses happiness at 60 per cent IES officers in 2022, 2023 batches being women

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

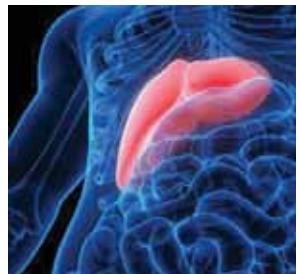


President Droupadi Murmu on Tuesday expressed happiness that more than 60 per cent of the Indian Economic Service (IES) officers from the 2022 and 2023 batches were women and urged them to champion initiatives that foster the holistic empowerment of women across the States while ensuring inclusive development of the country. "Increasing participation of women will help in fulfilling the resolve of inclusive development of India," she said, calling it a significant achievement that reflects a positive trend towards greater gender diversity and inclusivity in the workforce. She was addressing a group of probationers of the Indian Economic Service (2022 and 2023 batches), who had called on her at the Rashtrapati Bhavan here. Murmu said that economic growth is an important component in the country's development. "Macro and micro economic indicators are considered useful parameters of progress. Therefore, the role of economists is important in making government policies and schemes effective and use-

ful," she added. Murmu told officers that as India is moving towards becoming the third largest economy in the world, they will get countless opportunities in the times to come to enhance their capabilities and utilise them to the fullest. She expressed confidence that they will make a significant contribution to the development of the country by taking proper advantage of these opportunities. The president urged the young officers to keep in mind the interest of the poor and backward sections of the country while giving policy related suggestions or taking any decision in their workplace, a statement issued by the Rashtrapati Bhavan said. Murmu said that economic service officers are expected to provide appropriate advice for economic analysis and design of development programmes as well as for strengthening the resource distribution system and evaluating schemes.

Viral hepatitis second leading infectious cause of death worldwide, says WHO

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



With 1.3 million deaths annually, viral hepatitis stands as the second leading infectious cause of death worldwide, trailing only tuberculosis. Hepatitis B is responsible for 83 per cent of these deaths, with hepatitis C accounting for the remaining 17 per cent, according to the World Health Organization's 2024 Global Hepatitis Report released recently. Despite advancements in diagnostic tools and treatments, coverage rates for testing and treatment have stalled. However, achieving the WHO's elimination goal by 2030 remains feasible with urgent action, as per the report which reveals that there are 254 million people who are afflicted with hepatitis B, and 50 million with hepatitis C in 2022. "Half of the burden is among people aged 30-54, with 12 per cent among children under 18. Men constitute 58 per cent of all cases. New infections have slightly decreased, with 2.2 million new cases in 2022, down from 2.5 million in 2019." However, what is a matter of concern is that diagnosis and treatment coverage rates are far below the global targets for both hepatitis B and C. Data shows that only 13 per cent of people with chronic hepatitis B and 36 per cent with hepatitis C have been diagnosed. "Treatment rates are even lower, with only 3% receiving antiviral therapy for hepatitis B and 20% receiving curative treatment for hepatitis C," says the report, attributing the low rates to disparities in pricing and service delivery. The report said that many countries fail to procure affordable generic medicines, leading to pricing disparities. "Service delivery remains centralized and vertical, with out-of-pocket expenses for many affected

populations," it said. "This report paints a troubling picture: despite progress globally in preventing hepatitis infections, deaths are rising because far too few people with hepatitis are being diagnosed and treated," said WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "WHO is committed to supporting countries to use all the tools at their disposal - at access prices - to save lives and turn this trend around." New incidence estimates indicate a slight decrease compared to 2019, but the overall incidence of viral hepatitis remains high. In 2022, there were 2.2 million new infections, down from 2.5 million in 2019. These include 1.2 million new hepatitis B infections and nearly 1 million new hepatitis C infections. More than 6000 people are getting newly infected with viral hepatitis each day. The revised estimates are derived from enhanced data from national prevalence surveys. They also indicate that prevention measures such as immunization and safe injections, along with the expansion of hepatitis C treatment, have contributed to reducing the incidence. Across all regions, only 13% of people living with chronic hepatitis B infection had been diagnosed and approximately 3% (7 million) had received antiviral therapy at the end of 2022. Regarding hepatitis C, 36% had been diagnosed and 20% (12.5 million) had received curative treatment.

Extra judicial confession loses significance in absence of substantive evidence: SC

PT ■ NEW DELHI

Extrajudicial confession by its very nature is a "weak piece" of evidence and it may be used as a corroborative piece of evidence in tandem with substantive evidence, the Supreme Court said on Tuesday while acquitting a man who was convicted in a 1998 murder case. The apex court allowed an appeal filed by the man challenging the verdict of the Punjab and Haryana High Court which had affirmed the trial court's May 1999 order convicting and sentencing him to life imprisonment. The prosecution alleged that

the appellant had in June 1998 murdered a man at a cinema hall in Bhiwani as he bore a suspicion that the victim was involved in illicit relations with his wife. A bench of Justices B R Gvai and Sandeep Mehta noted that the prosecution's case was primarily based on the testimonies of two witnesses - the victim's brother and another person who claimed that the accused had made a confession before him. Referring to the evidence in the case, the bench said both these witnesses fall within the category of "wholly unreliable witnesses" and it would be unsafe to place reliance on their evi-



dence so as to affirm the guilt of the accused. Dealing with the purported extrajudicial confession made

by one of the witnesses, the bench said it was contradicted by the evidence of another prosecution witness.

"Even otherwise, extra judicial confession by its very nature is a weak piece of evidence. It may be used as a corroborative piece of evidence in tandem with substantive evidence," the bench said. "In wake of the discussion made above (in the judgement), we have no hesitation in holding that the prosecution failed to bring home the charge and establish the guilt of the accused appellant beyond reasonable doubt," it said. The bench noted that the incident had taken place around 11:30 am. And the victim's brother had admitted in his cross-examination that the body was lifted from the spot

at about 4 p.M. It said there cannot be any doubt that the victim's brother could not have decided at the first blush that the deceased had expired as a result of a knife blow. "The natural reaction expected from a brother in such a situation would have been to take immediate steps for taking the victim to the hospital so as to save his life," it said, adding the victim's brother did not make any such attempt, and in this background, his presence at the crime scene was doubtful. The apex court, which quashed the verdicts of the high court and the trial court, acquitted the appellant.

INS Talwar seizes 940 kg of contraband narcotics: Navy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Indian Naval ship INS Talwar, mission deployed in Western Arabian Sea for Maritime Security Operations as part of Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 led Focused Operation Crimson Barracuda successfully apprehended a suspicious dhow on April 13 and seized 940 kg of contraband narcotics, navy said here on Tuesday. Giving details, officials said the ship's specialist boarding teams and MARCOs seized 940 kgs of contraband narcotics. The drugs are being disposed off as per CMF SOPs. The seized drugs included 453 kg of methamphetamine, 416 kg of hash and 71 kg of heroin from a dhow as part of Focused Operation Crimson Barracuda. The Indian Navy joined CMF last November. "I commend the crew of INS Talwar for their efforts throughout this Focused Operation and their hard work has paid off with this seizure of 940 kg of drugs," said Royal Canadian Navy Capt. Colin Matthews, Commander,

Combined Task Force 150. "This seizure, the fourth of this Focused Operation, demonstrates the effectiveness and professionalism of CMF and of the Indian Navy, in deterring and disrupting criminal and terrorist activities at sea." Crimson Barracuda, which concluded on April 15, focused on countering terrorist and criminal organizations' use of the high seas to conduct smuggling operations in the Western Indian Ocean region. CTF 150 is one of five task forces under Combined Maritime Forces, the world's largest international naval partnership. CTF 150's mission is to

deter and disrupt the ability of non-state actors to move weapons, drugs and other illicit substances in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. Combined Maritime Forces is a 42-nation naval partnership upholding the international rules-based order by promoting security and stability across 3.2 million square miles of water encompassing some of the world's most important shipping lanes. Relentless efforts of Indian Navy as a CMF partner reaffirms its commitment towards ensuring a drug free neighbourhood.

EC bars Surjewala for 48 hours for derogatory remarks against Hema Malini

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



The Election Commission on Tuesday barred Congress leader Ranveer Surjewala for 48 hours over his alleged derogatory remarks against BJP MP Hema Malini. This is the first campaign ban imposed by the poll body in this Lok Sabha election cycle. The Election Commission last Tuesday issued a show-cause notice to Surjewala for his alleged "undignified, uncivilised and vulgar" remarks against Malini. The poll body said it has carefully gone through the contents and averments made in the reply of Surjewala. "The commission without prejudice to any order/notice issued or to be issued subsequently to him in the matter relating to MCC violations, hereby, strongly condemns the impugned statement made by him during the election campaign held in Haryana and repudiates Ranveer Surjewala

for the misconduct," the poll watchdog said. The commission, under Article 324 of the Constitution and all other powers enabling in this behalf, bars Surjewala from holding any public meetings, public processions, public rallies, road shows and interviews, public utterances in media (electronic, print, social media) etc. In connection with ongoing elections for 48 hours from 6 pm on April 16, it said. In its notice to Surjewala, the EC had said that on careful examination, the comments were found to be "highly undignified, vulgar and uncivilised" and to be prima facie violative of the provisions of the MCC and the poll panel's advisory issued to parties last

Oldest IAF pilot dies at 103



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Air Force (IAF)'s oldest living pilot Squadron Leader Dalip Singh Majithia died at the age of 103 at his farm in Rudrapur, Uttarakhand on Monday. His wife Joan Sanders Majithia passed away in 2021 at the age of 100. The couple is survived by two daughters. Majithia was born in Shimla on July 27, 1920 and joined the IAF volunteer reserve in 1940 during World War-II. He joined the 4th Pilot's Course at the Initial Training School (ITA) in Walton, Lahore, in August 1940 and three months later awarded the best pilot trophy. He was then posted to the No. 1 Flying Training School in Ambala to continue advanced flying training. After serving in various capacities, he retired from the IAF in 1947.

Contribute fully in 400 seats goal: PM to Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi resumed his electoral campaign in North Bengal once again giving out a 400-seat-call so as to enable him translate his "trailer" of a performance into a full-fledged act of making India the third largest economic power in the world.

"All these years you have seen introducing a whole lot of schemes for the people but that was all a trailer ... this time if you vote me to power the whole picture will unfold before you," the Prime Minister said from twin rallies of Balurghat and Raiganj in North Bengal adding the people of Bengal had made up their minds to help the BJP go beyond 400 seats this time round. Early this month the Prime Minister had told a rally at Cooch Behar about his resolve to make India the third largest economy in the world.

"Come June 4, and Bengal has decided to help the BJP

breach the 400-seat mark ... this large gathering conveys this message to me that the people of Bengal will definitely bless us to achieve that feat," of 400 seats, the Prime Minister said.

However, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee who was holding a rally barely 200 km away at Jalpaiguri said "let them cry hoarse for 400-seats ... but they will not get more than 200 this time round," wondering "if they are so confident of getting 400 seats then why are they sending agencies and sending opposition leaders to jail."

An unrelenting Prime Minister on the other hand continued to fire salvos at the Trinamool Congress for turning Bengal into a "free zone of the corrupt and criminals." Asking the people to shun the party that was committed to change the demography of Bengal, the Prime Minister said "the TMC Government has been playing an open game of corruption which we have seen in the every strata of the



administration ... the corruption in the primary school teachers' recruitment is a big example." Saying that every raid by the central agencies in the houses of ministers and TMC leaders yielded crores of rupees the Prime Minister said how "even the investigating agencies are not spared by the Trinamool Congress goons who attack and injure them when they come in search of operations."

Saying that the Mamata Banerjee Government had given a freedom to the criminals Modi said how "the TMC has given Bengal in lease" to the anti-social elements and infiltrators. Though he would not talk about a steady rise in the minority vote share the Prime Minister slammed the TMC for playing a role in changing the demography of the State. "In order to indulge in its vote-bank politics the TMC Government is allowing infiltration and changing the demography of Bengal," he said.

The TMC Government was stoking infiltration and thwarting the Citizenship Amendment Act which was made to provide citizenship to genuine people the Prime Minister said, "they are misleading the people on CAA and promoting infiltrators" which would ruin the future of the people of Bengal. In an apparent bid to wean back the women voters that had of late been siding with the TMC, thanks to the women-centric schemes like Kanyashree and Laxmi Bhandar the Prime Minister Sandeshkhali and reminded how the women of this State were being oppressed and dishonored. "Whatever happened at Sandeshkhali sent shivers down the entire nation," the Prime Minister said adding how the TMC leaders grabbed people's lands and sexually exploited their women.

The Prime Minister was campaigning for BJP State president Sukanta Majumdar who is contesting from Balurghat.

AAP announces final list of four more candidates in Punjab

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

The Aam Aadmi Party on Tuesday announced its final list of four more candidates in Punjab for the Lok Sabha polls, fielding three legislators and a turncoat.

With this announcement, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has declared its candidates for all 13 parliamentary seats in Punjab.

The announcement regarding the names of candidates was made by the party's national general secretary Sandeep Pathak in a post on X.

From Jalandhar (reserve) constituency, AAP named former Akali MLA Pawan Kumar Tinu, who joined the party a few days back. Tinu will be facing Congress candidate and former chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi and BJP's Sushil Rinku. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is yet to name its candidate from Jalandhar.

Tinu, a Dalit leader, was elected as MLA from the Adampur assembly constituency in the Jalandhar district in 2012 and 2017. He lost the 2022 assembly polls to Congress nominee Sukhwinder Kotli. He had unsuccessfully contested the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat is currently represented by Sushil Rinku, who won it on AAP ticket in the 2023 bypoll. Rinku was named the AAP candidate from the seat but he quit the party and joined the BJP.

Besides Tinu, AAP named



three party MLAs - ?Jagdeep Singh Kaka Brar from the Ferozepur Lok Sabha seat, Amansher Singh Kalsi from Gurdaspur and Ashok Parashar Pappi from the Ludhiana parliamentary seat. Brar is an MLA from Muktsar. He had defeated SAD nominee Kanwaljit Singh in the 2022 assembly polls. Brar had unsuccessfully contested the 2017 assembly polls. The Ferozepur seat is currently represented by SAD chief Sukhbir Singh Badal who has already announced not to contest the Lok Sabha polls. The Congress, the BJP and SAD are yet to announce their candidates from the Ferozepur Lok Sabha seat.

AAP showed its faith in Batala MLA Kalsi by fielding him from the Gurdaspur seat, currently represented by BJP's Sunny Deol.

Kalsi became MLA from Batala by defeating Congress' Ashwani Sekhri in the 2022 assembly polls.

Kalsi is pitted against BJP candidate Dinesh Babu and SAD's Daljit Singh Cheema.

The Congress is yet to name its candidate from the Gurdaspur seat. From Ludhiana seat, AAP has fielded Ludhiana Central MLA Pappi. He will face three-time MP Ravneet Singh Bittu, who is now the BJP candidate. Bittu had quit the Congress and joined the BJP. The Shiromani Akali Dal and the Congress are yet to name their candidates from Ludhiana.

