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Delhi Government's Vigilance Department exposes Kejriwal

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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

The Vigilance Department on Monday issued a show cause notice to the Health Minister's OSD RN Das in connection with alleged irregularities in procurement of various items like personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, gloves, masks and RAT kits worth around ₹60 crore during Covid pandemic in 2021.

In a show-cause notice issued on Monday by the Vigilance Department, it said in various cases, committees headed by RN Das (who was OSD to Health Minister Satyender Jain and currently OSD to Health Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj) was in the forefront in managing the tenders in favour of a particular family in different company names.

Jain is currently lodged in Tihar facing a probe in a money laundering case while Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia too are in Tihar Jail for the liquorgate scam.

The vigilance department has sought a response from Das within seven days and it said the conspiracy was hatched in the backdrop of Covid crisis and the pandemic was used as a reason and basis to swindle crores of rupees from public exchequer and all the procurements were done completely ignoring the procedure to be followed by the mandate issued by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

"Health department officials have used the context of Covid for enriching these private companies and intentionally allowed cartelisation among the companies," said the notice pointing Das chaired three committees for procurement of single use gloves, sterilised gloves and N-95 masks.

Reacting to the show cause notice, the AAP-led Delhi Government in a statement said, "The laughable allegations borne out of desperation pertain to the time period when Das was neither OSD of Saurabh Bharadwaj nor Satyendra Jain. Neither was he recommended by the then Minister."

Meanwhile, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva has welcomed the notice and has said this will help bring out the truth of the scam of purchase and distribution of fake and poor quality medicines in the Delhi Government hospitals. The BJP leader said no OSD or ministerial employee can do such a big scam without the consent of the concerned Minister.

According to notice, the cartelisation and giving wrongful gain to the suppliers is also established by the fact that the initial tender of RAT Kit was given to M/s SD Biosensor, Healthcare private limited at the unit price of ₹450.

This tender was awarded based upon the circular of ICMR dated 26.08.2020 as per the supply order dated 16.06.2020 and 29.06.2020 for ₹49.50 crore (approximately together). The logic that was given for M/s SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd is that it was recognised as a valid supplier for the RAT Kit.

In the said circular of ICMR, there is no mention of Pharma Surge Impex or M/s AC Surgipharma Pvt Ltd Dr RN Das and company have introduced the concept of tendering through GeM instead of directly ordering as per the ICMR circular so as to roping in Pharma Surge Impex and M/s AC Surgipharma Pvt Ltd, which are owned by the family of Sandeep Gupta and Chetan Makhija.

The notice further said in the tender the rate that was quoted is ₹459.20 per unit. It is observed that as to how these officers have awarded contracts and adopted tendering methods contrary to ICMR circular.

Even in the tender, the unit price is ₹9.20 higher than the initial unit price. It is observed that the rate of RAT Kit has progressively declined every month so much so that within a span of 6 months, the RAT Kit was available at a rate of ₹31.50 per unit.

It further stated that RAT Kit orders were given jointly to M/s Pharma Surge Impex (Proprietor is Vandana Gupta wife of Sandeep Gupta) and M/s SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt. Ltd. (Proprietor is Chetan Makhija).

These two companies were together and were given 4 orders which indicate strong collaboration. Pharma Surge Impex does not figure in the list of ICMR circular dated 26.08.2020.

The vigilance department said Chetan Makhija is also director of M/s SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd as well as M/s AC Surgipharma Pvt Ltd. Approvals were either given to M/s SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd or M/s AC Surgipharma Pvt Ltd. "And whereas, outwardly, they are two different companies but it is manned by Chetan Makhija which is again proof of cartelisation," it said.

The notice said the omissions and commissions have been noticed on the part of RN Das, OSD to then Minister (Health) Satyendra Jain in the purchase of various medical items, such as single use gloves, sterilised gloves, N-95 masks & RAT kit, in the backdrop of Covid crisis during the year 2020-2022.

The department said Health Department officials used the context of Covid for enriching these private companies and intentionally allowed cartelisation among the competitors.

"It is observed that certain medical items were purchased so as to favour a few individuals and companies/ firms and thereby causing wrongful gain to these companies and wrongful loss to the Government," the order a show cause notice copy said.

The notice said the direct order was placed to SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd as per ICMR circular. But subsequent procurement was not done u/s 50 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, it was done based upon recommendation by committee under Chairmanship of Dr RN Das, Dr ZSIC Marak and Dr Poonam Panwar.

In its observation that led to a needle of suspicion, the vigilance noted that three members were common in all the committees formed to be involved in the procurement of several items and incidentally flouting the norms all these committees were headed by RN Das in the capacity of chairperson in all the committees.

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

Kerala under shackles of drug mafia: Modi

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

In a whirlwind election campaign that saw him heli-hopping from Kochi to Kunnamkulam and back to Kochi from where he flew down to Kattakkada in southern Kerala on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made startling disclosure.

"Kerala has emerged as the narcotics capital of South India and the State is under the shackles of a drug mafia. Politicians ruling the State are offering patronage to these drug syndicates while campuses in the State have become killing fields where students are murdered while the law enforcing agencies look the other way," said the Prime Minister.

He also disclosed that both the Congress and the CPI(M) were hands-in-glove with banned extremist outfits. "These organisations themselves have declared their alliance with these parties," pointed out Modi.

Modi said there was no difference between the Congress and the Communists except in their names. "When they are in Kerala, they act as if they are enemies. Once they cross the border and enter Tamil Nadu, both these parties are friends and allies. They are cheating the public of Kerala," charged the Prime Minister.

He pointed out that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has not uttered anything against the cooperative bank scam in Kerala in which the CPI(M) embezzled hundreds of crores of rupees belonging to the poor people.

Modi promised the electors of Kerala that his Government would make the State a hub of heritage tourism. He also made an irresistible offer to all homemakers' liberal financial assistance to arrange homestay facilities for promoting tourism.

A massive crowd has turned up at Kunnamkulam and Kattakkada to greet the Prime Minister and listen to him. Waxing eloquence on the natural beauty and salubriousness of the State's climate, Modi said he is at a loss to understand why the Congress-led UDF and the CPI(M)-led LDF kept Kerala as an underdeveloped region despite the fact that nature has been very kin to the State.

Explaining the salient points in the election manifesto released by the BJP on Sunday, which happened to be the Vishu Day, the Prime Minister told the gathering that what they have witnessed in the ten years was just a trailer while the mega action is to be expected in the next tenure of the NDA Government.

The Prime Minister said the bullet train connecting Ahmedabad and Mumbai will become a reality in the next few months.

Boost for Indian agriculture as IMD predicts above normal monsoon

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In good news for the farmers and agriculture sector which is the main fulcrum of the Indian economy, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast above-normal rainfall during the upcoming June-September southwest monsoon season. The seasonal rainfall forecast is expected to be 106 per cent of the long-period average (LPA), which is 870 mm (1970-2020 average).

This is the first time in a decade the IMD has predicted above-normal rainfall, that too in its first-stage long-range forecast, which is issued nearly 45 days in advance of the actual onset of the southwest monsoon over Kerala on June 1. The IMD categorises the seasonal rainfall as above-normal when it ranges between 105-110 per cent of the LPA.

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

M Ravichandran, secretary at the Union Ministry of Earth Sciences said "there are multiple favourable factors indicating a high probability for above-normal rainfall during the June-September period this year".

"Of these, the vital oceanic factor is the El Nino, an event associated with the above-normal sea-surface temperatures prevailing over the equatorial Pacific Ocean. It is known to cause extreme heatwaves and suppress the Indian summer monsoon rainfall," he said.

The ongoing El Nino event, the IMD said, is weakening.

"But it continues to remain in the 'moderate' category. Closer to the onset of the southwest monsoon season, El Nino Southern Oscillation neutral conditions are likely to establish," added Mohapatra.

Iran to allow Indian officials to meet seized cargo vessel crew

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Iran will soon allow Indian Government officials to meet with 17 Indian crew members who are onboard a Israel-linked ship seized near the Strait of Hormuz on Saturday by Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian told External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar.

Amir-Abdollahian conveyed this to Jaishankar during a telephonic conversation on Sunday, according to an Iranian readout. In the talks, Jaishankar called for the release of the Indians onboard Portuguese-flagged cargo vessel MSC Aries.

"We are following up on the details of

the seized ship and soon it will be possible for the representatives of the Indian Government to meet with the crew of the said ship," the Iranian readout quoted Amir-Abdollahian as saying. He also reportedly called for India's role to stop the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

The readout said Jaishankar expressed his concern about the situation of the 17 Indian crew members and requested assistance from Iran in this regard.

Special Naval Forces of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) seized 'MSC Aries' reportedly in view of its links with Israel. The MSC (Mediterranean Shipping Company) said on Saturday that it is working closely with relevant authorities for the well-being of 25 crew members and the return of the vessel.

Registration for Amarnath yatra begins

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The 52-day-long Shri Amarnathji Yatra will commence on June 29 this year and it will culminate on August 19, 2024 amid tight security arrangements.

Meanwhile, the advance registration for the annual Amarnath pilgrimage began on Monday across designated bank branches.

The Shrine Board authorities have also taken up the task of snow clearance on both tracks on a war footing. The leftover track expansion work will be taken up further after the completion of the snow clearance work.

"The advance registration has started today at bank branches here. The exercise is being conducted at 540 branches of PNB (Punjab National Bank) across the country," an official involved in the registration process said.

It is Aadhaar authentication-based form generation for Yatris rather than the manual procedure followed in 2022, said the officials, adding that forms will be system-generated now.

"For registration, it is mandatory for the pilgrims to produce a health certificate. However, children below 13 years of age, elders above 70 years and six-week pregnant women will not be permitted for the pilgrimage."

For issuing a Compulsory Health Certificate (CHC) for advance yatra registration, more than 230 doctors have been authorised in various medical centres in all 20 districts of Jammu and Kashmir.

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

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With the 'mystery' and 'controversy' over the Electoral Bonds yet to settle, the flow of 'unaccounted' money of about ₹5,000 crore by the Election Commission in the last one and a half months has raised eyebrows.

In a move to crackdown on black money in form of cash, liquor, drugs, precious metals and freebies supply ahead of the first phase of polling for the 102 Lok Sabha seats on April 19, the poll watchdog has seized ₹4658.167 crore since March 1.

So on an average the poll watchdog has seized ₹100 crore per day. What is more concerning is the seizure of drugs worth ₹2,069 crore during this period.

Out of the total recoveries worth ₹4,658 crore, freebies and other items stand at over ₹1142.49 crore, the cash component stands at over ₹395.39 crore, while liquor stands at more than ₹489.31 crore. Significantly, 45 per cent of the seizures are of drugs (₹2,069 crore).

Data shared by the EC showed that authorities have been making seizures worth ₹100 crore every day since March 1. The EC said the seizures made since March 1 exceed the over ₹3,475 crore recovered during the 2019 parliamentary polls.

If the amount of January and February which stood at ₹7,502 crore added to this will bring the total seizure to over ₹12,000 crore so far. Meanwhile, the EC has ordered the removal of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) of Murshidabad in West Bengal over violence in the district and the officer's alleged "lack of supervision" to immediately prevent more incidents, according to sources.

With over ₹778.52 crore, Rajasthan is top in the list, followed by Gujarat (₹605.33 crore), Tamil Nadu (₹460.84 crore), Maharashtra (₹431.34 crore), Punjab (₹311. 84 crore), Kerala (₹281. 43 crore) Delhi (₹236.06 crore), West Bengal

(₹219.60 crore), and Bihar (₹155. 76 crore) are among the top in the seizures list.

Karnataka, West Bengal and Rajasthan are among the top in distributing liquor to voters during polls.

Significantly, 45 per cent of the seizures are of drugs and narcotics that are under the special focus of the commission. Notably, there was a substantial focus on drug seizures, which accounted for approximately 75 per cent of the total seizures in January and February 2024.

According to the EC, drug seizures accounted for approximately 75 per cent of the total seizures in January and February this year with the poll panel focussing on the menace much before the poll schedule was announced. Over the past few years, significant seizures have been made during elections to state assemblies in Gujarat, Punjab, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, and Mizoram.

In an incident in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, the commission suspended the flying squad leader for laxity in duty and selective checking of a cavalcade of a prominent leader. Similarly, officials checked vehicles in the convoy of the Chime Minister of a State and also vehicles of a Deputy Chief Minister in another State. The commission has also taken strict action against approximately 106 Government servants who have been found assisting politicians in campaigning, thereby violating the Model Code of Conduct and instructions.

"The seizures have been possible by comprehensive planning, scaled up collaboration and unified deterrence action from agencies, proactive citizen participation and optimal engagement of technology. The commission has also collaborated with the Directorate General of the Narcotics Control Bureau and its senior officials to identify key routes and corridors for drug trafficking and ensure effective counter measures are in place," the EC said in a statement.

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, while announcing the polls last month, had underlined money power as one of the '4M' challenges, the poll authority recalled.

The poll panel pointed out that it has been taking action to ensure level playing field such as checking vehicles of prominent leaders and even removing officials for laxity in carrying out their mandate. The commission, it said, has also taken strict action against nearly 106 Government servants who were found assisting politicians in campaigning, which is against various rules and ethics.

The EC sources also pointed out that there is "nothing new" in search of helicopters, as was done in case of TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee.

In the run-up to the polls, all district magistrates and superintendents of police were told to keep a strict watch on airfields and helipads. Such searches are taking place in airfields, both public and private, across the country to ensure inducements are not ferried by air, the sources said.

Enthusiasm marks BJP's 'Modi's guarantee 2024' manifesto at Bokaro

Amar Kumar Bauri endorses Dhullu Mahto: A stalwart for the marginalized

R SHARMA : BOKARO

In a press conference held at Bokaro Hansregency , the prominent leader of the opposition in the Jharkhand Legislative Assembly, Amar Kumar Bauri, directed attention to the BJP's "Modi's Guarantee 2024" manifesto. At this special occasion, prominent BJP leaders including loksabha candidate Dhullu Mahto discussed the significant provisions of the manifesto in detail.

Further underlining the essence of "Modi's Guarantee," Amar Kumar Bauri again ignited fervor within the party by declaring the ambitious slogan "Abki Baar, 400 Paar" expressed unwavering confidence in the BJP's ability to propel India towards development. Emphasizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's steadfast dedication to public welfare, the manifesto pledges to continue prioritizing the needs of villages, the underprivileged, Dalits, women, youth, and farmers.

Adding a significant dimension to the press conference, Dhullu Mahto was also present alongside other dignitaries. Notably Amar Kumar Bauri, acknowledging Dhullu's presence, hailed him as one of the foremost well-wishers and champions of the underprivileged, particularly evident through his ground-level efforts. Amar Bauri expressed unwavering confidence in Dhullu's candidacy, portraying him as a person deeply committed to development-oriented initiatives of poor peoples.

He lauded Dhullu's dedication to uplifting the marginalized sections of society, emphasizing his track record of tangible contributions at the grassroots level.

In response to various allegations leveled against him, Dhullu Mahto maintained his focus on constructive endeavors. He affirmed his commitment to carrying out good works and extended an open invitation for any inquiry into his actions.

Furthermore, Dhullu Mahto expressed full confidence in the "Modi Guarantee," echoing the sentiment shared by his fellow leaders. He exuded optimism about the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, expressing his belief in securing victory with the overwhelming support and blessings of the people in his constituency.

Over all the press conference exuded enthusiasm and confidence regarding the BJP's "Modi's Guarantee 2024" manifesto. Through this manifesto, the BJP has reaffirmed its commitment to the direction of a developed India.