AAP has already fielded five Cabinet ministers' - Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer from Sangrur, Kuldeep Dhaliwal from Amritsar, Balbir Singh from Patiala, Gurmeet Singh Khuddian from Bathinda and Laljit Bhullar from Khadoor Sahib. It has named two turncoats - Raj Kumar Chabbewal from Hoshiarpur and Gurpreet Singh GP from Fatehgarh Sahib. The party has also fielded Punjabi actor Karamjit Anmol from Faridkot and state unit chief spokesperson Malvinder Singh Kang from the Anandpur Sahib seat.

RLD joining BJP will not impact Muzaffarnagar Lok Sabha elections: INDIA Bloc candidate

PTI ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR (UP)

Samajwadi Party leader SHarendra Singh Malik, who is contesting the Lok Sabha election from Muzaffarnagar as INDIA bloc nominee, said the RLD aligning with the BJP will not have any poll impact in the constituency.

The former Rajya Sabha member is pitted against BJP's Sanjeev Balyan, whom he described as an "accidental leader". Both Malik and Balyan belong to the influential Jat community of western Uttar Pradesh. Balyan won from Muzaffarnagar in 2014 and 2019 and served as Union minister in the Narendra Modi-led government. In the run-up to the polls, the

Jayant Chaudhary-led Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) switched sides to leave the INDIA bloc and align with the BJP. The move left many in the region surprised. In the 2019 polls, Balyan had defeated Chaudhary's father and former RLD chief Ajit Singh by a close margin of around 5,000 votes.

On how he saw this political realignment, Malik said the RLD can do whatever it wishes as it does not have any candidate in Muzaffarnagar. "So that (RLD) is no factor here... The BJP will not get any benefit from this (RLD's support)," the Jat leader told PTI at his home here.

Malik recalled "political FIRs" that were lodged by



Muzaffarnagar police during the 2019 elections, including one related to an attack on the convoy of Jayant Chaudhary's wife Charu Chaudhary. He said the villagers who protected the convoy were

may align with anyone he wants to. Now even Farooq Abdullah is praising the BJP. But the truth is that supporters of Chaudhary Charan Singh are with us," Malik claimed.

On the influence of farmers groups in the elections in the region, he said the farmer organisations are apolitical but have an influence which cannot be denied. "If they speak in favour of anyone, it is definitely going to have an effect on the poll outcomes," Malik said.

On the issues he is taking up in this election, Malik said the biggest among them is 'sammaan' (respect) and claimed that the people have been "insulted" in the last 10 years.

JD(S) seeks EC action over alleged security lapse at meet attended by Deve Gowda

PTI ■ TUMAKURU (KARNATAKA)

The JD(S) on Tuesday approached the Election Commission over the alleged security lapse at an event presided by former Prime Minister and party patriarch H D Deve Gowda here and sought the suspension of police officials responsible for it.

In a letter to the Returning Officer of Tumakuru, the party said, on April 15 at Kunchitiga Samudaya Bhavana here, a leaders' meeting was conducted with due permission from the poll panel by BJP and JD(S) under the leadership of Deve Gowda in support of V Somanna (BJP). Somanna is contesting from the Tumakuru constituency in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls.

"Police officials who were present at the meeting venue did not take any security measures and let women supporting the Congress inside the hall. The women managed to reach the stage where Deve Gowda was present without being questioned or checked as police failed to do their job," the party alleged.

The JD(S) alleged that Deputy Chief Minister and state Congress chief D K Shivakumar and Minister Rajanna were behind the incident.

EVMs airlifted to four remote polling booths in Arunachal

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

The first batch of 40 election officials including police personnel were airlifted to four remote polling stations in Arunachal Pradesh's Kra Daadi district to conduct polling for the simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in the north-eastern state on April 19, an official said on Tuesday.

The polling officials along with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable

Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) were airlifted on Monday to the polling stations located at Pip-Sorang Circle in the remote district bordering China, the official said. "They were airlifted in two sorties by an MI-172 chopper operated in the state by Skyone airways," Toko Babu, officer on special duty (OSD) to the state's Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), said on Tuesday.

Airlifting of more polling teams to remote polling stations where road communication is not con-

ductive, would be done as per requirements of respective district electoral officers (DEOs) of various districts, he said.

"The polling teams airlifted on Monday will be stationed at Tali, the ADC headquarters in the district, from where they will undertake a foot march to reach Pip-Sorang circle," Babu said. Tali assembly constituency which falls under Arunachal West Parliamentary seat, is one among the 10 assembly seats won unopposed. Jike Takku of



BJP candidates in North and South Goa seats file nomination

PTI ■ PANAJI

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidates Shripad Naik and Pallavi Dempo on Tuesday filed their nominations for elections to the North Goa and South Goa seats respectively.

Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, who accompanied Naik and Dempo during the filing of their nominations, expressed confidence that the BJP will win both the seats in the coastal state by huge margins.

Pallavi Dempo, the executive director of Dempo Industries, filed her nomination before the returning officer at the Mathany Saldanha complex (administrative building) at Margao in South Goa. She was accompanied by CM Sawant, state BJP president Sadanand Shet Tanavade and hundreds of supporters.

The South Goa Lok Sabha seat is currently held by Congress' Francisco Sardinha.

Dempo is pitted against Viriato Fernandes of the Congress. North Goa MP Shripad Naik filed his papers at the collectorate in state capital Panaji in the presence of CM Sawant and Tanavade. Naik said he is getting an overwhelming response from voters and has completed one round of campaigning. The parliamentarian is pitted against Congress candidate Ramakant Khalap. Sawant said in Panaji that the BJP will win both the seats in Goa. "We will win by a margin of one lakh votes in North Goa and by 60,000 votes in South Goa," he said.

Sawant said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given various guarantees in the party's manifesto. "The people of Goa have also given the guarantee that they will elect both the BJP candidates," he said. The Lok Sabha polls in Goa will be held in a single phase on May 7.

Rahul attacks Modi

PTI ■ KOZHIKODE/WAYANAD (KERALA)

Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday lashed out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accusing him of helping a few rich businessmen in the country. Gandhi also attacked Modi over the electoral bond issue, terming it as a form of extortion where the intimidatory tactics are "much more sophisticated" as central agencies like the CBI, ED and Income Tax Department are deployed against the targeted businessmen.

"There are some people in every small town or village who extort money on the streets by threatening physical harm. In Malayalam you call this extortion 'kolla adikkal' (loot), but Modi calls it electoral bonds. What a common thief is doing on the streets, the PM is doing at an international level," he alleged.

Gandhi accused the BJP-led central government of using "sophisticated" tactics to threaten targeted businessmen. "At the electoral bond level, the threats are much more sophisticated. The ED,



CBI and Income Tax people will come, they will interrogate and at the end of it, they will say why don't you give this (their business) to Adani," the sitting Congress MP from Wayanad LS constituency alleged. He alleged that this is how Adani got

the Mumbai airport from its previous owner. In other instances, such intimidatory tactics also led to the businessman paying the BJP in electoral bonds, he also alleged. He raised the electoral bond issue by referring to a recent interview of Modi.

"In his interview, he was trying to defend the biggest corruption scandal on the planet — the electoral bond scheme through which the BJP got thousands of crores of rupees by extorting India's businessmen," Gandhi alleged while speaking to party supporters, workers and the huge crowd that turned up for his roadshow from Kodyathur in Kozhikode district.

Later in Wayanad, Gandhi alleged that Modi "does not have the understanding to run the country". While speaking to the public in Wayanad, the Congress leader also mocked the PM for his statements asking people to bang steel utensils and switch on their mobile phone lights during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier in Kodyathur, Gandhi alleged that Modi's job was also to distract people from the real issues in the country, protect the richest businessmen in India and "forgive their bank loans". Modi is helping "five or six of the biggest, richest businessmen" in India, he alleged.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Shower of blessings

For the first time in a decade, IMD predicts above-normal rainfall across the nation

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has marked a significant milestone by releasing its long-term forecast. For the first time in a decade, the IMD has predicted above-average rainfall across almost the entire expanse of the country. This forecast carries profound implications for various sectors, ranging from agriculture to water resource management and beyond. Policymakers and farmers will welcome this news, although ordinary individuals may find themselves contending with a more pronounced monsoon season than usual. It would indeed be a sigh of relief for all farmers. The agricultural sector, which forms the backbone of India's economy, is heavily reliant on timely and adequate rainfall. Adequate precipitation is essential for the cultivation of crops and the sustenance of agricultural activities. With an anticipated surplus in rainfall, farmers can expect better soil moisture levels, leading to improved crop yields. Additionally, the forecast offers them an opportunity to plan their cropping patterns and maximise agricultural output. Besides, India's water resources are intricately linked to the monsoon patterns. Above-normal rainfall augurs well for the replenishment of reservoirs, lakes and groundwater aquifers. It provides the much-needed boost to water levels, especially in regions grappling with water scarcity. Adequate rainfall can alleviate the stress on water resources, ensuring better availability for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes. A bountiful monsoon also facilitates the generation of hydroelectric power, thus contributing to the energy sector.



However, it may be too early to celebrate a normal or above-normal monsoon. Weather forecasts are probabilistic in nature; even a good monsoon across the country is a rare occurrence. While above-normal rainfall brings several benefits, it also presents certain challenges. Excessive precipitation can lead to flooding, particularly in low-lying areas and regions prone to inundation. Flooding not only causes damage to property and infrastructure but also poses risks to human life. Therefore, authorities must undertake pre-emptive measures such as strengthening infrastructure, improving drainage systems and implementing effective flood management strategies. Heavy rainfall increases the risk of soil erosion and landslides, particularly in hilly terrains. Adequate soil conservation measures and afforestation efforts are essential to mitigate these risks and safeguard vulnerable ecosystems. Also, authorities need to ensure efficient water management practices to prevent wastage and optimise the utilisation of water resources. The IMD's forecast heralds promising prospects for farmers to enhance productivity and for authorities to address water scarcity concerns. By adopting a comprehensive approach that combines preparedness, conservation and sustainable practices, India can harness the benefits of abundant rainfall while minimising associated risks, paving the way for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

PICTALK



Devotees stand in a queue to offer prayers at Dakshineswar Kali Temple on Bengali New Year, in Kolkata

Ignoring neighbours to embrace the world



ASHOK K MEHTA

The BJP Government has put Neighbourhood First Policy on backburner, leaving it underperforming amid rising anti-India sentiments in the region

BJP government has made foreign policy a key election issue: Prime Minister Modi has stated, 'Neighbour first and Act East second'. Foreign Minister S Jaishankar is campaigning how G20 has enhanced India's image and influence as a global player. Quest for High Table has shifted focus from Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP). S Jaishankar explained that politics can go up and down in neighbourhood but people generally have good feelings for India. That is certainly not the ground reality today when in almost every country, anti-India feeling is prevalent. NFP which was formally launched in 2008, has not performed optimally due to internal and external factors. Act East appended later has also failed to take off. Followed several add-ons: *sab ka saath sab ka vikas*; SAGAR; Vishva Mitra; First Security Responder and so on.

Former Minister Jaswant Singh in his book *Defending India*, has noted that India is strategically confined by Macmahon Line, Durand Line, LAC and LoC. Still it was once the regional hegemon having promulgated the Indira Doctrine and employed military force in national interest. India's geography and asymmetry with neighbours are both asset and liability. Congenital problems with Pakistan and later China have made it the least connected South Asian region. NFP was designed to shape the neighbourhood, especially the periphery, extending the neighbourhood to Mauritius and Iran in the West and Myanmar in the East. Curating friendly regimes, winning the goodwill of people through economic linkages and connectivity, creating strategic assets, minimising liabilities and most of all, being sensitive to genuine concerns of neighbours were some objectives of NFP. Rubbing neighbours the wrong way was not, nor meshing domestic politics with diplomacy. That an aspirational India would create glitches for NFP was not envisioned. China, gate-crashed after hiding its strength and biding its time arriving with deep pockets, BRI, MSR and Wolf Warrior



diplomacy. With ups and downs in politics regional rivalries were in full flow. Nepalese scholars were first to note change. The founding father, King Prithvi Narayan Shah had observed that Nepal is a yam between two boulders: China and India. They corrected that gospel to three boulders, adding US. Till late last year, Maldives followed India First policy, the only country to publicly proclaim the choice.

That has changed to India Out with President Muizzu demanding the 88 Indian soldiers leave before elections next month. He even hinted that Delhi tried bullying Male. Its strategic geography is pivotal in the Indian Ocean. Maldives is for now China First but India could have been more gentle with its smallest neighbour. Raking up the Kachhathevu issue that the government admitted it was settled in 2015, was a self goal but both Modi and Jaishankar wished to politically embarrass the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu and INC. Instead it has infuriated Sri Lankan media and ordinary Lankans, especially fisherfolk among the lakhs of Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. US Assistance Secretary of State for South Asia and Central Asia, Donald Lu has called Sri Lanka's economic recovery a "comeback story" with concessional loans from India and USAID. That story



MOST, IF NOT ALL, REGIONAL COUNTRIES WANT SAARC TO BE REVIVED, BUT INDIA'S IRON-CLAD POLICY OF NOT DEALING WITH PAKISTAN UNTIL TERRORISM FROM ITS SOIL STOPS HAS BEEN AGGRAVATED BY THE REMOVAL OF ARTICLE 370

will suffer a setback lead to revival of anti-India sentiment and further tilt towards China to whom Lanka owes USD 10 bn. In Bangladesh BNP has started an India Out campaign. China is heavily invested in projects including constructing a submarine port near Cox's Bazar adequate for 8 to 10 submarines. Bhutan was within a whisker of a land swap with China by the previous government. Otherwise Doklam could have been lost to the Chinese which would have endangered Siliguri Corridor, the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction dispute. The new Lotay Tshering government might delay the Doklam swap. In Myanmar, the military is rapidly losing ground in the civil war with Ethnic Armed Organisations and NUG. It has lost border control with China, Bangladesh, India and Thailand to EAOs. Most critical for India is Sittwe Port vital for the multi-modal Kaladan project and also the trilateral highway to Thailand. Reuters reported that junta troops nearby have fled and an attack on Sittwe is imminent. But Sohail Kazan, executive director, Bharat Freight, said last week that Sittwe will be safe following a deal between junta and Rakhine state government. If true, that is good news. Kaladan project was contracted in 2008 and is nowhere near completion dislocating India's two signature Act East pro-

jects. Delhi has to rethink its relations with the junta. Most if not all regional countries want SAARC to be revived. But India's iron clad policy of not dealing with Pakistan till terrorism from its soil stops has been aggravated by removal of Article 370. Trade potential according to World Bank between Pakistan and India is between USD 15 and 20 bn. India's NFP has not worked because its global ambitions have diluted its zeal for the neighbourhood. Further, it has been unable to compete with China despite geography being on its side. Under NFP and Act East, India has concentrated mainly in the maritime domain resulting in neglect of inland connectivity. The Government brags about North East shining (Manipur is a shame) but little progress is seen over connectivity of BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan India Nepal) or South East Asia. The Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) is also dead. India's focus on neighbourhood has wavered, failing to secure the periphery. Some diplomats have advocated India setting red lines? Winning over neighbours is now a huge challenge. (The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka and a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. Views are personal)

Reflections on class and age discrimination

From a childhood encounter at a political rally to navigating workplace dynamics, an individual's journey unveils lessons in equality and empathy

The then Prime Minister was to address a public rally in Ghaziabad. My father, posted as the head of the electricity department in the city, was responsible for the electrical arrangements at the venue. He took us to listen to her speech from a vantage point.