BJP candidate outlines pro active features of Sankalp Patra

BJP candidate V D Ram (hands stretched) at the press conference in Daltonganj today. PNS

PNS : DALTONGANJ

The BJP candidate for the Palamu lok sabha seat Vishnu Dayal Ram a two term MP today outlined the salient pro active features of the Sankalp Patra of the BJP for the 2024 lok sabha election, released only this Sunday by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his elite team.

A small coterie of media pressed him to pose like launching the xeroxed copy of the Sankalp Patra of the BJP today here in his press conference which this astute politician declined firmly knowing that he would be making himself an object of ridicule by his own senior party fellows. No BJP politician can afford to re launch which was earlier launched by the Prime Minister. V D Ram was pointed out that the high sounding Sankalp Patra of the BJP is silent on India's stand on the climate change and global warming to which this well read man pulling out his own knowledge put forth India's stand on zero net emission of carbon by 2070 when India is a huge user of coal while other advanced countries are dilly dallying the issue.

He was asked about job and employment avenues in the Sankalp Patra to which he took some time reading out other features and when he composed himself he explained that start-ups and infrastructure boom will create jobs and jobs.

He talked about robust international border fencing with technical solutions with China, Pakistan and Myanmar so that breach of boundary or border is aborted. Ram made a passing reference to Uniform Civil Code and CAA leaving it to the mediapersons that they know more about it.

However he said 3,938 people of Palamu had sent suggestions when the Sankalp Patra was to be framed.

The BJP candidate V D Ram was accompanied by veteran Shyam Narain Dubey, MLAs Alok Chourasia and Pushpa Devi, district president Amit Tiwary, Bipin Bihari Singh, Vibhakar Narain Pandey, Sheo Kumar Mishra and others. Eom

BK Tiwari Appointed as DIC of Bokaro Steel Plant

A Beacon of Hope for BSL's Sustainable Progress

RAHUL SHARMA : BOKARO

In a significant development, BK Tiwari has been appointed as the new Director Incharge of Bokaro Steel Plant. The notification for this appointment was issued by the Ministerial Appointments Committee of the Government of India on Friday.

Notably B.K Tiwari, currently the Executive Director (Works) at BSL, emerged as the chosen candidate for the helm of Bokaro Steel Plant after his name was recommended to the central government in February 24. Following interviews conducted by officials of the Central Public Sector Enterprises Board in Delhi, Tiwari's dedication and expertise distinguished him among 12 contenders, culminating in final approval granted by the Central Cabinet.

Mr Tiwari began his career on July 15, 1989, with BSL's Coke Oven Department as a Management Trainee. Progressing within this division, he ascended to the position of Chief General Manager in June 2017. Subsequently, on May 29, 2021, he assumed leadership as the ED Colliery, and on June 15, 2022, he took charge as the Executive Director of BSL's Works division. Amidst considerable anticipation, B.K Tiwari's ascension to the role of Director Incharge at Bokaro Steel Plant stands as a significant milestone. What sets Tiwari apart is not just his professional acumen but also his grounded persona, a trait that resonates deeply with those he leads. This grounded nature infuses his leadership style with humility, approachability, and a keen understanding of the challenges and aspirations of the workforce.

It's this inclusive vision that garners widespread support and hope. Employees see new DIC B.K Tiwari as not just a leader but also a champion for their welfare and advancement. Officials recognize in him a partner who values collaboration and consensus-building, essential ingredients for sustainable progress in a complex industrial setting.

Bokaro district administration prepares for Ram Navami festival

PNS : BOKARO

In anticipation of the Ram Navami festival in 2024, the district administration, under the leadership of Deputy Commissioner Vijaya Jadhav, convened a meeting at the administrative office. Various officials, including Civil Surgeon Dr. Dinesh Kumar, AMC Chas Saurav Kumar Bhuvaniya, and others, were present at the meeting.

DC Vijaya Jadhav, while chairing the meeting, gathered information from both sub-divisional officers regarding licensed and unlicensed wrestling arenas (akhadas) in the district. Additionally, details about procession routes and religious sites along those routes were also collected.

During the review, DC Jadhav directed the assessment of procession routes, utilizing technology such as drones, CCTV cameras, and video recording, to ensure smooth monitoring. She emphasized the need for fire extinguishing facilities and proper lighting at crowded locations along the routes.

Furthermore, DC instructed the Electrical Department to ensure uninterrupted power supply along the routes during the procession, maintaining safety measures. Medical teams and ambulances will be stationed at crowded areas during the event.

Addressing concerns about social media, she urged vigilance against the spread of rumors or misinformation and emphasized regular monitoring of WhatsApp groups and social media platforms, discouraging the dissemination of provocative content. To address misinformation circulating on social media, the district administration has provided contact numbers for public assistance. Citizens are urged to promptly report any suspicious messages to the police. For legal or administrative inquiries concerning the festival, residents can reach out to the district control room. The district control room in Bokaro can be contacted at the following landline numbers: 06542-223475/247891.

MOCK DRILL TO TAME HOOLIGANS IN RAM NAVAMI

PNS: DHANBAD:

District police on Monday held a mock exercise at police kendra on Monday to meet any unwarranted situation on Ram Navmi day.

It has been decided to keep eye on Ramnauvmi procession from drone cameras across sensitive locations across district.Test fly were organised at Jharia and other locations on the designated procession route.

Preventive flag March was organised within limits of different police stations including Jharia, Tundi,Bank more, Nirsa besides others.

SSP Hardeep S Janardan has directed all police stations to be on alert mode till the festival passes off peacefully.

Ramnauvmi akhara too have been directed to refrain from any provocative activities. Peace committee meetings were held across different police stations to maintain law - order and peace.

National Fire Service Week gets kicked off today at Tata Steel Jharia Division

PNS : DHANBAD

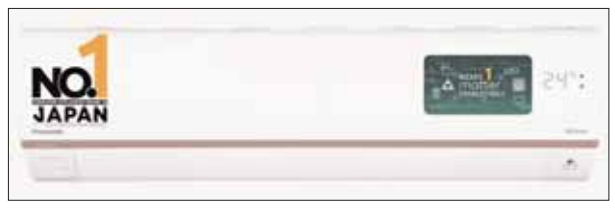
The National Fire Service Week was kicked off on Monday by Sanjay Rajoria, General Manager, Jharia Division, Tata Steel.

Sanjay Rajoria emphasised the importance and relevance of observing National Fire Safety Week and advised the Fire Safety team to continue the good work being done by them.

The Safety and Security department of the Division has planned to organise several awareness programmes and training sessions on fire safety, mock drills with the governments fire team, and training on the use of fire extinguishers and rescue techniques for employees, contractor workers, school children, and the community to make them self-sufficient for any emergencies.. The theme for this year is Ensure Fire Safety, Contribute towards Nation Building".

Other senior officials present for the occasion were Narendra Kumar Gupta, Chief (Jamadoba Group), Barun Banerjee, Head (Safety), Col Bhawani Singh Nirwan, Head (Administration), Kousik Gayen, Head (Planning), and Sujit Kumar Jha, Senior Area Manager (Security), Jharia Division, Tata Steel.

Panasonic Unveils the New AC Range in Jharkhand



Panasonic Life Solutions India (PLSIND) has announced its 2024 lineup of new air conditioners in the Madhya Pradesh market. Featuring 60 models across a wide range of 1.0, 1.5, and 2.0-ton capacities, the latest range of air conditioners is now available at all major retail outlets, e-commerce platforms, and the Panasonic Brand store. Key features include Jetstream airflow, customized cooling, and Miraie, a versatile app that helps users track energy consumption, utilize True AI, set up customized sleep profiles. According to Mr. Abhishek Verma, Business Head, Air Conditioners Group, PMIN, PLSIND, India's first Matter-enabled ACs from Panasonic not only offer interoperability but also bring reliability and durability with an Eco-tough casing. With an expertise of over 65 years in developing Air Conditioners, Panasonic's new range of ACs are tech-enabled and are designed to deliver Cooling, Quality and a Connected experience to redefine smart living.