I do not remember the speech. What I do remember is that my father came back immediately after the event ended and rushed us from the venue. He kept looking back surreptitiously, asking us to walk faster. I was to learn that a supervisor working under my father and wanting to make a good impression, was also pursuing us to introduce his family. Much later, at a more mature age, I could understand that this was an incidence of class discrimination prevalent in our society. I was to learn quite a few life-altering lessons a few years later as I joined Indian railway services.

During my first posting in Calcutta, I was asked to study an old machine and propose measures to improve its productivity, taking the assistance of an experienced supervisor. The two of us



SANJAY CHANDRA

spent innumerable hours studying the machine. I became an apprentice to a more knowledgeable person, even though he was lower in the hierarchy. Then and even later in my subsequent postings, or even after I quit an active professional life, I learnt a lot about handling work-related issues and even man management, from my junior colleagues, by not dwelling on the so-called finer nuances of a superior status. I also learnt empathy for others. In yet another posting, as a branch head, I was approached by irate union leaders who complained

about the rude language by a junior colleague. His fault was that he had used the term 'tum' to address a worker rather than the more respectable 'aap'. This was Bengal, where everyone is expected to use a respectful salutation when talking to another person, whatever the status. I tried to assuage the hurt sentiments by pointing out that the junior colleague came from north India where it was a common practice to use the more affectionate 'tum' even while addressing parents. The representatives were not done. They pointed out that I was

always respectful even though I was from the same region. This was another lesson learnt, never to be forgotten, about the futility of status discrimination. We were visiting relatives a few days back. My wife's uncle, now nearing 80, narrated a recent experience. He had gone to some office for work, where a much younger person jumped the queue. The uncle objected which was rudely brushed aside by the young man, "How is it material? Have I pointed a gun at you?" This was a status discrimination of another kind - a perceived superiority of the youth against old age. Or was it the gun power? We ought to remember what Nelson Mandela said, "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONSTITUTIONAL MORALITY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Constitutional Morality: The Pillar of India's Democracy", published on April 15, this is my response. India's electoral fervour every four years embodies the essence of democracy, echoing the aspirations of its constituent assembly. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of constitutional morality as the cornerstone of governance rings true today. It's a conscious cultivation, not merely a natural sentiment, vital for a vibrant democracy. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud aptly emphasises the judiciary's role in upholding constitutional values like dignity and equality. This jurisprudence, evolving alongside societal dynamics, ensures the Constitution remains a living document. Recent landmark judgments, from LGBTQ+ rights to adultery laws, highlight the judiciary's commitment to constitutional morality over popular sentiment. Yet, navigating societal and religious intersections, as seen in the Sabarimala case, poses ongoing challenges. The court's role in reconciling evolving beliefs, evident in decisions on euthanasia and abortion rights, underscores its pivotal position in shaping India's moral landscape. As we navigate these complexities, constitutional morality stands as a beacon, guiding our journey towards a more just and equitable society.

Sunandna Sharma | Hisar

HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Unravelling the Roy family's legacy", published on April 15, this is my response. The political landscape for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections reveals not just contemporary rivalries but also echoes of Bengal's tumultuous past. Amidst accusations and justifications, the saga of Siraj-ud-Daula's downfall resurfaces, highlighting the intricate web of alliances and betrayals that shaped the region's destiny. Delving into history, one confronts the pivotal Battle of Plassey in 1757, altering the trajectory of Bengal's identity. The

Revitalising railway realms



Apropos the news article, "Desolate railway tracks transformed into a verdant oasis", published on April 15, this is my response. The transformation of a once-ignored stretch of land into the lush oasis of 'Evergreen Nursery' is a testament to human innovation and environmental stewardship. This verdant haven, nestled amidst the bustling railway tracks, not only rejuvenates the landscape but also symbolises a paradigm shift in urban con-

servation efforts. The metamorphosis from a crime-ridden wasteland to a vibrant botanical sanctuary reflects the power of collaborative endeavours between public and private entities. The partnership between the Delhi Division of Northern Railway and Evergreen Nursery exemplifies a shared commitment to sustainable development and beautification.

Moreover, the altruistic purpose behind the nursery, where plants are nurtured not for profit but for communal enrichment, resonates deeply with the ethos of community service. It serves as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness between humanity and nature, where each leaf and bloom embodies a story of renewal and hope. As we traverse through these green corridors, we are reminded not only of the beauty of flora but also of our collective responsibility to safeguard our planet for future generations.

Neeraj Shah | Delhi

clash between Bengali and Islamic cultures, symbolised by Siraj-ud-Daula's reign, echoes through the ages. The triumph of Clive and the merchant princes ushered in a new era, fostering a renaissance that birthed luminaries like Tagore and Bose.

The revelation from Atlee underscores the lesser-known role of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, a beacon of resistance against British rule. His legacy, intertwined with Bengal's ethos, stands as a testament to the region's indomitable spirit, shaping not just India's past, but its future. In this electoral battleground, as parties jostle for power, Bengal's historical tapestry reminds us of the enduring struggle for identity and freedom.

Roshan Kumar | Bhubaneswar

CAFFEINE CHRONICLES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Exploring the world of single origins, flat whites and beyond!", published on April 14, this is my response. Melbourne's caffeinated landscape is a saga of passion, history and innovation, woven into the

city's very fabric. With an abundance of cafes that surpass a thousand, each sip of espresso unveils a narrative steeped in Italian heritage and modern-day craftsmanship. Monique Bayer's guided tour offers a portal into this world, where every alleyway hides a treasure trove of coffee delights. From the legacy of Pellegrini Espresso Bar to the emergence of artisanal roasters like Industry Beans, Melbourne's coffee evolution is palpable. Monique's curated journey delves deep, introducing nuances like filter coffee and cold drip variants, enriching the sensory experience.

In this city, coffee isn't just a beverage; it's a cultural phenomenon. From paleo-friendly butter coffee to innovative frozen concoctions, Melbourne's cafes cater to every palate. With terms like cupping and AeroPress echoing through the streets, it's evident that coffee here is more than a drink—it's a way of life.

Kundan JM | Bhopal

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

STRIVE TO DEVELOP FAITH

The pursuit of guidance from the Divine holds the promise of revelation



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Let me start with why we often don't endeavour to develop faith, as is commonly observed. Lord Krishna has aptly stated, "Out of thousands of men, hardly anyone strives for perfection" (The Bhagavad Gita 7.3). The essence of a perfect life lies in becoming a devotee of God, for He is the ultimate controller of the entire world. There exist numerous reasons, or perhaps excuses, for this reluctance. Beginning with a straightforward argument: who has truly seen Him? If God holds such significance, why does He not present Himself so that we may behold Him? In this age of the internet, one might argue that He could easily make His presence felt. Some may argue that God is unmanifest, yet we lack any tangible experience of such an entity. If God is indeed a reality without whom we cannot thrive, then why do some ideologies, such as communism, appear to manage so well, especially in certain countries? Why is there pervasive poverty and suffering in the world? If God possesses omnipotence as described, why does He not rectify these injustices? We encounter many ascetics on the streets, leading some to conclude that only those who have failed turn to God, while they believe they can manage without divine intervention. Perhaps they might consider turning to God later if the need arises. These excuses, however, varied, ultimately lead us to a sense of emptiness. In reality, it is often our ego that serves as the primary hindrance. We struggle to accept an entity so vast and incomprehensible, leaving us feeling insignificant and powerless. Another significant barrier lies in the acceptance of spiritual practices, which may seem unfamiliar and daunting. Yet, all these excuses only serve to deepen our sense of emptiness. Why not begin by praying for what we deeply desire? Even a child can pray and often does. If our prayers are sincere and aligned with righteousness, God may consider them.



The next step involves seeking guidance from God, who is eager to provide it. Given His omniscience, God communicates in various ways; to advanced devotees, He may impart intuition or even speak directly, while beginners may receive guidance through mediums such as family members, friends, or even seemingly random occurrences like messages in newspapers. It should be evident that following God's instructions is a wise course of action, yielding manifold benefits. Let us now explore some basic practices that are both accessible and highly rewarding. My personal favourite is 'darshan' — simply gazing upon an image or idol of God.

Observing God's benevolent countenance, we can feel His attraction towards us. However, it's crucial to remember that adherence to righteousness, or 'dharma,' is of paramount importance to God. While deity forms or images serve as focal points, God's presence transcends physical limitations, permeating all existence. Another simple yet profound practice is offering 'namaskar' — paying homage to God with folded hands. This act serves to humble our egos, which often obstruct our connection with the divine and hinder our interactions with fellow beings. As we persist in these practices, we will gradually experience God's responses, not necessarily through miraculous events, but through subtle yet discernible manifestations. We can liken this experience to connecting to the internet—where there is a network, there is connectivity. Similarly, God, omnipresent as He is, can be experienced in various ways. God's subtle presence is accessible to all. He eagerly awaits our approach, desiring nothing but our well-being. Let us cast aside our doubts and excuses and wholeheartedly commit to forging a deeper connection with the divine.

(The writer is a spiritual guide; views are personal)

Iran strikes threaten regional stability

The assault, though primarily symbolic in nature, highlights the mounting tensions in the region. However, the US endeavours to uphold a balance of power



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA



REUTERS

At a time when people in several countries in South Asia and East Asia were celebrating the traditional New Year, Iran, the second-largest country in West Asia, launched a series of missile attacks targeting its arch-enemy Israel. Jordan and Saudi Arabia supported Israel and intercepted most of the missiles fired by Iran. The attack appears to be symbolic, aimed at boosting the morale of organisations such as Hamas in Palestine, Yemen's Houthis, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, all of which have declared war against Israel in West Asia, as well as countries like Lebanon and Syria, rather than engaging in an official war against Israel. This attack serves as a morale booster. Shortly after the attack, Hamas rejected the Cairo agreement, a result of discussions between top intelligence agencies, the CIA and Mossad, together with other stakeholders mediated by Egypt, concerning Israeli hostages.

However, many encouraged Israel to respond quickly. However, United States President Biden stated that he would not yield if attacks were made against Iran. It is seen as a matter of prior agreement by both parties rather than a threat. The truth is, that the US administration cannot afford to assist Israel in another war at this point. At a time when the country's reputation has been tarnished at the international level and when Biden's political power is extremely weak if the United States makes such an unwise decision, it will have to face unprecedented consequences shortly, similar to how the United States has caused irreversible damage to world peace and order. Elon Musk's recent statement that the possibility of the United States becoming the victim of a September 11-style surprise attack is very high seems to hold deep truth. The consequences of these conflicts may not only affect Washington or New York but also American military bases around the world. The likelihood of an attack similar to the one on Pearl Harbor is high. The United States cannot always continue to create military conflicts in other countries for its war trade and keep its superpower status as it desires. The superpower, as history has proven, will inevitably crumble at any



THE ATTACK BY IRAN WAS RETALIATION. IT IS A RESPONSE TO THE ISRAELI PROVOCATION AT THE IRANIAN CONSULATE IN SYRIA, A GROSS VIOLATION OF THE VIENNA CONVENTION, WHICH CLAIMED THE LIVES OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

given point. Compared to its lifespan, the United States is a relatively young superpower in the grand scheme of civilisation, considering the collapse of great empires.

Throughout history, mighty empires have risen and fallen, leaving lasting legacies. The Roman Empire, spanning from 27 BC to AD 476, peaked in the 2nd century AD, but internal strife, economic instability and external invasions, such as by the Visigoths and Vandals, led to its fragmentation. The Ottoman Empire, dominant in the 16th and 17th centuries across the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and Western Asia, declined due to internal conflicts and challenges from European powers like Russia and Austria. The Mongol Empire, founded by Genghis Khan in the 13th century, stretched from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean, but internal divisions and the death of key leaders led to its fragmentation by the late 14th century. Lastly, the British Empire, spanning from the 16th to the 20th century, faced economic strain and nationalist movements, ultimately dissolving due to internal weakness and external pressures. These collapses, driven by political, military and socioeconomic factors, reshaped the world, underscoring the transient nature of power and the enduring impact of history on modern geopolitics and civilisation.

However, the deep state of the United States has certainly studied and comprehended global history better than many other countries. That is why the basic strategy of the United States has been to create new wars while talking about peace and turn those wars into long-term tragedies to keep uncertainties. This strategy can weaken its rivals and maintain its power continuously. These issues become clear when many conflicts are understood in their political and economic context. The ideology that Israel has contin-

uously pursued against Iran in national and international forums is not a single opinion or rivalry of Israel, but it is a long-term propagation through carefully selected facts and objectives together with the United States. On one hand, the West fuels wars against hostile countries. On the other, it manufactures internal crises in those nations by imposing international sanctions. This remains a persistent behaviour of the West.

The thing that should not be forgotten here is that the attack by Iran was a retaliation. It is a response to the Israeli provocation on the Iranian consulate in Syria, a gross violation of the Vienna Convention, which claimed the lives of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iran's calculation, as some analysts pointed out, was that if it did not respond, Israel would seek to push back and degrade the axis of resistance across the region. However, it is unreasonable to think that Israel miscalculated its attack on the Iranian diplomatic site in Syria as Israel continues to keep deep intelligence penetration of IRGC and Hezbollah networks in Syria, making those networks highly vulnerable to Israeli attacks. Iran must uphold its reputation among its allies and address internal political crises effectively. Therefore, prioritising attacks conducted through proxies is advisable, while occasional skirmishes from both sides should be acknowledged.

Moreover, it is very important to consider the government's domestic policies and openly mention Iran's inherent weaknesses amid escalating tensions among some politicians and officials in Iran. They highlighted the many crises facing the Iranian government and warned against engaging in direct conflict with Israel without first addressing these pressing issues, which they argued would only worsen the situation. They emphasised the impor-

ance of prudent governance and effective crisis management and the need to mitigate ongoing crises to prevent system collapse.

Economic challenges and psychological instability in society are urgent issues that need to be addressed as they are now breeding grounds for enemy penetrations. They advocated the adoption of conciliatory policies to reduce tensions and promote harmony and empathy in Iranian society. The regime's repressive domestic policies, particularly regarding the mandatory hijab enforcement campaign, have fuelled widespread discontent and delegitimised the government. Recent anti-Israel actions, like seizing a cargo ship, have caused Iran's markets to react negatively. The national currency's value has hit a record low. President Ibrahim Raisi faces criticism and calls for a cabinet reshuffle to address economic hardships affecting many Iranians.