Arechar Nutra celebrates Women's inner beauty

Arechar Nutra proudly unveils its relentless commitment to celebrate the women's inner beauty through its impactful initiative BeautyBeyondBeauty. ArecharNutra's BeauthyBeyondBeauty initiative aims to bring into light the efforts of all the women who make a huge impact in the lives of people through her inner goodness and efforts of such women deserve to be celebrated to spread the impact. Among such women, there is Payal Kumar, a devoted volunteer, dedicated to serve the lives of underprivileged community through her impactful initiative "Utsav". As part of her "Utsav" initiative, she served the underprivileged community selflessly through her various impactful activities. Through its impactful initiative BeautyBeyondBeauty, Arechar Nutra reaffirms its commitment to promoting holistic well-being and celebrating individuals.

KNMA unveils a New Visual Identity

It was a sight to behold as the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art unveiled its new visual identity on Tuesday evening amidst an atmosphere teeming with vibrant conversations, shared camaraderie, and enriching cultural performance. Against the backdrop of artistic fervour and intellectual exchange, KNMA also reaffirmed its commitment to fostering dialogue and engagement within the ever-evolving landscape of the arts. "It is a momentous occasion for me as the child of 13 years has grown beautifully and become this inclusive creative space that welcomes all forms of arts and people from all walks of life. With KNMA's new cultural space coming up in a few years, we thought the time was ripe to have a modern visual identity that resonates with the museum's larger mission of making art accessible and celebrating the cultural diversity of India. I also want to thank all our supporters and friends who have joined us to celebrate this special moment with us," said Kiran Nadar, Founder and Chairperson of KNMA.

Celebrate Ram Navami festival in a cordial manner: DC

Celebrate Ram Navami by following the model code of conduct: SP

PNS : LOHARDAGA

Under the chairmanship of Deputy Commissioner Dr. Waghmare Prasad Krishna, a necessary meeting regarding the upcoming Ramnavmi festival was organized in the meeting room of the District Council office with district and block level officials, police officials and peace committee members. Meanwhile, in the meeting, Deputy Commissioner Dr. Waghmare Prasad Krishna said that like every year, we all have been celebrating the festival of Ram Navami with great pomp. Despite such a crowd, this festival has been celebrated peacefully. At the time of the birth of Lord Shri Ram, there was a different festive atmosphere in Ayodhya which is described in Ramayana written by Maharishi Valmiki and Ramcharitmanas written by poet Tulsidas. If the same atmosphere is adopted then this festival will be celebrated in a very peaceful manner.

DJs are often used by various Akharas on the occasion of Ram Navami, but care should be taken that songs that hurt or make people crazy are not played. No one should put pressure on the DJ operator to play any particular song. Adequate numbers of volunteers should be kept during the procession and they must have contact with their police station in-charge, block development officer and zonal officer. Any apprehension or discomfort should be reported to the concerned officials and police station in-charges so that timely action can be taken.

The district administration has a sufficient number of required forces. All of you should cooperate with the administration to ensure that the festival of Ramnavati is celebrated peacefully and harmoniously in the district. Here, while addressing the meeting of the District Level Peace Committee, Superintendent of Police Haris Bin Zaman said that the culture of dialogue created due to the meetings of the police station level and district level peace committee is very good. SP Haris Bin Zaman said that only with mutual cooperation this festival of Ram Navami will be completed in a peaceful and harmonious manner. He said that everyone should take responsibility for their respective areas. Peacekeepers will be deputed. It would be even better if the volunteers included people from all communities. In view of the Lok Sabha general elections, the Akhara operators will have to take many precautions. SP Haris Bin Zaman said that the licensed Akhara will follow its prescribed route at all costs. He said that unlicensed Akhara operators should apply for license and give information about the prescribed route to the police stations. Keeping in view the Model Code of Conduct, there will be a ban on playing DJ from 10 pm to 6 am. No particular person will be promoted in any procession. All of you should celebrate this festival with discipline, joy and as per rules.

Meanwhile, Deputy Development Commissioner Dilip Pratap Singh Shekhawat said that the Akhara operators will definitely follow the prescribed route of their procession. He said that magistrates and police officers will definitely be present at their place of deputation.

BJP manifesto made with suggestions of masses: Sunita Singh

VINOD PRASAD : LOHARDAGA

The resolution letter of Bharatiya Janata Party has been made with the suggestions of common people. All the resolutions that BJP had taken among the public in the last 10 years have been fulfilled under the leadership of Modi ji. BJP Lohardaga district in-charge cum state minister Sunita Singh said these things in a press conference in Lohardaga on Monday. Sunita Singh said that BJP received a total of 15 lakh suggestions. Out of that, five lakh suggestions were received on Namo app and 10 lakh were received through video. Schemes related to the upliftment of the common poor and all sections of the society have been made.

The schemes have reached the last person sitting in the society. In the same way, for the future progress of the country, a plan has been made for the development of farmers, youth, women, railway sector, religion and culture of the country. Considering the problem of paper leak for the youth, we have made a strict law to prevent irregularities in Indian government recruitment examinations. Now we will strictly enforce this law and give strict punishment to those who are playing with the future of the youth. So that government recruitment can be done in a timely and transparent manner.

Along with expansion of startup ecosystem and funding for the youth, mentorship to startups, encouragement to startups in government procurement, more employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector, employment opportunities through investment in infrastructure, will promote the spirit of entrepreneurship. At the same time, assistance of six thousand rupees per year has been provided to the farmers. Due to which the farmers have become stronger. The government will also promote research and awareness. Irrigation facilities will expand. The world's largest grain storage capacity will be developed.

Everyone above seventy years will be linked to Ayushman Bharat scheme. The government will provide priority to the disabled and eunuchs in schemes, increase the targets of the housing scheme, increase women's participation in sports, and the government will facilitate the construction and maintenance of public toilets for women. At the same time, by paying special attention to the problems like anemia, breast cancer, osteoporosis, cervical cancer, more efforts will be made for the healthy life of women and by running a special campaign, cervical cancer will be completely eradicated from women. Many types of facilities will be further increased in the railway sector also.

Kavach train protection system will be expanded. 1300 railway stations are being fully developed on world class standards. This project will be extended to all those large and mid-sized stations. An example of this is the railway station of Lohardaga district, the way it has developed since 2014 is in front of the public. Today almost all the facilities are available in this station. The work is still in progress.Having an express train like Rajdhani at Lohardaga is like a dream come true. Due to the division on religion and culture, Janata Party is continuously constructing many corridors at religious places and providing opportunities to regional arts. Whereas the manifestos of the opposition remain limited to mere announcements. Jharkhand state is a living example of this. Where people doing politics only in the name of water, jungle and land did the work of snatching the land of common poor tribals.

the pioneer
RANCHI I TUESDAY I APRIL 16, 2024

People of nation have full faith in Modi's guarantee: Marandi

'The resolution letter is not only of BJP, but it is of the countrymen'

PNS : RANCHI

BJP State President Babulal Marandi today said that the resolution letter issued by BJP is not only for the party but it is a resolution letter to the countrymen. The entire country has accepted that Modi's guarantee is a guarantee to fulfill the guarantee. The people of the country accept that Narendra Modi and BJP fulfill what they say. It's a matter of credibility here. Whatever Modi said, he did. Opposition parties in the country have become completely unreliable. The public has full faith in Modi's guarantee. Suggestions for the resolution letter came from 15 lakh people from all over the country, out of which 4 lakh and 10 lakh people made videos and gave suggestions through NaMo app. This is a big thing in itself. Marandi was addressing journalists at the state level media center in Maru Tower.