Over the years, Israel has demonstrated its capability in targeting Iranian nuclear scientists and infrastructure. Notably, the Stuxnet cyber-attack, jointly orchestrated by the United States and Israel, delivered a significant blow to Iran's nuclear ambitions. This proves that national interests are never compromised for domestic political issues, except for former President Trump. Stuxnet marked a pivotal moment, ushering in the era of cyberwarfare, where lines of code wielded the power to reshape geopolitical landscapes. Its impact reverberated globally, highlighting the evolving nature of warfare and the formidable role of technology in modern conflicts. In this situation, Iran cannot continue to be silent. It must prove its power numerically. Therefore, the recent attack was more a reputational-preservation move than a declaration of war.

(The writer is a Sri Lankan Journalist. Views are personal)

Uttarakhand women: Agents of change in State politics

From leading environmental crusades to confronting social injustices head-on, they embody the spirit of the region, epitomising resilience and fortitude

Women in Uttarakhand are renowned for their extraordinary resilience and hard work, characteristics deeply rooted in their Himalayan heritage. Despite grappling with the challenges of life in this rugged terrain, Uttarakhand's women have consistently been at the forefront of social and environmental movements, epitomized by figures like Gaura Devi of the Chipko movement and Tinchari Mai (Deepa Nautiyal), who spearheaded the Anti-Liquor movement. These women have fearlessly confronted injustice, embodying the spirit of Uttarakhand. This article seeks to underscore the political engagement of women in Uttarakhand, shedding light on their role in bol-



SHEETAL ARYA

stering democracy.

The political participation of women in Uttarakhand can be delineated into two primary spheres: first, women assuming leadership positions within the political domain and second, women exercising their electoral rights as voters. Since the inception of the state, the representation of women in the legislative assembly has seen a significant

albeit gradual rise. From four women members in the first assembly, the number has increased by 50% in the 2022 elections, marking a commendable stride. However, despite this progress, women remain a minority in the assembly, constituting a mere fraction of the total members. Presently, the legislative assembly boasts eight women members, including three Dalit women, the highest number in Uttarakhand's history. Notably, Smt. Ritu Khanduri serves as the speaker, while Smt. Rekha Arya is the lone female minister in the cabinet. Despite these advancements, the disparity in political representation persists, underscoring the challenges women face in accessing political power. While women's representa-

tion in the parliamentary arena remains scant, with only two female MPs out of eight, the discrepancy between the female population (49%) and their political representation is stark. Despite their active participation in grassroots movements, women's presence in formal politics remains disproportionately low. Women in Uttarakhand constitute the backbone of the rural economy, grappling with issues like migration, environmental degradation and inadequate healthcare services. However, societal norms and economic constraints often deter their political involvement. Moreover, political parties' reluctance to field female candidates exacerbates this disparity. For instance, in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha



elections, the Congress has not nominated any female candidates, while the BJP has nominated only one, Mrs. Mala Rajya Laxmi Shah. Nevertheless, women voters in Uttarakhand have emerged as a formidable force, outnumbering men in recent elections. Their increasing political awareness, fueled by issues directly affecting their lives,

coupled with higher literacy rates and government initiatives like reservation quotas, has galvanized their participation. Policies such as 30% horizontal reservation in government jobs and 50% reservation in Panchayats have bolstered women's political agency, enabling them to assume leadership roles at the grassroots level. In the run-up to the 2024 Parliamentary elections, both major parties are vying for women's support, employing diverse strategies. Congress has pledged financial assistance and job reservations for women, emphasizing women's security and justice. Conversely, the BJP highlights its implementation of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as a milestone for women's rights,

coupled with grassroots mobilization efforts. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal among women voters, attributed to his grassroots connect and initiatives like the Women Reservation Bill, further consolidates BJP's electoral prospects. The "Modi factor" has resonated with Uttarakhand's women, contributing to BJP's continued dominance since 2017. To bolster women's empowerment, the state government has allocated a substantial gender budget for 2024-25, earmarked for bridging gender disparities and promoting equality. Additionally, measures like deploying women employees to oversee polling booths and facilitating pregnant women's access to voting booths underscore the commitment to

inclusive governance. In conclusion, Dr Ambedkar's assertion that a community's progress is contingent upon women's advancement holds for Uttarakhand. While women have historically been instrumental in social movements, their underrepresentation in formal politics remains a pressing concern. Addressing these challenges is imperative for ensuring women's political representation and expediting the state's development. As Uttarakhand gears up for the upcoming Chunav Kauthig, with women comprising 48.1 per cent of the electorate, their increased participation promises to be a harbinger of democracy's triumph in the state.

(The writer is a research scholar; views are personal)

Trump to return to court after no jurors picked on first day

AP ■ NEW YORK/ WASHINGTON

Donald Trump will return to a New York courtroom Tuesday as a judge works to find a panel of jurors who will decide whether the former president is guilty of criminal charges alleging he falsified business records to cover up a sex scandal during the 2016 campaign.

The first day of Trump's history-making hush money trial in Manhattan ended with no one yet chosen to be on the panel of 12 jurors and six alternates. Dozens of people were dismissed after saying they didn't believe they could be fair, though dozens of other prospective jurors have yet to be questioned.

It's the first of Trump's four criminal cases to go to trial and may be the only one that could reach a verdict before voters decide in November whether the presumptive Republican presidential nominee should return to the White House. It puts Trump's legal problems at the center of the closely contested race against President Joe Biden, with Trump painting himself as the victim of a politically motivated justice system working to deprive him of another term.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records as part of an alleged effort to keep salacious — and, he says, bogus — stories about his sex life from emerging during his 2016 campaign. On Monday, Trump called the case brought by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg a "scam" and "witch hunt."

The charges center on \$130,000 in payments that Trump's company made to his then-lawyer, Michael Cohen. He paid that sum on Trump's behalf to keep porn actor Stormy Daniels from going public with her claims of a sexual encounter with Trump a decade earlier. Trump has denied the sexual encounter ever happened.

Prosecutors say the payments to Cohen were falsely logged as legal fees. Prosecutors have described it as part of a scheme to bury damaging stories Trump feared could help his opponent in the 2016 race, par-



ticularly as Trump's reputation was suffering at the time from comments he had made about women.

Trump has acknowledged reimbursing Cohen for the payment and that it was designed to stop Daniels from going public about the alleged encounter. But Trump has previously said it had nothing to do with the campaign.

Jury selection could take several more days — or even weeks — in the heavily Democratic city where Trump grew up and catapulted to celebrity status decades before winning the White House. Only about a third of the 96 people in the first panel of potential jurors brought into the courtroom on Monday remained after the judge excused some members. More than half of the group was excused after telling the judge they could not be fair and impartial and several others were dismissed for other reasons that were not disclosed.

Another group of more than 100 potential jurors sent to the courthouse Monday was not yet brought into the courtroom for questioning. Meanwhile, Supreme Court on Tuesday is taking up the first of two cases that could affect the criminal prosecution of former President Donald Trump for his efforts to overturn his election loss in 2020. Hundreds of charges stemming from the Capitol riot also are at stake.

The justices are hearing arguments over the charge of obstruction of an official proceeding. That charge, stemming from a law passed in the aftermath of the Enron finan-

cial scandal more than two decades ago, has been brought against 330 people, according to the Justice Department. The court will consider whether it can be used against those who disrupted Congress' certification of Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory over Trump.

The former president and presumptive nominee for the 2024 Republican nomination is facing two charges in the case brought by special counsel Jack Smith in Washington that could be knocked out with a favorable ruling from the nation's highest court. Next week, the justices will hear arguments over whether Trump has "absolute immunity" from prosecution in the case, a proposition that has so far been rejected by two lower courts.

The first former U.S. president under indictment, Trump is on trial on hush money charges in New York and also has been charged with election interference in Georgia and with mishandling classified documents in Florida.

In Tuesday's case, the court is hearing an appeal from Joseph Fischer, a former Pennsylvania police officer who has been indicted on seven counts, including obstruction, for his actions on Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in a bid to keep Biden, a Democrat, from taking the White House. Lawyers for Fischer argue that the charge doesn't cover his conduct.

The obstruction charge, which carries up to 20 years behind bars, is among the most widely used felony charges brought

in the massive federal prosecution following the deadly insurrection.

Roughly 170 Jan. 6 defendants have been convicted of obstructing or conspiring to obstruct the Jan. 6 joint session of Congress, including the leaders of two far-right extremist groups, the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. A number of defendants have had their sentences delayed until after the justices rule on the matter. Some rioters have even won early release from prison while the appeal is pending over concerns that they might end up serving longer than they should have if the Supreme Court rules against the Justice Department. That includes Kevin Seefried, a Delaware man who threatened a Black police officer with a pole attached to a Confederate battle flag as he stormed the Capitol. Seefried was sentenced last year to three years behind bars, but a judge recently ordered that he be released one year into his prison term while awaiting the Supreme Court's ruling.

The high court case focuses on whether the anti-obstruction provision of a law that was enacted in 2002 in response to the financial scandal that brought down Enron Corp. can be used against Jan. 6 defendants.

Fischer's lawyers argue that the provision was meant to close a loophole in criminal law and discourage the destruction of records in response to an investigation. Until the Capitol riot, they told the court, every criminal case using the provision had involved allegations of destroying or otherwise manipulating records.

But the administration says the other side is reading the law too narrowly, arguing it serves "as a catchall offense designed to ensure complete coverage of all forms of corrupt obstruction of an official proceeding," including Fischer's "alleged conduct in joining a violent riot to disrupt the joint session of Congress certifying the presidential election results."

Smith has argued separately in the immunity case that the obstruction charges against Trump are valid, no matter the outcome of Fischer's case.

Tensions rise in Aus after bishop, priest wounded in knife attack

AP ■ SYDNEY

A teenager has been accused of wounding a Christian bishop and a priest during a church service in the second high-profile knife attack to rock Sydney in recent days, leaving communities on edge, leaders calling for calm and a besieged church urging against retaliation. The 16-year-old was overpowered by the shocked congregation at Christ the Good Shepherd Church after he allegedly stabbed Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel and the Rev. Isaac Royel during a service on Monday night that was being streamed online.

Police have not commented on reports that the boy's fingers were severed by parishioners in the Orthodox Assyrian church in suburban Wakeley, but confirmed his hand injuries were "severe."

Video of the attack spread quickly on social media and an angry mob converged on the



A police forensic officer works at a crime scene at the Christ the Good Shepherd Church in suburban Wakeley in western Sydney, Australia on Tuesday.

church demanding vengeance. They hurled bricks, bottles and fence boards at police, who temporarily barricaded the boy inside the church for his own safety. Many in the crowd chanted "an eye for an eye" and

"bring him out." Several people including police officers required hospital treatment following the hours-long riot.

The church said in a statement on Tuesday it "denounced

retaliation of any kind." Police stood guard around mosques in parts of Sydney on Tuesday after reports that text messages were circulating urging the Assyrian Christian community to retaliate against Muslims.

Sydney's Lakemba Mosque, Australia's largest, has hired additional private security for the next week after receiving fire bomb threats on Monday night.

Police and community leaders said public anxiety had been heightened by a lone assailant's knife attack in a Sydney shopping mall on Saturday that killed five women and a male security guard who attempted to intervene. The 40-year-old assailant, Joel Cauchi, had a history of mental illness and trouble with women and a fascination with knives. He was shot dead by police.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese urged the public not to take the law into their own hands.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators shut down airport, Chicago key bridges

AP ■ CHICAGO

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators blocked roadways in Illinois, California, New York and the Pacific Northwest on Monday, temporarily shutting down travel into some of the nation's most heavily used airports, onto the Golden Gate and Brooklyn bridges and on a busy West Coast highway.

In Chicago, protesters linked arms and blocked lanes of Interstate 190 leading into O'Hare International Airport around 7 am in a demonstration they said was part of a global "economic blockade to free Palestine," according to Rifqa Falaneh, one of the organizers.

Traffic in the San Francisco Bay Area was snarled for hours as demonstrators shut down all vehicle, pedestrian and bike traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge and chained themselves to 55-gallon drums filled with cement

across Interstate 880 in Oakland. Protesters marching into Brooklyn blocked Manhattan-bound traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge. In Eugene, Oregon, protesters blocked Interstate 5, shutting down traffic on the major highway for about 45 minutes.

O'Hare warned travelers on the social platform X to take alternative forms of transportation with car travel "substantially delayed this morning due to protest activity." Some travelers stuck in standstill traffic left their cars and walked the final leg to the airport along the freeway, trailing their luggage behind them.

Among them was Madeline Hannan from suburban Chicago. She was headed to O'Hare for a work trip to Florida when her and her husband's car ended up stalled for 20 minutes. She got out and "both ran and speed walked" more than a mile (1.6 kilometers). She said she made it to the gate on time,

but barely. "This was an inconvenience," she said in a telephone interview from Florida. "But in the grand scheme of things going on overseas, it's a minor inconvenience."

While individual travelers may have been affected, operations at the airport appeared near normal with delays of under 15 minutes, according to the Chicago Department of Aviation.

Inbound traffic toward O'Hare resumed around 9 a.m. Near Seattle, the Washington State Department of Transportation said a demonstration closed the main road to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Social media posts showed people holding a banner and waving Palestinian flags while standing on the highway. State authorities urged people to use light rail instead. About 20 protesters were arrested at the Golden Gate

Bridge demonstration and traffic resumed shortly after noon, according to the California Highway Patrol. The agency said officers were making arrests at two points on the interstate, including one spot where roughly 300 protesters refused orders to disperse.

"Attempting to block or shut down a freeway or state highway to protest is unlawful, dangerous, and prevents motorists from safely reaching their destinations," the agency said in a statement.

Oregon State Police said 52 protesters were arrested for disorderly conduct following the Interstate 5 protest in Eugene, Oregon, about 110 miles (177 kilometers) south of Portland. Six vehicles were towed from the scene.

New York Police made numerous arrests, saying 150 protesters were initially involved in the march around 3:15 p.m., but that number quickly grew.

Sunak faces resistance over smoking ban plans

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak faces very vocal resistance against his plans to effectively ban smoking for anyone aged 15 and younger as a new bill comes up for a vote in the House of Commons on Tuesday. The British Indian leader proposed the Tobacco and Vapes Bill last year and declared his vision for creating a "smokefree generation" by making it an offence to sell tobacco products to anyone born after January 1, 2009, which covers children aged 15. Once it clears its parliamentary journey, the new legislation will introduce some of the world's strictest anti-smoking laws in the country.

"I propose that in future we raise the smoking age by one year, every year. That means a 14-year-old today will never legally be sold a cigarette and that they — and their generation — can grow up smoke-free. We know this works," Sunak had declared at the Conservative Party conference in October last year. As there is Opposition backing for the



bill in Parliament and governing Conservative MPs have a free vote on the bill, any Tory votes against the bill will not be seen as a full-blown rebellion against the Prime Minister.

But two of Sunak's immediate predecessors, Liz Truss and Boris Johnson, have been leading a very vocal group of Tories who plan to vote against the bill as "un-Conservative" and taking away choice from the public.

"The truth is that there is no safe level of tobacco consumption. It is uniquely harmful, and that is why we are taking this important action today to protect the next generation," said UK Health Secretary Victoria Atkins.

"This Bill will save thousands of lives, ease the strain on our NHS [National Health Service], and improve the UK's productivity," she said.