Marandi said that today, when it got the opportunity, the party worked to complete all the issues raised by the BJP since the Jan Sangh period. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made the impossible possible. This mainly includes abolishing Article 370 from Kashmir and paving the way for the construction of Ram Temple. Modi ji has resolved to make the country a developed India. The work that Modi has done for the uplift of the country and the poor in the 10 years of his two terms, from 2014 to 2019 and 2019 to 2024, is remarkable and beyond imagination. Remember the condition of the country during the Corona period and wonder what will happen. Providing 5 kg of food grains to 80 crore people at that time is not an ordinary thing. No poor will sleep hungry, this is Modi's guarantee.

BJP State President Babulal Marandi addresses a press conference after inaugurating the media center for the Lok Sabha elections at Maru Tower in Ranchi on Monday. Jharkhand in-charge Laxmikant Vajpayee is also seen in the picture. Pix by Vinay Murmu

In the resolution letter, it has also been said that the poor will be given food grains for the next 5 years. The Modi government has given guarantees not only for the food of the poor but also for their health. There is already a provision for free treatment up to Rs 5 lakh under Ayushman Bharat, now in the resolution letter it has been said that free treatment will be provided for people above 70 years of age. The Prime Minister's thinking is that no person in the country should be roofless, hence till now Prime Minister Houses have been provided to more than 4 crore people, now in the resolution letter it has been mentioned to provide houses to another 3 crore people. The remarkable work done by the Modi government regarding farmers and agriculture is well known, now the Modi government has resolved to make India a food processing hub. Farmers will benefit from this and new employment opportunities will also be created.

Every year 5000 kilometers of new railway tracks are being laid. Efforts are on to provide world class facilities to the railway station and to connect bullet rail to all directions. The basic mantra of BJP is development as well as heritage. There is a resolution to save and develop cultural heritage. Ayodhya and Kashi are the major names in this region. Inspired by the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, new projects will be started for the development of religious and cultural places. Similarly, there are many cultural heritages in Jharkhand which have to be developed and protected. Modi government has declared 15 November as Tribal Pride Day.

During this, state in-charge Laxmikant Vajpayee said that in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections, the party's resolution letter has been published in the form of Modi's Guarantee 2024. The resolution letter was also published in 2019. This time the suggestions of 15 lakh people have been incorporated in it. Modi's working style has been that he fulfills what he says. Therefore, the resolution letter published by BJP has been named Modi's Guarantee. Modi's guarantee is a symbol of commitment.

During this press conference, state in-charge Laxmikant Vajpayee, state general secretary Aditya Sahu, Manoj Kumar Singh, Shivpujan Pathak, Pratul Shahdev, Yogendra Pratap Singh, Tariq Imran, Ajay Rai, Sandeep Verma, Ashok Badaik etc were also present.

Former CM Hemant Soren files bail petition at PMLA court

PNS : RANCHI

Former Chief Minister Hemant Soren has filed a bail petition in the special court of PMLA. This petition will be heard in the court on 16th April. Soren has been arrested in the land scam case by ED on January 31 after a long interrogation.

ED had arrested Hemant Soren on January 31, 2024, during the investigation in the scam case of 8.5 acres of land in Bariatu, Ranchi. He had resigned from the post of Chief Minister before his arrest. After his arrest, ED took him on remand for 13 days and interrogated him. Presently he is lodged in Birsa Munda jail. Apart from these, Bhanu Pratap, a revenue employee of Badgai area, is also currently in jail in judicial custody. In this case, the mastermind of making fake land deeds is Mohd. Saddam has also been arrested and is currently on ED remand till April 16.

The matter pertains to the purchase and sale of 8.50 acres of land in Bariatu area of Ranchi. When ED started investigating this case and searched its documents, the documents related to this land were found on the mobile phone of Revenue Sub-Inspector Bhanu Pratap Prasad. Prasad has been arrested in the case of selling land by falsifying documents. On the basis of documents found in the mobile phone, ED started investigation of the land.

ED also recorded the statement of the arrested revenue sub-inspector and the then zonal officer of Badgai zone. After recording the statement of the CO, Chief Minister Hemant Soren was summoned by the Central Investigation Agency. ED had sent summons to Hemant Soren and asked him to come to the zonal office of Ranchi and give details of his assets. Soren refused to go to ED office. Not once or twice, but eight times he ignored the ED summons. He even once warned the ED that if the central agency did not withdraw its notice, he (Hemant Soren) would be forced to take legal action against it (ED). After interrogation of Soren he was arrested in the night of January 31.

Soren had challenged the rights of ED by filing a writ petition in the Jharkhand High Court on 24 September 2023. The High Court rejected his petition and said that it was not worthy of hearing. Before that, Hemant Soren had gone to the Supreme Court and requested the Supreme Court to stay the ED notice. He is being harassed by ED by repeatedly sending notices. A bench of Justices Aniruddha Bose and Bela M Trivedi rejected his plea and refused to stay the ED notice.

BJP unveils media center for Lok Sabha elections

PNS : RANCHI

State BJP today inaugurated the media center for the Lok Sabha elections at Harmu Maru Tower. BJP state president Babulal Marandi and national vice president, state in-charge MP Laxmikant Vajpayee jointly inaugurated the event by cutting the ribbon and breaking the coconut. From this media center, journalists will be able to easily get election related party news. On this occasion, BJP State President Babulal Marandi said that the people of Jharkhand stand with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and also trust him. He claimed that in this election, NDA will win 14 out of 14 Lok Sabha seats in the state. He said that this election in the state is in 4 phases, hence it will last for about two months. A media center has been started so that journalists do not face any trouble. State media in-charge Shivpujan Pathak said that during the Lok Sabha elections, journalists will now be able to get many important information including party activities, travel of leaders from the media center itself. Till the elections, press conference will also be organized in this center and journalists of electronic media will also be able to come here and take bytes. In this program, including State General Secretary and MP Aditya Sahu, Manoj Singh, Pratul Shahdev, Yogendra Pratap Singh, Ashok Badaik, Pradeep Sinha, Tariq Imran, Ajay Rai, Sandeep Verma.

BJP State President Babulal Marandi, Jharkhand in-charge Laxmikant Vajpayee cut a ribbon inaugurating the media center for the Lok Sabha elections at Maru Tower in Ranchi on Monday. Pix by Ratan Lal

Addl CEO exhorts youth to participate in electoral process

PNS : RANCHI

Today elections are being held in many countries, but the whole world is looking towards the largest democracy, India. Young voters are especially important in building a healthy democracy. It is the responsibility of all of us to become familiar with the electoral process as well as to make people aware, said Additional Chief Electoral Officer, Jharkhand, Neha Arora during the awareness workshop of the Electoral Literacy Club formed in the Masscom Department of Ranchi University under SVEEP.

Additional Chief Electoral Officer Neha Arora during a workshop with Electoral Literacy Club members in Ranchi on Monday. Pix by Ratan Lal

Nodal Officer Sweep Cell-cum-Deputy Development Commissioner, Ranchi Dinesh Kumar Yadav, Deputy Director Information and Public Relations Department, Jharkhand Ranchi Anand, famous filmmaker and Director Masscom Department, Ranchi University BP Sinha and students were present in the workshop. During the workshop, Neha Arora stressed on organizing the various activities mentioned in the directory related to ELC in a proper manner in a democracy. He told the students present that to make people aware about the electoral process and voting, they should create content which is informative, so that people can know what provisions have been made by the Commission for the elections, and to make people aware about ethical voting.

Nodal Officer Sweep Cell-cum-Sub Development Commissioner, Ranchi Dinesh Kumar Yadav provided information about election related digital apps and websites to the students present during the workshop. He also stressed the purpose and significance of connecting young voters with the election process with the active participation of schools/colleges.

Giving information to the students, Deputy Director, Information and Public Relations Department, Jharkhand Ranchi, Anand said that for voter awareness, videos, reels, memes, ringtones etc. have been released by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Jharkhand, all of you should use these materials. And for latest information related to the election process, follow the social media handles of CEO Jharkhand.