Under the new law, smoking itself would not be criminalised, and anyone who can legally buy tobacco will not be prevented from doing so.

The ban aims to stop people from smoking even before they start as the government pointed to its highly addictive nature, with four in five smokers picking it up before the age of 20, remaining addicted for life. If passed, the bill will progress to the next stage, bringing the UK closer to creating the first smoke-free generation, the government says. Under the plans, trading standards officers would get new powers to issue on-the-spot 100-pound fines to shops selling tobacco or vapes to children, with all the money

raised going towards further enforcement.

"This historic legislation will consign smoking to the 'ash heap of history,'" said Deborah Arnott, head of the charity Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). The Tobacco and Vapes Bill would also give the government new powers to tackle youth vaping by restricting flavours and regulating the way that vapes are sold and packaged to make them less appealing to children.

The UK's Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) said while vaping can play a useful role in helping adult smokers to quit, non-smokers and children should never vape.

The long-term health impacts of vaping are unknown, and the nicotine contained within them can be highly addictive, it warned. According to official figures, responsible for around 80,000 deaths annually, smoking is the UK's single biggest preventable killer and costs the NHS and economy an estimated GBP 17 billion a year — more than the GBP 10 billion annual revenue from tobacco taxation.



President Joe Biden, right, meets with Prime Minister Petr Fiala of the Czech Republic in the Oval Office at the White House, Monday.

AP/PTI

Indian-origin principal wins legal challenge over school prayer ban

PTI ■ LONDON

An Indian-origin school principal, often referred to as "Britain's strictest headmistress", on Tuesday welcomed a UK High Court ruling that upheld her ban on prayer rituals after a Muslim pupil sought to legally challenge it as discriminatory. Katherine Birbalsingh, of Indo-Guyanese heritage, had told the court that Michaela School — a "secular" secondary school for boys and girls in Wembley, north London — did not allow religious prayers in keeping with its ethos of promoting an "inclusive environment". While half of the pupils at the school are Muslims, it also has large numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Christian pupils.

"As the Governing Body is aware, the School does not provide a prayer room for use by pupils, for various reasons. These reasons include that a prayer room would foster division amongst pupils, contrary to the School's ethos, lack of available space and available staff to supervise pupils and that pupils would miss important School activities, including during the lunch break if they were to spend time in a prayer room," Birbalsingh told the court. "Unacceptable segregation or division, contrary to the whole ethos of the school, was taking place as a result of permitting prayer. An intimidatory atmosphere was developing. Our strict disciplinary policies, on which the ethos and great success of (the) School is based,

were at risk of being undermined," she said.

Justice Thomas Linden, in an 80-page judgment following a hearing in January, ruled in the school's favour.

"In my judgment, the starting point is that the School was right to take the view that the issue was whether to permit and facilitate ritual prayer indoors; in effect, to reverse its longstanding policy of not providing a prayer room," it reads. "She (the unnamed pupil) knew that the School is secular, and her own evidence is that her mother wished her to go there because it was known to be strict... Her evidence has focussed on her preferences and what she supposes the position would be elsewhere," it notes.

'Substantial increase in attack on Hindus in US'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Observing that there is a substantial increase in attacks against Hindus in the US, an Indian-American Congressman has said that this was just the "beginning of a coordinated anti-Hindu attack", as he asked the community members to unite against hate crimes. Congressman Shri Thanedar's remarks came during a news conference held at the National Press Club here on Monday. "Today I am seeing in the United States a substantial increase in attacks on Hinduism. A lot of misinformation is being circulated whether it is online or otherwise," Thanedar said. Thanedar and four other Indian-American lawmakers — Ro Khanna, Raja Krishnamoorthi, Ami Bera and Pramila Jayapal — had recently



written to the Department of Justice seeking an investigation on the recent surge in attacks on Hindu temples and places of worship. At the press conference organised by HinduAction, a non-profit body, Thanedar complained that no action has been taken against those responsible for the attacks and no arrests have been made either.

"We have experienced substantially more events of this kind in recent months. I have a feeling that this is just the beginning of a very coordinated attempt against this community and the community must stand together. The time has come and I will stand with you," Thanedar said. "Having practised Hinduism, having grown up as a Hindu in a Hindu household, I know what Hinduism is. It is a very peaceful religion," he said, adding that it is not a religion that attacks others.

However, this community continues to be misrepresented, misunderstood, sometimes deliberately, he said. "I recently joined four of my Indian-American colleagues to write to the Department of Justice. You know, one of the concerns that we had was the rising attacks on places of worship," Thanedar said.

"We've seen those happening in California, we have seen those happening all the way in New York and all across America. It appears to be a very coordinated effort to attack these places of worship, which has created a lot of fear in the community," he said. Thanedar alleged that often local law enforcement enters into these investigations which go nowhere.

He said it leaves the community feeling like they have nobody who cares about them. That means that the community continues to live in fear. The community continues to live in an adverse situation with essentially no help from law enforcement, he added. Thanedar said that there is a need to coordinate efforts between the local law enforcement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Justice.

"A higher priority needs to be assigned to such hate crimes against this peaceful community," he said.

"That is what we have asked the Justice Department to do and it is time for the whole community to come together and make sure that we demand equality, that we demand justice. We will not tolerate such hate against Hinduism. Thanedar said he has introduced a resolution in the United States Congress on "anti-Hindu attacks". "Through the resolution and the letter that we wrote to the Department of Justice, we continue to put pressure on this administration to ensure that the Hindu community has a right to live in peace," he said. Utsav Chakrabarti from HinduAction described it as a historic resolution in the fight against "anti-Hindu crimes" in the US.

'Pak needs years to implement IMF-advised structural reforms'

Cash-strapped Pakistan would need two or three years to implement structural reforms prescribed by the IMF, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb has said...

— doesn't go through the structural reforms, the country would still be looking for another programme, the report said. "We have known the what and why not for years but for decades," he was quoted as saying in the report.

reforming the Bretton Woods twins — the IMF and the World Bank. "We are dealing with adaptation and financing and to the extent that these institutions come in to help countries like Pakistan from inclusive growth perspective...

Inquiry commission gives clean chit to ex-ISI chief Gen Hamid

Pakistan's former Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) director general Lieutenant General (ret'd) Faiz Hamid has been exonerated by the inquiry commission established to investigate the 2017 sit-in by a headline religious group here and Rawalpindi, it emerged on Tuesday.



Syed Akhtar Ali Shah, a former civil servant, who also served as Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa's police chief and included Tahir Alam Khan, a former Islamabad police chief and Khushal Khan, an additional secretary at the Ministry of Interior. It was tasked to identify those

who planned, financed, and supported the protest and also recommended legal action against its planners and executors which disrupted life in Rawalpindi and Islamabad between November 6 and November 27, 2017. The commission in the report of 149 pages, 57 annexures & sub-annexures and one appendix claimed to have examined all relevant evidence but described it to be an elaborate case study on the style of governance in Pakistan.

'Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens global security'

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told Chinese leader Xi Jinping who hosted him in Beijing on Tuesday that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine threatens global security, in an apparent call for China to apply greater pressure on its neighbor and close strategic partner to resolve the conflict.

which has threatened to spread into a regional conflict and has disrupted energy and global food supplies and other trade. Russia's actions "violate a principle of the United Nations Charter and the principle of the inviolability of national borders," Scholz was quoted as saying by German media.

as saying. Scholz on Monday called for fair competition in trade relations while warning about dumping and overproduction during a talk to college students in the financial hub of Shanghai, where German companies have major investments. His visit has underscored trade-related tensions as the European Union and other nations complain that China is competing unfairly through the use of tariffs, intellectual property theft and political interference.

'Pak sustained its N-programme despite economic turmoil'

Pakistan sustained its nuclear modernisation efforts last year despite its economic turmoil as its contentious relationship with India continues to drive its defence policy, the top US intelligence official has told Congress.

However, cross-border violence between the countries has decreased since their February 2021 recommitment to a ceasefire, he said. "Islamabad is modernising its nuclear arsenal and improving the security of its nuclear materials and nuclear C2 (command and control). In October, Pakistan successfully tested its Ababeel medium-range ballistic missile," he said.

China's GDP grew by 5.3% in 1st quarter of 2024

China's economy grew at 5.3 per cent in the first quarter, making a stronger-than-expected start to the year even as the downturn of its property market continued while the domestic demand remained subdued.

Sheng mentioned positive factors during this period, such as rising production demand, stable employment and prices, and growing market confidence. "These positive factors driving economic recovery are accumulating and strengthening, laying a good foundation for full-year growth," he said. Sheng also noted that the 5.3 per cent GDP growth was mainly driven by a rebound in the industrial sector and an improvement in the service sector. He, however, was silent on the continued crisis in the property sector, which accounts for 20 per cent of the world's second-largest economy, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

property investment fell 9.5 per cent, highlighting the challenges faced by China's real estate firms. "You cannot manufacture growth forever, so we really need to see households come to the party if China wants to hit that around five per cent growth target," Harry Murphy Cruise from Moody's Analytics told the BBC. The real estate industry crisis was highlighted in January when property giant Evergrande was ordered to liquidate by a court in Hong Kong.

More homes flooded in Kazakhstan

Nearly 14,500 homes have been flooded in a Russian region bordering Kazakhstan after water levels spiked in a local river, local authorities said Tuesday. The floods sparked evacuations of thousands in the Orenburg region, located some 1,200 kilometers (745 miles), southeast of the capital of Moscow after a dam on the Ural River burst last week under the pressure of surging waters. Local authorities have classified the deluge as an emergency of federal importance, and more than 16,500 people have been evacuated from the flooded areas, the office of the Orenburg governor said Tuesday.

according to officials. The situation is more dire in the southwest of the region near the Kazakh border, where authorities said the river there has risen to a dangerous level in the town of Ilek. Further east along the border, floods also hit the regions of Kurgan and Tyumen after water levels rose in local rivers. Russian emergency officials said Tuesday that over 300 homes have been flooded in the Kurgan region. In both the Kurgan and Tyumen provinces, evacuations from areas that may be flooded are underway. In neighboring Kazakhstan, massive floods have prompted the evacuation of over 113,000 people to date, Kazakh emergency officials said. As of Tuesday, more than 5,700 houses remain flooded there, officials said.

'Singapore PM Lee to continue to be part of govt after stepping down next month'

Singapore (PTI): Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will stay in the Cabinet as Senior Minister after stepping down as the leader of the government on May 15, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, who will succeed him, said on Tuesday. "There won't be many changes to the rest of the line-up for now," Wong, who would be the fourth prime minister of the economically prosperous city-state of Singapore, said. Earlier on Monday, it was announced that Lee will step down on May 15 after nearly 20 years of heading the government as part of the long-planned leadership transition. Details of the cabinet reshuffle would be announced a few days before the swearing-in ceremony on May 15, Wong told reporters a day after the leadership handover date was announced. "Our system works on the basis of continuity and progressive change. It has never been the case that when there is a leadership transition, all the older ministers step down at the same time," the 51-year-old Prime Minister-to-be said.

Ukrainian pres signs law to boost conscription to fend off Russia's aggression

Kyiv (AP): Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a controversial law Tuesday, days after it was passed by parliament, potentially helping Kyiv to boost conscription to replenish depleted forces to fend off Russia's continued aggression. The mobilisation law, published on Ukraine's Parliamentary website, is expected to take effect in a month and make it easier to identify every draft-eligible man in the country. Many have dodged conscription by avoiding contact with authorities. The law also provides soldiers with incentives, such as cash bonuses or money toward buying a house or car, which according to analysts Ukraine can't afford. Ukraine has been struggling to fend off the Russian advance. Since the full-scale invasion began in Feb 2022, Russia has captured nearly a quarter of Ukraine, which is outnumbered, outgunned and in desperate need of more troops and ammunition, as doubt increases about Western military aid. The signed law was watered down from its original draft. It didn't include a provision that would rotate out troops who had served 36 months of com-



bat. Authorities said a separate bill on demobilisation and rotation would be prepared in the coming months. But the delay caused public outrage among Ukrainians whose relatives have been fighting without breaks for two years. Exhausted soldiers have no means of taking a break from front-line work because of the current scale and intensity of the war. Ukraine already suffers from a lack of trained soldiers capable of fighting, and demobilising soldiers on the front lines now would deprive its forces of the most capable fighters. In December, Zelenskyy said Ukraine's military wanted to mobilize up to 500,000 more troops.

Heavy rains lash UAE, death toll in Oman flooding rises to 18

Dubai (AP): Heavy rains lashed the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday, flooding out portions of major highways and leaving vehicles abandoned on roadways across Dubai. Meanwhile, the death toll in separate heavy flooding in neighboring Oman rose to 18 with others still missing as the sultanate prepared for the storm. The rains began overnight, leaving massive ponds on streets as whipping winds disrupted flights at Dubai International Airport, the world's busiest for international travel and the home of the long-haul carrier Emirates. By the evening,

over 120 millimeters (4.75 inches) of rainfall had soaked the city-state — the typical average for a year in the desert nation — with more expected in the coming hours. Police and emergency personnel drove slowly through the flooded streets, their emergency lights flashing across the darkened morning. Lightning flashed across the sky, occasionally touching the tip of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Schools across the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms, largely shut ahead of the storm and government employees were

largely working remotely if able. Many workers stayed home as well, though some ventured out, with the unfortunate stalling out their vehicles in deeper-than-expected water covering some roads. Authorities sent tanker trucks out into the streets and highways to pump away the water. Water poured into some homes, forcing people to bail out their houses. Rain is unusual in the UAE, an arid, Arabian Peninsula nation, but occurs periodically during the cooler winter months. Many roads and other areas lack drainage given the lack of regular rainfall, causing flooding.

UK criminalises creation of 'deepfake' images without consent

London (PTI): Despicable people who create sexually explicit "deepfakes" will face prosecution under a new law going through its parliamentary journey, the British government said on Tuesday. Deepfake refers to images and videos made to look hyper-realistic, with the victim usually unaware and unable to give their consent. Recent years have seen the growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to add the faces of celebrities or public figures - most often women - into pornographic films. Under the new offence, those who create such images without consent face a criminal record and an unlimited fine. If the deepfake content

is then shared more widely, offenders could be sent to jail. "The creation of deepfake sexual images is despicable and completely unacceptable irrespective of whether the image is shared," said Laura Farris, UK Minister for Victims and Safeguarding. "It is another example of ways in which certain people seek to degrade and dehumanise others - especially women. And it has the capacity to cause catastrophic consequences if the material is shared more widely. This government will not tolerate it. This new offence sends a crystal-clear message that making this material is immoral, often misogynistic, and a crime," she said.