During the workshop, election related questions were also asked to the students. Students who gave correct answers were also given gifts. At last, Voter's Oath was administered to everyone by Additional Chief Electoral Officer, Jharkhand, Neha Arora.

Live Savers writes to restore JSACS Blood Mobile Van

The Life Savers has written to the Principal Secretary, Health, Govt of Jharkhand that a Volvo size Air Conditioned 4 bedded blood mobile van maintained and run by Jharkhand State Control Society is not functional for more than a year now. This facility is very important for enhancing voluntary blood donation in our government blood center. It becomes even more important especially during the summer when the scarcity of blood increases. A lot of venues for drives in summer get difficult which can otherwise be easy if the air conditioned blood mobile van is fully operational and running. Also a lot of blood donation camps can collect more units of blood with the help of this facility. The body has requested the Health Secretary to intervene to get this facility available for Government Blood Centres.

Orientation Program for parents at SCS

Surendranath Centenary School organised Orientation programs in different phases for the parents of Pre Nursery to class X starting 2nd April and concluding on15th April 2024 to familiarise them with the curriculum, rules and regulations of the school, teaching methodologies and the co- scholastic activities. The school which has introduced its Pre Nursery (Balvatika) from this year gave a traditional welcome to the parents of the Kindergarten section with tilak followed by a song and dance. A PPT showcasing the achievements, activities and play way learning methods with a focus on fitness, health and wellness was also presented. Welcoming the parents to the new academic session Principal Samita Sinha spoke at length about the benefits of effective communication between parents and teachers, NEP, FLN, School Ready Module for class I and Bridge Course for grade III and VI.

Security forces recover huge cache of explosives, other items

PNS : RANCHI

Security forces have achieved success in the campaign against Maoists. During the operation, security personnel have recovered explosive materials used by them. This has dealt a big blow to the Maoists. On Monday, an operation was conducted against Maoists by the security forces in the forest area near Huspi village of Tonto police station area. During this time, Maoists explosives and explosive making materials have been recovered from the old Naxalite dump in the forest area. Anti-Naxal campaign continues. It is to be known that since October last year, a joint operation by the police and security forces has been conducted in the border areas of Kuida, Chhota Kuida, Maradiri, Meralgada, Hathiburu, Tilayabeda Boyapaissang, Katamba, Bayhatu, Boroy, Lemsadih of Goilkera police station area and village Husipi under Tonto police station. , has been started in the border areas of Rajabasa, Tumbahaka, Regada, Patatorb, Goburu, Luiya villages. forces have recovered Printer-2, Multi DVD Writer - 1, Red Banner Cloth 1, Bundle Ammonium Nitrate 5 packets (total 1 kg each packet 5 kg), M Seal Packet 50 packets (total 25 g each packet), M Seal Big Packet-5 packets (total 2.5 kg each 500 Gram), Detonator Non Electric Commercial-09, Sulfur Powder 1 Packet (1 Kg), Gun Powder-4 Packets (Total 2 Kg Each 500 Gram), Can (Container 5 Ltr Capacity, Filled)-1, Can (20 Ltr Capacity).

Corruption probe begins in JSCA on MCA order

PNS : RANCHI

The Central government has started investigating allegations of corruption against Jharkhand Cricket Association (JSCA) and JSCA's unit, Country Cricket Club. The Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) issued a directive on March 7, directing the regional director to investigate the management of the country cricket club following a complaint filed by Nirmala Kaur, a retired IPS officer and wife of late Amitabh Chaudhary.

Expressing concern about the current management of the JSCA, Amitabh Chaudhary's family alleged widespread corruption, mismanagement of funds and fraudulent elections following the demise of the former state body president in August 2022. The name of Patna-based lawyer and former director of Country Cricket Club Rajiv Kumar Singh is also included in Nirmala Kaur's complaint.

The MCA's decision to launch an investigation is based on a complaint by Nirmala Kaur, alleging the conduct of the club was detrimental to public interest. It alleges that resources, funded primarily by grants from the BCCI, are being used to benefit specific individuals rather than supporting the wider cricket community. Apart from this, the complaint cites examples of fake tendering and irregularities in the election process held in November 2023.

Nirmal Kaur's complaint alleges misuse of infrastructure at the Jharkhand State Cricket Association stadium and denial of access to JSCA resources to aspiring cricketers. The complaint states that club accounts are not maintained properly. The club's total income is not accounted for. The electricity bill and all maintenance bills of the club are being paid from the BCCI grant. The club's income is used in fraudulent tendering and purchases and the management committee is enriching it with the club's earnings. Additionally, the complaint has accused Rajeev Kumar Singh of maintaining permanent quarters within the JSCA Stadium despite his primary residence being in Patna, Bihar.

Attack on Geeta Koda: FIR lodged against 56 people

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a shocking turn of events, MP and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Singhbhum Lok Sabha candidate Geeta Koda faced a harrowing attack during her poll campaign in a village within her constituency. The incident, which occurred on Sunday, has sparked outrage and raised concerns about the safety of political candidates amidst the ongoing election fervor.

The attack took place at Mohanpur village, situated within the jurisdiction of Gamharia police station in the home district of Chief Minister Champai Soren, Seraikela-Kharsawan. According to reports, Koda and her convoy were confronted by an armed crowd, consisting of six named assailants and over 50 unknown individuals.

The district administration's flying squad team (FST) swiftly responded to the situation by lodging a case against the perpetrators. Another case was filed against five to six unidentified individuals for violating Section 144 and carrying arms without permission, indicating the severity of the incident.

Eyewitnesses recounted how the mob, armed with a range of weapons including bows, arrows, pickaxes, sticks, and axes, obstructed Koda and her convoy from entering the village. Allegedly, they cited support for a rival political bloc as the reason for barring the BJP candidate's entry into the village.

The situation escalated as the mob proceeded to gherao Koda and her supporters for over two hours, subjecting them to harassment and intimidation. It wasn't until around 4:30 pm that law enforcement authorities intervened to rescue Koda from the volatile situation.

Lok Sabha MP-cum Bharatiya Janata Party Singhbhum Lok Sabha candidate Geeta Koda. PNS

Describing the ordeal, Koda expressed outrage over the blatant attack on democracy, labeling it as a "murder of democracy." She highlighted the presence of criminal elements who, under the guise of political allegiance, resorted to violence and intimidation tactics.

Koda's account painted a distressing picture of the events, detailing how supporters were manhandled, and women's clothes were torn off amidst the chaos. The incident underscores the urgent need for ensuring the safety and security of political candidates and their supporters during election campaigns.

As investigations into the attack continue, questions regarding the motive behind the assault and the identities of the perpetrators loom large. The incident serves as a grim reminder of the challenges posed by political violence and the imperative of upholding the principles of democracy.

The BJP candidate's ordeal has elicited condemnation from various quarters, with calls for swift action to bring the culprits to justice and safeguard the democratic process. In the midst of a fiercely contested election season, incidents like these serve as stark reminders of the fragility of democracy and the importance of preserving its sanctity.