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Markets slump for third day

On fears of escalating tensions in Middle East; IT stocks drag

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty continued to slump on Tuesday dragged down by heavy selling in IT stocks amid weak global trends and fears of escalating tensions in the Middle East. Outflow of foreign fund also dented investors' sentiment. Continuing its downtrend for the third day running, the 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 456.10 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 72,943.68. During the day, it slumped 714.75 points or 0.97 per cent to 72,685.03. The NSE Nifty declined 124.60 points or 0.56 per cent to finish at 22,147.90. From the Sensex basket, Infosys, IndusInd Bank, Bajaj Finserv, Wipro, HCL Technologies, Bajaj Finance, Tech Mahindra, Tata Consultancy Services, and Larsen & Toubro were the major laggards. Titan Company, Hindustan Unilever, HDFC Bank, Maruti, ITC, Power Grid and Reliance Industries were the gainers. "The domestic market sustained its consolidation trend for the



third consecutive day, amid apprehensions regarding geopolitical tensions and drop in the probability of a rate cut in the short-term. Heightened concerns arose following stronger-than-anticipated US retail sales, amplifying the assumption that the US Federal Reserve might delay rate cuts, leading to a notable uptick in the dollar index and US bond yields. "The IT sector saw the most significant decline, primarily due to expectations of earnings

being affected by the weak discretionary spending in the US and muted domestic Q4 results," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.57 per cent and midcap index advanced 0.05 per cent. Among the indices, IT declined 2.32 per cent, teck (2.09 per cent), bankex (0.50 per cent), metal (0.36 per cent), capital goods (0.26 per cent) and commodities (0.24 per cent). Energy, consumer discretionary,

healthcare, industrials, consumer durables, oil & gas, and power were the gainers. Stock markets would remain closed on Wednesday for Ram Navami. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong settled lower. European markets were quoting in the red. Wall Street ended in negative territory on Monday. Israel's military chief said on Monday that his country will respond to Iran's weekend attack, but he did not elaborate on when and how as world leaders urged against retaliation, trying to avoid a spiral of violence in the Middle East. Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.26 per cent to USD 89.87 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 3,268 crore on Monday, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark tanked 845.12 points or 1.14 per cent to settle at 73,399.78 on Monday. The NSE Nifty declined 246.90 points or 1.10 per cent to finish at 22,272.50.

Petrol sales up 7 per cent, diesel declines 9.5 per cent in April

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's petrol consumption soared 7 per cent in the first half of April but diesel sales were down 9.5 per cent ahead of the onset of a harsh summer season that is set to crank up fuel demand, preliminary data of state-owned firms showed on Tuesday. Petrol sales of three state-owned firms, which control 90 per cent of the fuel market, rose to 1.22 million tonnes during April 1 to 15 when compared to 1.14 million tonnes of consumption in the same period last year. Diesel demand dropped 9.5 per cent to 3.14 million tonnes. While petrol sales were up mostly due to an increase in use of personal vehicles on the back of a price cut, crop harvesting season as well as the onset of summer which will increase the demand for air conditioning in cars is likely to reverse the trend in diesel demand. Petrol and diesel prices were last month reduced by Rs 2 per litre, ending a nearly two-



year-long hiatus in rate revision. Month-on-month petrol sales dropped 3.6 per cent when compared to 1.27 million tonnes of consumption in March 1-15. Diesel demand too was down 2.7 per cent month-on-month when compared to 3.22 million tonnes in the first half of March. Diesel is India's most consumed fuel, accounting for almost 40 per cent of all

petroleum product consumption. Transport sector accounts for 70 per cent of all diesel sales in the country. It is also the predominant fuel used in agriculture sectors, including in harvesters and tractors. Petrol consumption has consistently shown a year-on-year rise, diesel consumption has been on a see-saw - rising in one month and falling in another. Consumption of petrol

during the first half of April was 9.2 per cent more than in the COVID-marred April 1-15, 2022, and 56.5 per cent more than in the first half of April 2020. Diesel demand was up 4.7 per cent over April 1-15, 2022, and 27.9 per cent compared to the first half of April 2020. Jet fuel (ATF) sales rose 10.4 per cent year-on-year to 3,35,700 tonnes during April 1-15, 2024. But this was 1.2 per cent lower month-on-month. Like petrol and diesel, ATF demand too is now firmly above pre-Covid levels. ATF consumption was 34.3 per cent more than in April 1-15, 2022, and 18.4 per cent more than in the first half of April 2020. Cooking gas LPG sales were up 8.8 per cent year-on-year at 1.2 million tonnes in April 1-15, 2024. LPG consumption was 15.3 per cent higher than in April 1-15, 2022, and 28.3 per cent more than in the first half of April 2020. Month-on-month, LPG demand fell 11.6 per cent against 1.36 million tonnes of LPG consumption.

India's unemployment rate to decline 97 basis points by 2028: ORF Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's unemployment rate is likely to decline by as much as 97 basis points by 2028 as the country's economy hits the USD 5 trillion mark, fuelling a rise in employment, a new report said on Tuesday. Unemployment rate -- the percentage of people in the labour force who are without jobs -- is projected to fall from 4.47 per cent in 2024 to 3.68 per cent in 2028, the India Employment Outlook 2030 report by thinktank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) said. "India's job market is experiencing a transformation as the country has become the world's fastest growing large economy in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic," the report said. The country's young population, whose median age is 28.4 years, holds a key to fuelling economic expansion. "With a GDP growth rate of 7.8 per cent, India

could potentially achieve its target of becoming a USD 5-trillion economy by 2026-27, with such growth being underpinned by strong private consumption and public investment," it said. India's gross domestic product (GDP) size is estimated at just under USD 4 trillion in 2024. An ORF press statement said the report identifies sectors that the country's 600-million-plus population of people aged 18-35 years regard as aspirational, as these sectors could act as engines of growth in the years ahead. "The report forecasts that as India approaches its USD 5 trillion goal, overall employment could rise 22 per cent, while unemployment could decline by 97 basis points by 2028," the statement said. The service sector in particular is set to witness significant job creation with each unit rise in services output expected to contribute to a substantial 0.12 per cent increase in employment. The report singles out ten especially high-opportunity sub-sectors in the services space.



These include digital services, financial services, and services related to health, hospitality,

consumer retail, e-commerce, and renewable energy. Other areas poised for rapid growth are global capability centres, and MSME and startup ecosystems. The burgeoning service sector also offers encouraging avenues for women's employment. Hence, investing in women's skilling, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurship needs to be prioritised further, argues the report. "The projections for India's manufacturing sector are less optimistic. In spite of the US' growing imports from India, India's competitive cost structures and labour resources, and the government's push for manufacturing through flagship schemes such as Make in India, employment in the sector appears to have declined. "Technological advances and increased automation continue to cast doubts upon the country's ability to absorb its expanding workforce," the statement said. In this context, transitioning towards industrial

value chains associated with the service sector could help rejuvenate employment. Nilanjana Ghosh, a director at ORF and one of the authors of the report said, "Policymakers and public sector schemes could partner more closely with other stakeholders to identify employability and skill gaps. The next step would be to upgrade curricula and skills to make India's talent pool more industry ready." Ghosh added that nurturing entrepreneurship would be crucial for improved next-gen employment. "A new class of entrepreneurs could stimulate job creation, expand India's startup ecosystem, spur innovation, and promote youth participation. But we also need to ensure that the workplaces of the future are gender-sensitive and inclusive," he said. The report concludes that a multistakeholder approach towards employment generation and enhancement could help realise India's vision of a digitally empowered, skilled, innovative, and self-reliant economy.

Heating equipment maker JNK India IPO to open on April 23

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Heating equipment maker JNK India Ltd is set to open its initial public offering (IPO) on April 23. The initial share-sale will conclude on April 25 and the bidding for anchor investors will open for a day on April 22, according to the red herring prospectus (RHP) filed on Tuesday. The IPO is a combination of fresh issue of equity shares worth up to Rs 300 crore and an Offer-for-Sale (OFS) of up to 84.21 lakh equity shares by promoters and an existing shareholder. Those offloading shares in the OFS are promoters -- Goutam Rampelli, Dipak Kacharalal Bharuka, JNK Heaters Co. Ltd and Mascot Capital and Marketing Pvt Ltd. -- and a shareholder Milind Joshi. Proceeds from the fresh issue will be used for funding working capital requirements and for general corporate purposes. JNK specialises in processed heaters, commanding a market share of about 27 per cent within the Indian heating equipment market for new order bookings during fiscal year 2023, according to F&S Report.



As of March 2023, it had an order book of about Rs 868 crore, way higher than the over Rs 143 crore order book in March 2021. In terms of financials, the company's consolidated revenue from operations surged by 37.42 per cent to Rs 407.30 crore for the fiscal year 2023, from Rs 296.40 crore a

year earlier and net profit increased by 29 per cent to Rs 46.36 crore in fiscal 2023 from Rs 35.98 crore in fiscal 2022. IIFL Securities and ICICI Securities are the book-running lead managers of the public issue. The equity shares are proposed to be listed on BSE and NSE.

India fastest growing economy during last three years, says Sitharaman

PTI ■ JAIPUR



Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said here on Tuesday that India has been the fastest growing economy in the last three consecutive financial years and this growth can continue in the coming years as well. She said the next 25 years will be critical for India. In the financial year 2023-24, India witnessed a growth rate of eight per cent in three quarters and is expecting a similar level of growth in the fourth quarter, she said, adding it has been a sustainable growth. "India has been the fastest growing economy in the last

three consecutive financial years and this growth can continue in the coming years as well. The next 25 years will be very critical for India," Sitharaman said in a dialogue programme with industrialists and businessmen. She said that foreign investors are coming to invest in India due to the credibility of its economy. "Due to the economic policy, larger macroeconomic stability, stable government, stable taxation policy, transparent tenders and procurement, there has been immense credibility of India's economy abroad. So, the investors are coming here to invest," she said.

Gold, silver prices hit fresh peaks

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Extending gains for the second day in a row, gold and silver prices hit fresh all-time high levels on Tuesday, tracking strong trends in the international markets amid fears of escalating tensions in the Middle East. According to HDFC Securities, gold prices zoomed Rs 700 to hit its lifetime high of Rs 73,750 per 10 grams in the national capital on Tuesday. It had closed at Rs 73,050 per 10 grams on Monday. Similarly, silver price jumped Rs 800 to hit a record high of Rs 86,500 per kg. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at a new record high of Rs 73,750 per 10 grams, up by Rs 700, taking positive cues from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst, Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the global markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,370 per ounce, up by USD 15 from the previous close. Gold rose as demand for the haven asset grew amid fears of escalating tensions in the Middle East following Iran's unprecedented attack on Israel last week.

RupeeQ aims to treble loan disbursement portfolio to ₹300 crore by 2027

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Home-grown platform for online loans and credit cards RupeeQ aims to treble digital loan disbursements portfolio to Rs 300 crore by 2027 on the back of government's push towards high-speed internet services in semi-urban and rural areas. Talking to PTI, Neeru Puri, Managing Director and Chief Financial Officer of RupeeQ, said, "It is estimated that total value of digital lending business in India will exceed USD 1 trillion over next 5 years. At RupeeQ, we expect to treble our loan disbursement portfolio by 2027, while in fiscal 2023-24 we clocked about Rs 100 crore." According to reports, India shall have 900 million active internet users by 2025, while 56 per cent of all new internet users will be from rural areas, and 65 per cent of new internet users will be female. Puri opined that the government's push on digitalisation and penetration of high-speed internet even in semi-urban and rural areas will help the company materialise its goal.

Puri said the digital lending space in India saw a phenomenal growth in value from USD 270 billion in 2022 to an estimated worth of USD 350 billion by end of next year with a remarkable compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 39.5 per cent. In the current financial year, the digital footprint of financial services consumers would increase to 75 per cent (from current 50 per cent). This is primarily due to the explosion of smartphones as well as mobile internet, Puri explained. As per a recent Boston Consulting Group's (BCG) report, loan disbursement models in the last few years have seen frenetic activity. There are a few fundamental drivers which are all coming together to turbo-charge this space. First, consumer behaviours are changing dramatically, shaped by experiences offered by internet giants. Second, there have been some rapid technological advances, led by the ever increasing penetration of smartphones as well as the proliferation of data.

Road execution to grow 5, 8 per cent in FY25: Icra

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Road execution in India is likely to grow 5-8 per cent to 12,500-13,000 km in the current fiscal, after recording a robust expansion of 20 per cent in 2023-24, rating agency Icra said on Tuesday. It added that the pace of execution in this fiscal will be supported by a healthy pipeline of projects, increased capital outlay by the government and focus on completion of projects by



Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH). Icra noted that road execution was impacted in the first half of FY24 on account of a prolonged monsoon in certain geographies, which affected productive days. According to Icra, the ministry's project award pipeline is healthy, at above 45,000 km as of March 2024. This is despite the awarding being significantly impacted in FY24 amid delay in approval from the Cabinet for

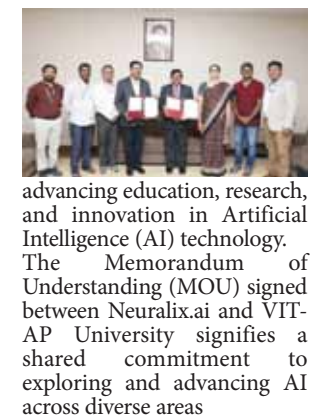
the revised cost estimates of Bharatmala Pariyojana Phase 1 (BMP), it added. Consequently, the overall awards declined by 31 per cent to 8,551 km in FY24 from 12,375 km in FY23. Icra pointed out that a similar trend was seen in FY19 before the last general elections, when the project awarding had declined by over 67 per cent on a year-on-year basis. The rating agency said engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC)

mode continues to be the mainstay of this process, accounting for 70-75 per cent of the awards in FY24, followed by Build, Operate, Transfer (BOT)-Hybrid Annuity Mode (HAM), accounting for 25-30 per cent share. "There were no awards under BOT-Toll in FY2024," Icra said, adding that in March 2024, the ministry amended the BOT-Toll model concession agreement to improve its attractiveness.

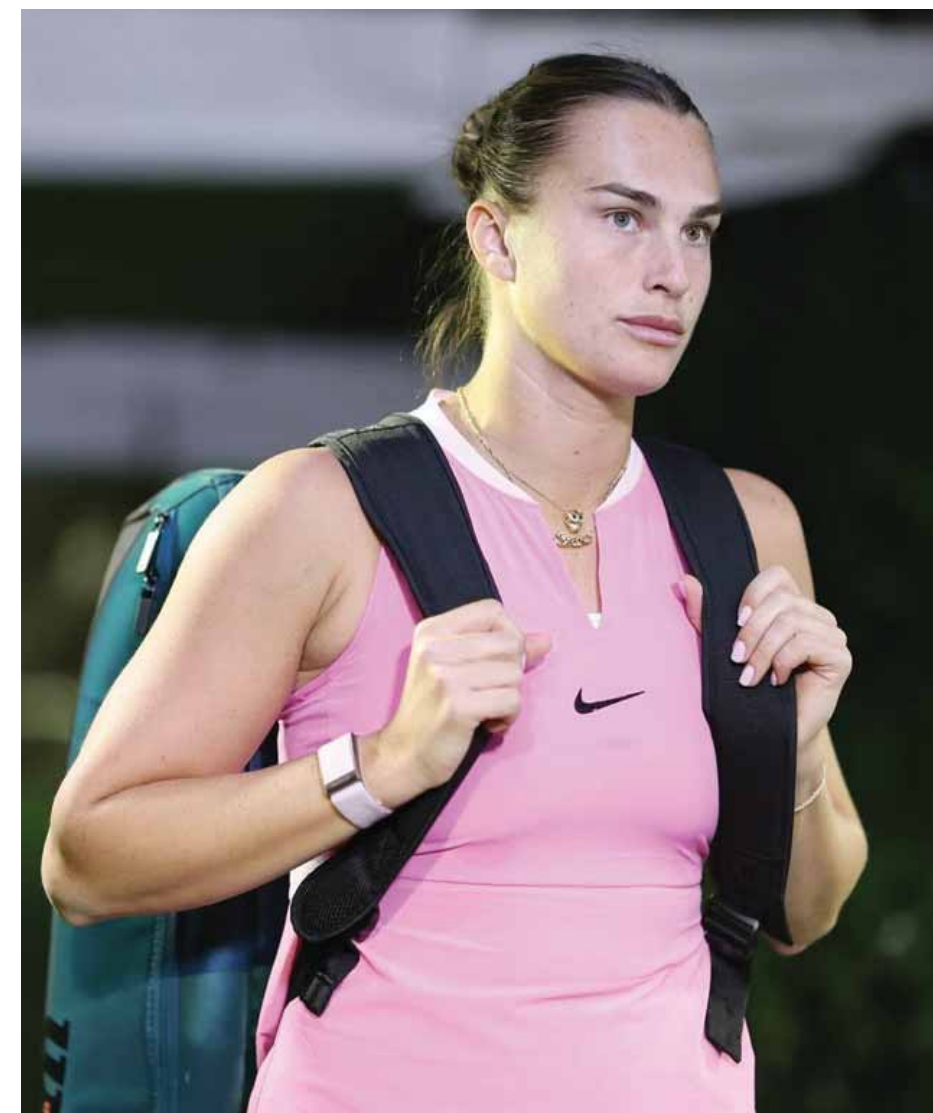
Neuralix Inc, VIT AP University announce collaboration to advance AI research

PNS ■ AMARAVATI, ANDHRA PRADESH

Neuralix Inc. and VIT-AP University announce strategic collaboration to advance Artificial Intelligence (AI) knowledge and research. Neuralix Inc., a leading AI startup specializing in digital transformation across various industries, and VIT-AP University, with its commitment to academic excellence and technological innovation, have formalized a collaboration aimed at



advancing education, research, and innovation in Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between Neuralix.ai and VIT-AP University signifies a shared commitment to exploring and advancing AI across diverse areas



SABALENKA TO FACE GOOD FRIEND BADOSA IN STUTTGART OPENER

AP ■ STUTTGART, GERMANY

Paula Badosa battled past Diana Shnaider 6-3, 6-4 to set up a match with friend and world No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka at the Porsche Grand Prix. Shnaider fended off four match points before former No. 2 Badosa took her fifth opportunity at the clay-court tournament on Monday. Badosa's 10 double faults allowed Shnaider eight break point opportunities. The 20-year-old Russian was unable to

take any of them on the center court in Stuttgart. Sabalenka has finished runner-up on her last three appearances in Stuttgart, losing the final to former No. 1 Ashleigh Barty in 2021 and current No. 1 Iga Swiatek in 2022 and 2023. Sachia Vickery of the United States defeated Aliaksandra Sasnovich of Belarus 7-6 (2), 7-5 and will next face compatriot Coco Gauff, the world No. 3. Veronika Kudermetova of Russia outlasted Barbora Krejčíková 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 for a

second-round meeting with No. 4 Elena Rybakina. Kudermetova was a break down in the deciding set but fought back and took her first match point to prevail after 3 hours, 6 minutes - one of the longest ever matches in Stuttgart. Gauff, Sabalenka, Swiatek and Rybakina all received first-round byes. Eight of the top 10 women are at the tournament. Swiatek is bidding to become the first three-time champion in Stuttgart since Maria Sharapova won from 2012-14.

Four titles in seven months, success of Kolkata Big Three will have huge impact: AIFF president

PTI ■ KOLKATA

The success of Kolkata's 'Big Three' — Mohun Bagan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting — will not just have a massive impact on state football but will also have a positive effect on the sport in the country, said All India Football Federation president Kalyan Chaubey on Tuesday. Seven months, four titles, and the 'Mecca of Indian football' was celebrating after Mohun Bagan's maiden League Winners Shield triumph following their 2-1 win over Mumbai City FC at the packed Salt Lake Stadium here on Monday. 'Bringing home the ISL Shield, I-League Trophy, Super Cup and Durand Cup to West Bengal is a sign of new-age football in the state, and adaptability of these clubs to the newer norms of

football," Chaubey told PTI. "The three giants of Kolkata enjoy enormous fan support in West Bengal, India and globally. I'm sure the success of MB and EB, along with Mohammedan Sporting joining the two in ISL next season, will have a massive impact on Indian football." It all began with Mohun Bagan starting the season with their first Durand Cup title in 23 years, defeating arch-rivals East Bengal 1-0 on September 3 last year. East Bengal made amends to win the Super Cup, beating Odisha FC 3-2 in Bhubaneswar on January 29. It marked the end of their 12-year trophy drought. Having faced multiple relegation, Mohammedan Sporting came back from oblivion to defeat Shillong Lajong FC 2-1 earlier this month to win the I-League with a round to spare and



confirm their promotion to ISL. Mohun Bagan then went on to lift the ISL Shield in front of a record 61,000-plus home crowd at the Salt Lake Stadium. The Green and Maroon brigade will now aim to finish season by lifting the ISL Trophy, which would be a 'High

Five' for the Maidan 'Big Three'. Mohun Bagan is the oldest club in India, having been established in 1889, while Mohammedan Sporting came into existence two years later in 1891. East Bengal (established in 1920) also recently celebrated their centenary year. "They are the 'Big Three' of Kolkata football. With historic milestones and to have ruled Indian football for decades, the three have centuries-old football culture and I'm just glad that they have all come around once again to help the city earn the bragging rights," he said. "It's a remarkable year for Kolkata football to bring home four titles this season." "Millions of football fans, having their loyalties to these Big Three, have joined in to reverberate Kolkata's legacy," he added.

Goal Palmer scores four in 6-0 demolition of dismal Everton

AP ■ LONDON

Cole Palmer put on an unstoppable display with a perfect first-half hat trick and a fourth in the second half as Chelsea demolished Everton 6-0 in the English Premier League. Palmer scored with his left foot, head and right foot in the 13th, 19th and 29th minutes on Monday to become the first Chelsea player to score in seven successive home games. "It all happens so fast," Palmer told Sky Sports. "We started well and I scored another hat trick - buzzing. First one was my favorite, my right foot was a bit of a swinger." The Manchester City reject

stroked home a superb first from just outside the box and nodded in the second from close range after Jordan Pickford could only parry Nicolas Jackson's shot. His third was a wonderful 35-yard lob after Pickford needlessly gifted him possession. Nicolas Jackson added a fourth a minute before halftime, and Palmer made it 5-0 from the penalty spot in the 64th. Substitute Alfie Gilchrist's first goal for the club made it six in injury time. Palmer's goals took his season tally to 20 in the league, tied with Manchester City's Erling Haaland. The result extended a depressing few days for



Everton. Just hours before kickoff, the club lodged an appeal against a two-point deduction for a second breach of the Premier League financial rules. Everton was docked two points last week for overspending in a

three-year spell up to the end of the 2022-23 season. It was a second deduction this season for Everton, which had six points removed - reduced from 10 following an appeal - for breaching spending limits from 2019-20 to the 2021-22

season. "We've already agreed that's gone, we have to get on with it," Everton manager Sean Dyche said. "(The points deduction) is out of our control." Dyche described Monday as a "collective down day" and said his team was miles off the pace. "We can't perform like that at a place like this. The key moments when they got chances, finding the back of the net, we haven't done that all season." The Liverpool club sits in 16th place, only two points and two places above the relegation zone. After running its unbeaten streak to eight, Chelsea was in ninth place, only one point behind West Ham.



Muddappa begins season with double victory

PTI ■ PUNE

Multiple-time national champion Hemant Muddappa of Mantra Racing began the season with a double victory at the summer edition of the Valley Run 2024 at Ambay Valley here on Tuesday. Bengaluru's Muddappa was also adjudged as the fastest rider of the day. Muddappa, the 12-time national champion, punched above his weight as he won the unrestricted class with a 1000cc bike, the BMW S1000RRR, and managed to set a national record of 09.480 seconds for this category. He edged past seasoned rider Mohammed Riyaz from

Hyderabad. In the four stroke 851 to 1050cc Open class, Muddappa clocked 09.692s to take the second gold ahead of Riddhihi Patil of Mumbai but had to be content with a second place in the third category he took part. Astride a Dayatona, Riyaz won the 4-stroke 551 up to 850cc Open class in 10.421 seconds, pushing Muddappa's Kawasaki Ninja 6R to second place. The FMSCI event was scheduled to run concurrently with the first round of the Nationals, but since the MMSC event was postponed, Elite Octane and Sportsraft, the organisers of this race, successfully completed the 2024 edition.

Australian aggression can be countered with better innovative passing: Rupinder Pal Singh

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The recent 0-5 drubbing notwithstanding, former drag-flick specialist Rupinder Pal Singh feels the Olympic-bound Indian men's hockey team can counter Australia's aggressive style of play with better defensive coordination and some innovative passing. India were blanked in the five-Test series in Perth some days ago, a disappointing outing for the team, which did reasonably well in the FIH Pro League before that and is expected to better or match its bronze from Tokyo Olympics at the Paris Games in July-August. Singh, who was part of the 2014 Asian Games gold-winning side, is not too concerned by the final result as he felt the team kept improving with every game. "We lost the first match 5-1, after that the team improved and the score-lines were close, we missed some chances, some work needs to be done prior to the Olympics. The series was a preparation for Paris Olympics, as new variations and players were tried out," he told PTI Videos. Asked how should the team counter Australia's attacking style of play, he said innovative passing could do the trick.



"Australia's hard press can be countered, high level of coordination is required for that, defender-to-defender ball transfer, quick passes from defenders to the mid-field, overhead passes would be useful in countering such a style of play," the 33-year-old suggested. He sees no fault in India's reliance on penalty corners for scoring. "...All international teams, all are dependent on penalty corners — the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Australia. Defences have become stronger, here PC conversion is such an important tool that in every match about 1-2 goals have to be scored from them," he pointed out.

He described current India captain Harmanpreet Singh as one of the best drag-flickers in the world. He was, however, concerned about the penalty corner conversion rate of the women's team, which is seeking to rebuild itself after its stunning failure to qualify for the Olympics. "That's a worry (Penalty corner conversion), its penalty corner is an important tool in today's hockey we need to work on that," he said. Singh was speaking on the sidelines of a three-day training program organised by Hockey India. It was also attended by former India goalkeeper Yogita Bali, along with India goalkeepers Adrian D'Souza, Bharat Chetri, Helen Mary, Dipika Murty, Akash Chikte, and PT Rao. Apart from Singh, the other eminent former India drag-flickers who attended the training were Gurjinder Singh, VR Raghunath, and Jaspreet Kaur. The former stars have drawn up a curriculum on the basics

of drag-flicking and goalkeeping which would be implemented across all academies and centres in the country. **FUTURE BRIGHT FOR WOMEN'S HOCKEY:** Despite the Olympic heartbreak, women's hockey will do well, according to Bali, who picked Manipur's Bichu Devi Kharibam as the successor for long-serving goalkeeper Savita Punia. "In Bengaluru, we trained with top six goalkeepers of India, and I found Bichhu to be the best in India after Savita. She could be India's number one after Savita," Bali said. Bali said Indian women's hockey has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. "Compared to when I started playing, there are a lot more facilities, now there are scientific advisors, nutrition experts to help the development of the players. "Earlier Indian Railways was the prominent employment provider for hockey players, now several departments are offering jobs, so things are going well," she said.

Paris bound Olympians look forward to a post COVID Games with fans in stands

AP ■ NEW YORK

The biggest races, routines and games for many of this generation's Olympic athletes were contested in front of mostly empty stands, largely devoid of coaches to help them out or friends and family to cheer them on. That was three years ago at the COVID-19 Summer Olympics and two years ago at the COVID-19 Winter Olympics. Now that they're preparing for the Paris Olympics that begin in July - and a return to something that feels normal - the Americans heading back to the Games know they can never take for granted the screaming fans and a hug from Mom or Dad. "I think it's super important to be able to share these massive moments with people you care about," said BMX rider Alise Willoughby, who has been to the last three Olympics. Willoughby and about 100 other U.S. Athletes are doing interviews and photo shoots this week at the Team USA media summit at a hotel in

Times Square - an event that itself was made impossible in the lead-up to the Tokyo Games in 2021 amid the coronavirus pandemic. One topic of conversation this week is how grateful the bikers, rowers, gymnasts and the rest are to be past the days of contact tracing, quarantines and daily swabbing or spitting for COVID-19 tests inside the so-called Olympic bubble. In Paris, there will be celebrations with relatives and one-on-one contact with coaches, most of whom were not allowed into the venues three years ago. The USA House - a traditional stop for athletes to wind down and kick back, especially after they're done competing - will be doing brisk business once again. Mostly, athletes are looking forward to the chance to soak in the feeling from the crowd, an element sorely missing in the cavernous and largely unfilled venues in Tokyo. "I'll be able to see the audience's emotions. I want to build that with them and I can tailor my routines to



that," said American rhythmic gymnast Evita Griskenas, who plans French music to accompany one routine and "All-American" number for another, all with the goal of getting fans caught up in the moment. Griskenas said she already feels a different vibe. Preparing for the Olympics in Tokyo - Games that were initially delayed by a year, then held in an atmosphere nobody quite recognized - became a largely solitary, and joyless, affair. "It turned into training in my basement and throwing things outside," she said. This year, a different

experience awaits, and some athletes are even looking forward to a crowd rooting against them because, hey, at least it's a crowd. "The boys have been saying, 'We want to play France in, like, the semifinals,'" rugby player Perry Baker said. "You just visualize how big that can be, and how fun that can be. Their crowd. Our crowd. We live for those moments." With crowds, naturally, come other issues that were mostly set on the sideline in 2021. On Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron said the much-touted opening ceremony scheduled for the Seine River could be

moved to the Stade de France if the security threat is deemed too high. Asked what she thought of that possibility, Nicole Deal, the chief of security for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, said other than her main goal - athlete safety - she wants to provide the best experience for the athletes. "Security is an underpinning and a foundation. We're not the main show," Deal said. With two of the next five Olympics set to come to the U.S. - Los Angeles hosts in 2028 and Salt Lake City is a virtual lock for the Winter Games in 2034 - Olympic leaders know there's a lot riding on Paris. This return to "normal," they hope, will bring more Americans back to watching the Olympics in person, online and on TV. Prime-time ratings in Tokyo were 42% lower than the previous Summer Games, in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, and 50% below the Games before that, in London in 2012. There were a number of reasons for that - including the increasingly fragmented

Beijing half marathon results under investigation after runners appear to hand win to Chinese star

AP ■ BANGKOK

Organisers are investigating a half marathon race in Beijing after three African runners appeared to let China's top long-distance runner move ahead of them shortly before the finish line and sprint to victory, sparking public speculation that the result was rigged. There was a flood of public reaction online expressing suspicion about the race after video from the final moments of Sunday's Mengniu Beijing Half Marathon circulated online. On Monday, organizers of the race issued a statement saying they would investigate the results. "The organising committee attaches great importance to the issue raised by netizens about the results of the (race)," organisers said. "A special investigation team has been set up to conduct an investigation, and the results of the investigation will be released to the public in a timely fashion." The Beijing Sports Bureau, which was in charge of the race, did not respond to a

request for comment. He Jie, who won the marathon at the Asian Games and holds the Chinese national record in the event, was trailing behind three runners from Kenya and Ethiopia as they approached the finish line. One of the runners then seems to gesture for the others to slow down as He moves in front and sprints to the finish line. One of the other runners, Willy Mnangat of Kenya, told BBC Sport Africa that they allowed He to win but that they had been hired to serve as pacemakers and were not competing to win the race. However, all three had entered the race as official competitors rather than as pacemakers. "I was not there to compete," Mnangat was quoted as saying. "My job was to set the pace and help the guy win but unfortunately, he did not achieve the target, which was to break the national record." He finished with a time of 1 hour, 3 minutes, 44 seconds, which was more than a minute slower than the Chinese half marathon record.