Manifesto recognises aspirations, needs of rising middle class: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

The BJP asserted on Monday its manifesto recognises the aspirations and needs of the rising middle class, and identifies opportunities for them and promises to create conditions for a better quality of life.
The ruling party has promised better cities, higher quality infrastructure, faster and better digital infrastructure, controlling pollution, investment in technologies of tomorrow and better living conditions, it said, adding that the middle class will benefit a lot from these, it said.
Its promise of encouraging the creation of new satellite townships near metro cities, boosting transit-oriented development, building unified metropolitan transport systems, ensuring water-secure cities, leveraging best practices for waste water treatment and eliminating open landfills will address immediate liveability concerns of the middle class, the party said.
It has also promised in its manifesto, which was released on Sunday by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other senior leaders of the BJP, high-value jobs not just in big cities but in tier-2 and tier-3 cities besides leveraging tourism to promote local entrepreneurship and jobs.
The manifesto's focus on increasing the number of Global Capability Centres (GCCs), Global Tech Centres (GTCs) and Global Engineering Centres (GECs) and making the country a global hub will also help the middle class, who will benefit also from the resolve to make housing more affordable.
Noting that medical treatment for senior citizens, and those 70 years and above, is costly and can be a financial drain on middle class families as getting insurance for them is not always easy, the party said its promise of bringing them under the 'Ayushman Bharat' cover for health cost up to Rs 5 lakh irrespective of their family income will be a big helm to them.
The party also cited its promise of zero electricity bill through solar rooftops, including in housing societies, and the expansion of IITs, IIMs and AIIMS to make its point.
The BJP's promise of new investments in agricultural storage will lead to not only farmers getting more remunerative prices but also lower and more predictable food prices for the consuming middle class, it said.
The manifesto's details on India's proposed foreign policy initiatives, promoting the country's ideas and values to the world and carving a place for it at the global level, also benefits the middle class the most as they will play a key role as its ambassadors to the world.

21 retired judges write to CJI against attempts to undermine judiciary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

A group of 21 retired judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts have written to the Chief Justice of India on the escalating attempts by "certain factions to undermine the judiciary through calculated pressure, misinformation, and public disparagement".
Congress alleged that the letter by 21 judges to the Chief Justice of India was part of an "orchestrated campaign of the prime minister" to "threaten, browbeat and intimidate" the judiciary that has flexed its muscles in recent months.
These critics are motivated by narrow political interests and personal gains and are striving to erode public confidence in the judicial system, they said.
Though the retired judges, including four from the apex court, did not specify the incidents which prompted them to write to the CJI, their letter came amid amid a war of words between the ruling BJP and opposition parties over the actions against some opposition leaders in corruption cases.
With affected leaders and their parties moving courts to seek relief, the BJP has often accused them of using judicial decisions selectively and cited any lack of relief for several arrested leaders to rebut the opposition's criticism.
The retired judges, including justices (retired) Deepak Verma, Krishna Murari, Dinesh Maheshwari and M R Shah, accused the critics of having insidious methods with clear attempts to sway judicial processes by casting aspersions on the integrity of courts and the judges.
"Such actions not only disrespect the sanctity of our judiciary but also pose a direct challenge to the principles of fairness and impartiality that judges, as guardians of the law, have sworn to uphold," they said in the letter titled "Need to safeguard judiciary from unwarranted pressures".
The strategy employed by these groups is deeply troubling, ranging from the propagation of baseless theories intended to malign the judiciary's reputation to engaging in overt and covert attempts to influence judicial outcomes to their favour, they said.
"This behaviour, we observe, is particularly pronounced in the cases and causes of social, economic and political significance, including the cases involving certain individuals, wherein the lines between advocacy and manoeuvring are blurred to the detriment of judicial independence," they added.
The letter writers said they are particularly concerned about the tactics of misinformation and the orchestration of public sentiment against the judiciary.
"The practice of selectively praising judicial decisions that align with one's views while vehemently criticising those that do not, undermines the very essence of judicial review and the rule of law," they said.
They urged the judiciary led by the Supreme Court to fortify against such pressures and ensure that the sanctity and autonomy of the legal system are preserved.
"It is imperative that the judiciary remains a pillar of democracy, immune to the whims and fancies of transient political interests," they said.
Asked about the letter at a Press conference at the AICC headquarters, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh alleged that the "greatest threat" to judicial independence comes from the BJP. He also referred to name on that list and said it will give away the whole objective, background and authorship of the letter.

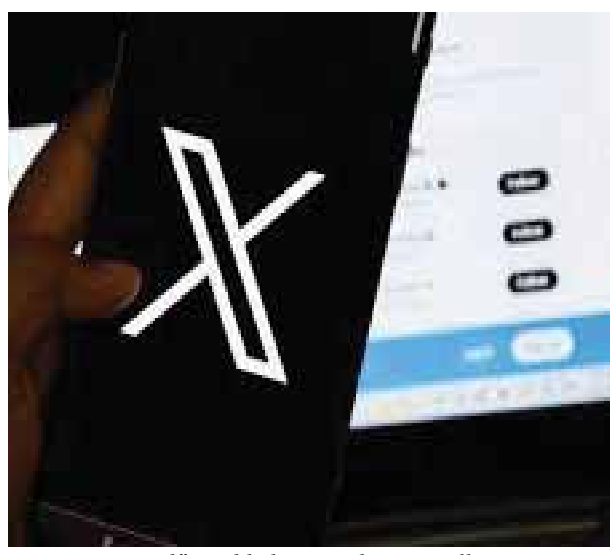
Government issues high risk warning for Indian Microsoft users

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

The Government has issued high risk warning for Microsoft services users in India after multiple vulnerabilities were found in various Microsoft products. Vulnerabilities could allow hackers to gain control, steal information remotely.
The caution note issued by the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team(CERT-In) is for users of Windows OS, Microsoft Office, Bing, Outlook and other Microsoft services.
The Indian cyber security agency has found multiple vulnerabilities in Microsoft products and has issued a high severity rating to the issue. The vulnerabilities affect a number of Microsoft software, including Microsoft Windows, Microsoft Office, Microsoft Developer Tools, its Azure services, Bing, System Center, Microsoft Dynamics, and Exchange Server.
Microsoft Exchange Server is a tool used by businesses to help them work together. It has things like email, calendars, contacts, and schedules all in one place. People can check their emails using programs like Microsoft Outlook. Plus, it works well with other Microsoft Office programs.
And the current set of vulnerabilities that have been found by CERT-In affect all these services mentioned above. Which means, anyone using any of these services could be a possible target of vulnerability.
The CERT-In website reveals that multiple vulnerabilities were reported in Microsoft Products. Reportedly, these security loopholes could allow an attacker to "gain elevated privileges, obtain Information Disclosure, Bypass Security restriction, conduct remote code execution attacks, perform spoofing attacks, or cause denial of service conditions".
This basically means that these vulnerabilities might let a hacker do things like get more power, find out secret info, get around security rules, control your computer remotely, trick you with fake links, or even stop your computer from working. The vulnerabilities in Microsoft Windows could allow an attacker into your computer and take charge or steal information remotely.
Such vulnerabilities take place because the computer does not protect itself well enough. One problem, according to CERT-In, is with a feature called Smart Screen, which is supposed to keep a device safe of malware. However, due to the vulnerability, it is actually letting the malware in.
This means, a hacker can take advantage of these security loopholes by sending special requests. If they succeed, they can take control of your computer or make it do things it should not.
How do you keep yourself safe from such vulnerabilities, you ask? Always ensure your device is up-to-date with the latest updates. These timely updates are meant to patch vulnerabilities or any security loophole that may exist in a product or software that you are using.

X bans over two lakh accounts in India over policy violations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI



Elon Musk-led X Corp has banned a staggering 212,627 accounts in India within the span of a month, marking a significant crackdown on content promoting child sexual exploitation and non-consensual nudity. The micro-blogging platform also took down 1,235 accounts for promoting terrorism on its platform in the country.
X said it has implemented several measures that relate to the mitigation of child sexual exploitation and terrorism.
X, in its monthly report, said that it received 5,158 complaints from users in India in the same time frame through its grievance redressal mechanisms.
Most complaints from India were about ban evasion (3,074), followed by sensitive adult content (953), hateful conduct (412), and abuse/harassment (359).
In addition, X processed 86 grievances which were appealing account suspensions. "We overturned 7 of these account suspensions after reviewing the specifics of the situation. The remaining reported accounts remain suspended," said the company. "We received 29 requests related to general questions about accounts during this reporting period," it added.
This information was released by Elon Musk-owned X (formerly Twitter) in its monthly compliance report. The company banned over 213,000 accounts in India between February 26 and March 25. It cited violations related to promoting child sexual exploitation and non-consensual nudity as the primary reasons for ban.
"There are many measures that have been in place for a long time on our platform that relate to the mitigation of child sexual exploitation and terrorism activity. X does not tolerate any material that features or promotes child sexual exploitation. This includes media, text, illustrations, or computer-generated images," the report stated.
Amid growing concerns over the proliferation of harmful content online, platforms like X seem to be intensifying efforts to combat such activities and maintain a conducive environment for healthy discourse.
In response to user complaints, the social media platform also reported receiving 5,158 grievances from users in India during the same reporting period. The ban is to highlight the platform's initiative to address user concerns promptly and effectively through its grievance redressal mechanisms.