GUJARAT TITANS, DELHI CAPITALS SEARCH FOR CONSISTENCY

PTI AHMEDABAD
Gujarat Titans will be striving for much needed consistency when they meet Delhi Capitals in an Indian Premier League match here on Wednesday. Unlike the past two editions, the Titans have not been able to play like a well-oiled machine though they still have time to fix the flaws. A last ball win over table leaders Rajasthan Royals on April 10 was just the kind of result the Titans needed to infuse fresh life to their campaign. They have only managed only two wins from their first six games but with another eight matches remaining, the Shubman Gill-led team has enough time to turn things around. The absence of Mohammad Shami has hurt them but they must best use the available resources. Umesh Yadav has taken seven wickets but has leaked more than 10 runs per over. His new ball partner

Spencer Johnson and the seasoned Mohit Sharma too can improve on their economy rate. Star spinner Rashid Khan has been at his frugal best but would like to have more wickets in his kitty. His cameo in the last game helped Titans seal a thrilling win and the team would also be expecting more out of him with the bat. Delhi Capitals, on the other hand, have struggled to assemble their playing eleven due to form and fitness issues. After four losses in five games, they got a much needed boost with the win against Lucknow Super Giants but they still have a lot to sort out if they are to push themselves for a place in the play-offs. The presence of a fit again Kuldeep Yadav made a huge difference as he broke the backbone of the opposition with three timely strikes in Lucknow. Kuldeep, who has added more speed to his craft, seems to be at the peak of his powers and it could be difficult



for Titans batters to face him, especially against his googlies. In Jack Fraser-McGurk, Capitals seem to have found an able number three and will be hoping that the Australian builds on the success of his maiden IPL game. Anrich Nortje, who has been taken to the cleaners by the batters so far in the IPL, did not play the last game. Mukesh Kumar has conceded 10 runs per over in the five games and was also expensive in his comeback game against LSG. The biggest positive for the team has been the batting form of skipper Rishabh Pant, who seems to be getting better with every outing. It would be fair to say that the southpaw is in prime position to make India's squad for the T20 World Cup despite stiff opposition from the likes of Sanju Samson and Ishan Kishan. Thin on Indian batting talent, the Capitals rely heavily on the likes of David Warner, who would itching to make an

impact after not contributing much in the last three games. **THE TEAMS (FROM):** Gujarat Titans: Shubman Gill (c), David Miller, Wriddhiman Saha, Sai Sudharsan, Shahrulkhan Khan, Matthew Wade, Kane Williamson, Azmatullah Omarzai, Abhinav Manohar, Rashid Khan, Vijay Shankar, Rahul Tewatia, Spencer Johnson, Kartik Tyagi, Joshua Little, Darshan Nalkande, Noor Ahmad, Ravirivrasan S Kishore, Mohit Sharma, Jayant Yadav, Umesh Yadav, Sushant Mishra, Sandeep Warrier, Sharath BR, Manav Suthar. Delhi Capitals: Rishabh Pant (c), David Warner, Abhishek Porel, Ricky Bhui, Yash Dullsh, Shai Hope, Prithvi Shaw, Tristan Stubbs, Kumar Kushagra, Swastik Chikara, Ishant Sharma, Jhye Richardson, Rasikh Dar Salam, Vicky Ostwal, Anrich Nortje, Mukesh Kumar, Kuldeep Yadav, Praveen Dubey, Khaleel Ahmed, Sumit Kumar, Axar Patel, Mitchell Marsh, Lalit Yadav, Jake Fraser-McGurk.

RCB Maxwell takes mental and physical break from IPL 2024

PTI BENGALURU
Royal Challengers Bengaluru has decided to take an indefinite "mental and physical" break from the Indian Premier League, blaming his wretched batting form for the decision. Maxwell's absence from RCB's match against Sunrisers Hyderabad here on Monday was initially attributed to a finger injury he suffered during the previous match against Mumbai Indians. But he later admitted to dropping himself from the squad. "It was a pretty easy decision. I went to Faf and the coaches after the last game (vs Mumbai Indians) and said it was probably time we tried someone else (in his place)," Maxwell said in the post-match press meet. "It's actually a good time to give myself a bit of a mental and physical break, get my body right. If I'm required to get in during the tournament, I can, hopefully, get back into a solid mental and physical space where I can make an impact," he added. This is the second time in his career that Maxwell has opted out of competitive cricket in order to gather himself. He had taken a similar break in October 2019, stating that he felt mentally and physically ruined at that time. The 35-year-old made his comeback a couple of months later. In the ongoing IPL, Maxwell has been quite underwhelming with the bat in the six matches he has played this season, contributing just 32 runs at an average of 5.33 and a strike-rate of 94. Twenty eight of those 32 runs came against Kolkata Knight Riders alone, helped to a great degree by two dropped catches. "I have been in this situation in the past where you can keep playing and get yourself deeper into a hole. We have had a pretty big deficiency after the power play, which has been my area of strength over the last couple of seasons. "I felt like I wasn't contributing with the bat, and with the results and the position we find ourselves on the table, I think it's a good time to give someone else an opportunity to show their wares, and hopefully, someone can make that spot their own," a candid Maxwell said. The big-hitting Australian, however, still hoped to return and make an impact in the later stages of the tournament. "The management here has been outstanding. I don't think I've had a better six months in cricket leading into this tournament. "So, it's frustrating when it ends up like this. But if I can get my body and my mind right, there's no reason I can't finish the tournament well if I do get another opportunity," he said. The sudden dip in his form was surprising, considering the hot run he had in the run-up to the IPL. Maxwell had made 552 runs from 17 T20s from November onwards, averaging 42 and his strike-rate was an impressive 185. But the Victorian started the IPL with a first-ball duck against Chennai Super Kings in an



away match, and from that point his fortunes plummeted. "T20 cricket is a pretty fickle game. Even if you look at the first game, I ran one off the middle of the bat to the keeper. I picked up the length, saw a scoring opportunity, but opened the face a little bit too much. "When you are going well, that goes wide of the (wicketkeeper's) gloves, you get a boundary. You are 4 off 1, and you are away for the tournament," he noted. Maxwell said luck was not on his side in this tournament. "I probably just haven't got away. In the first few games, I feel I made reasonably good decisions (for shot selection). But I was finding ways to get out. "It can happen in T20 cricket and when it snowballs like that, you can go searching and try too hard and forget the basics of the game," he said. Maxwell experienced a similar barren run in IPL 2020 while playing for Punjab Kings. During that season, the Australian scored a mere 108 runs from 11 matches and failed to hit a single six. However, Maxwell did not draw parallels between the two seasons. "I was bowling really well back then. I was actually playing more as a spinner. We had KL (Rahul) and Mayank (Agarwal) who were the two leading run-scorers at that time. "So, there weren't a lot of balls left in the game (for him). I was-

nable to get any match rhythm. So, I said the same thing to the Punjab management that we can have an overseas bowler in my place. "But we didn't have an off-spinner, so, I sort of played as an overseas off-spinner who could bat a little bit," he explained.

attack the power play with the two of us and then obviously we've got a lot of power through that middle-order," Head added. It wasn't a mere tall claim as a quick check will reveal SRH's power play scores in six matches this season as 65/1, 81/1, 58/1, 78/1, 40/3 and 76/0, and none of the other nine teams have come close to those numbers. But it was not blind hitting. Head revealed his approach in the initial six overs. "Depending on the field positions, I try to sum up what the bowlers are trying to do. In the power play, with just two fielders out, I try to think about hitting the ball 360, around the

We want to attack Power Play: Head says, revealing SRH batting philosophy

PTI BENGALURU
Sunrisers Hyderabad have Staken T20 batting to the next level with sustained range-hitting in the Indian Premier League, and Travis Head said maximising Power Play segment was central to their aggressive approach. Head, whose 39-ball 100 led SRH to a record-setting 287/3 against Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Monday, underscored that approach with a fifty inside the Power Play. It was also the second time Head completed a half-century within the first six overs. "We've definitely got a lot of power through our top and middle-order and I think we've sort of got to tailor the way we want to play around that power that we've got, especially in power play," said Head in the post-match press conference. The Australian opener has a perfectly ally at the top in an equally belligerent Abhishek Sharma, who blunts slower bowlers upfront while Head goes about destroying the pacers. "I guess Abhi and I at the top of the order try to maximise that (Power Play) as much as we can. It may be fours, it may be sixes. "But yeah, we want to try to



whole ground, as you only have to go over the infield or through the infielders for boundaries. "I'd worked on a few things over the last couple of days. I did not execute the way I would have liked (in the last two matches). But today, especially in the power play, I was able to strike the ball the way I wanted," said the left-hander. The 30-year-old also lauded Hyderabad bowlers, especially skipper and premier pacer Pat Cummins, for holding their nerves when RCB batters were scoring briskly. "We knew that we probably needed three or four really good overs in the game to win it. So, it's amazing to sit here and think that when we make 280, but it's going to be one of the nights for the bowlers to hold on and I thought Pat bowled exceptionally well. "We were able to get wickets throughout the middle of the overs which set the game up. DK (Dinesh Karthik) played an unbelievable innings. But we did really well to get them back at 125 or 130 for five," he added.

attack the power play with the two of us and then obviously we've got a lot of power through that middle-order," Head added. It wasn't a mere tall claim as a quick check will reveal SRH's power play scores in six matches this season as 65/1, 81/1, 58/1, 78/1, 40/3 and 76/0, and none of the other nine teams have come close to those numbers. But it was not blind hitting. Head revealed his approach in the initial six overs. "Depending on the field positions, I try to sum up what the bowlers are trying to do. In the power play, with just two fielders out, I try to think about hitting the ball 360, around the

IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
(erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited)
CIN : L65110T2014PLC097792
Registered Office: KRM Towers, 8th Floor, Harrington Road, Chennai-600031. TEL: +91 44 4564 4000 | FAX: +91 44 4564 4022.

APPENDIX IV [Rule 8(1)]
POSSESSION NOTICE (For immovable property)

Whereas the undersigned being the Authorised Officer of the IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited) under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13(12) read with rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a demand notice dated 17.01.2024 calling upon the borrower, co-borrowers and guarantors 1. New Balaji Metador Transport, 2. Pushpa Singh (In The Capacity Of Legal Heir Of Late Chandrashekar Parihar), 3. Pushpa Singh, 4. Digvijay Singh Parihar, 5. Chandra Bahadur Singh 6. Digvijay Singh (In The Capacity Of Legal Heir Of Late Chandrashekar Parihar) 7. Pooja Singh (In The Capacity Of Legal Heir Of Late Chandrashekar Parihar) to repay the amount mentioned in the notice being Rs. 95,87,860.34/- (Rupees Ninety Five Lac Eighty Seven Thousand Eight Hundred Sixty and Thirty Four Paise Only) as on 17.01.2024, within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said Demand notice. The borrowers having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken Physical Possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him under sub-section (4) of section 13 of Act read with rule 8 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 on this 10th day of April 2024.

The borrowers in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of THE IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited) for an amount of Rs. 4,84,283.14/- (Rupees Four Lac Eighty Four Thousand Two Hundred Eighty Three And Fourteen Paise Only) and interest thereon. The borrower's attention is invited to provisions of sub-section (8) of Section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

Description of the Immovable properties

Item-1:- All That Piece And Parcel Of Plot Nos 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9, Admeasuring 6836.81 Sq. Ft., Khata No. 1150, Land Khasra No. 31/2, 35/3, 35/30, 36, 37/2, Situated At Wake Mauza Gram: Devipuri, P.H.No. 114, Proposed P.H.No. 52, R.N.M-Raipur-2, Tehsil & District: Raipur, Chhattisgarh-492001, And Bounded As: East : Remaining Land Of Colony, West: Rasta, North : Rasta, South : Boundary Wall Of Colony

Item-2:- All That Piece And Parcel Of Plot No. 10, Admeasuring 25 X 58 = 1449.51 Sq. Ft., Khata No. 1150, Land Khasra No. 31/2, 35/3, 35/30, 36, 37/2, Situated At Wake Mauza Gram: Devipuri, P.H.No. 114, Proposed P.H.No. 52, R.N.M-Raipur-2, Tehsil & District: Raipur, Chhattisgarh-492001, And Bounded As: East : Oepn Land, West : Rasta, North: Plot No. 09, South: Plot No. 11

Sd/-
Authorised Officer
IDFC First Bank Limited
(erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited)
Date : 10th April 2024
Place : Raipur
Loan Account No : 41681058.

IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
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The borrowers in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of THE IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited) for an amount of Rs. 4,84,283.14/- (Rupees Four Lac Eighty Four Thousand Two Hundred Eighty Three And Fourteen Paise Only) and interest thereon. The borrower's attention is invited to provisions of sub-section (8) of Section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

Description of the Immovable properties

All That Piece And Parcel Of Property Area 33 X 40 = 1320 Sq. Ft., Bearing Old Khasara No. 3469/4 & 3469/3 Part, New Khasara No. 3469/8, Situated At Village: Ratanpur, P.H.No. 37, R.N.M-Ratanpur, In The Nagar Panchayat Ratanpur Limit Rajendra Prasad Ward No. 5, Tah.: Kola, Distt. Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh-495442, And Bounded As: East : Remaining Land Of Seller (Kh.No. 3469/1 & 3469/3), West: Remaining Land Of Seller (Kh.No. 3469/1 & 3469/3), North : Nisitari Rasta (Kh.No. 3469/1 & 3469/3), South : Khet Of Raju Shrivats (Kh.No. 3578/1)

Sd/-
Authorised Officer
IDFC First Bank Limited
(erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited)
Date : 10th April 2024
Place : Bilaspur
Loan Account No : 34060121.