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

Lieutenant Commander Bhaskar Rajvanshi was on Sunday awarded a gallantry medal by the Navy for his exemplary professionalism and courage in recovering an advanced light helicopter (ALH) from a state of "catastrophic control failure", according to an official statement.
A Navy spokesperson in a statement said this was the "first ever documented instance" of a safe recovery from collective control failure emergency in the "entire ALH fleet across all services".
"The pilot with his limited flying experience ensured safe recovery of the helicopter and aircrew in an extremely challenging scenario, thereby saving an asset worth over Rs 100 crore. The recovery of the aircraft has enabled the services to undertake accurate investigation of the failure towards putting remedial measures in place for the entire ALH fleet," read his citation for the Nao Sena Medal (Gallantry).
On March 8, 2023, IN 709, ALH MK III (MR) helicopter was disembarking from the aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant, to Mumbai with three personnel onboard."Flying at altitude 500 ft above mean sea level, the pilot suddenly encountered a catastrophic control failure, wherein the aircraft suffered uncommanded loss of collective power, rapid descent without any warning or failure indication in cockpit," read the citation. With no collective control available, the situation was likely to turn into a "fatal disaster," it said.
However, Rajvanshi, captain of the 321 Shikra ALH flight, did not surrender to the given circumstances, displaying tremendous courage and extraordinary piloting skills, he manoeuvred the helicopter with limited control available to effect an "extraordinary ditching at sea," the citation said.
The pilot ensured that the helicopter ditched clear of merchant and fishing traffic and thereby avoided loss of civil property or lives. Even after effecting safe touchdown over the sea surface, the helicopter remained extremely vulnerable to unbalanced aerodynamic forces that could lead to toppling and sure loss of machine or lives, it added.
"The pilot observed utmost discipline, maintained composure and guided his crew to safety by swift deployment of emergency floatation gear and safety equipment," the citation further said. The singular act of bravery, grit and presence of mind in the face of danger has upheld the Indian Navy's ethos, it said.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday appreciated the steps taken by the Indian Railways to prevent train accidents, including the automatic train protection system 'Kavach', to avoid collisions.
A bench of Justices Surya Kant and K V Viswanathan disposed of a petition that raised several issues related to passenger safety after taking note of multiple steps taken by the public sector behemoth to prevent accidents and promote safe travel.
"We appreciate the steps taken by the Railways," the bench said, while taking note of the status report filed by Attorney General R Venkataramani.
While hearing the plea filed by petitioner Vishal Tiwari on January 2, the apex court had sought to know about the protective measures, steps implemented so far or proposed to be taken by the Centre, including the 'Kavach' system.
It had asked the petitioner to hand over a copy of his plea to the office of the Attorney General.
Referring to the train accident in Odisha's Balasore district in June last year that had left 288 people dead, the petitioner had claimed non-implementation of the 'Kavach' scheme was resulting in accidents. He had said a lot of accidents have taken place in the past due to collision between trains.
The plea had sought directions to the Centre to set up an expert commission headed by a retired judge of the apex court and consisting of technical members to analyse and review the risk and safety parameters in the railway system and to suggest systematic safety modifications for strengthening the safety mechanism.
It claimed that non-implementation of 'Kavach' at the earliest had resulted in a massive loss of life and damage to public property which imputed direct liability of gross negligence and breach of duty of care to respondent authorities.It had also sought issuance of guidelines for implementation of the 'Kavach' system with immediate effect.
The petition was filed days after the crash involving Bengaluru-Howrah Superfast Express and Shalimar-Chennai Central Coromandel Express, which were carrying around 2,500 passengers, and a goods train in June last year near Bahanaga Bazar station in Balasore.

Army Chief on visit to Uzbekistan to enhance bilateral collaboration

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

Army Chief General Manoj Pande on Monday embarked on a four-day visit to Uzbekistan to explore new avenues of bilateral military collaboration.
He is scheduled to hold wide-ranging talks with the top military brass of the Central Asian nation besides visiting a number of defence establishments.
The defence ministry described the Army Chief's visit to Uzbekistan as a "significant step" in bolstering defence cooperation between the two countries.
"The visit by General Pande aims at strengthening military cooperation between India and Uzbekistan besides exploring new avenues of collaboration between the two nations," it said.
Pande will hold talks with Lieutenant General Bakhodir Kurbanov, the Defence Minister of Uzbekistan; Major General Khalmukhamedov Shukhrat Gayratjanovich, the First Deputy Minister of Defence and Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. "These dialogues are pivotal in fostering stronger military cooperation," it said in a statement.
On Tuesday, General Pande will visit late prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's memorial in Tashkent and pay homage to him, it said.
Thereafter, he will visit the Victory Park, commemorating Uzbekistan's contributions and sacrifices in the Second World War. On Wednesday, the Army Chief will travel to Samarkand where he will meet Commander of the Central Military District.
"The visit will culminate in Termez, on April 18, where the Army Chief is also scheduled to witness the joint exercise DUSTLIK between the armed forces of India and Uzbekistan, highlighting the interoperability and camaraderie developed between the two countries," the ministry said.
Meanwhile, the Indian Army contingent departed on Monday for the 5th edition of India- Uzbekistan joint military Exercise DUSTLIK. The Exercise is scheduled to be conducted from April 15-28 at Termez.
Exercise DUSTLIK is a yearly event conducted alternatively in India and Uzbekistan. Last edition was conducted at Pithoragarh (India) in February 2023.
The Indian Armed Forces contingent comprising 60 personnel is being represented by 45 personnel from the Indian Army, majorly from a battalion of the Jat Regiment, and 15 personnel from the Indian Air Force. The Uzbekistan contingent comprising approximately 100 personnel, from Uzbekistan Army and Air Force, will be represented by personnel from Southern Operational Command, part of South-West Military District.
Aim of Exercise DUSTLIK is to foster military cooperation and enhance combined capabilities to execute joint operations in mountainous as well as semi urban terrain. It would focus on high degree of physical fitness, joint planning, joint tactical drills and basics of special arms skills.
Tactical drills to be practiced during the exercise will include creation of a Joint Command Post, establishing an Intelligence and Surveillance Centre, securing of landing site, Small Team Insertion & Extraction, Special Heliborne Operations, Cordon and Search Operations, Room Intervention Drills and Demolition of illegal structures.
The complexity of this edition of Exercise DUSTLIK has been enhanced with conduct of multi domain operations as the contingent comprises of personnel from combat support arms and services besides Infantry. Two Women Officers also form part of the Indian Army contingent, including one from the Regiment of Artillery and the second from the Army Medical Corps.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Israel is "strong and resilient" and, if needed, it will "confront Iran" after the recent attack, the Israeli envoy here asserted on Monday and said India should play a role in bringing stability in the West Asia region.
In an interview to PTI at the Israeli Embassy here, the country's ambassador to India Naor Gilon said that Israeli defence forces with the support of the US and "other friends in the region" were able to "intercept 99 per cent" of the UAVs and missiles fired by Iranians.
However, there was "minor damage" suffered at Nevatim air base in the attack late Saturday, he said.
With Iran's attack on Israel triggering the spectre of a wider conflict in West Asia, India on Sunday said it is seriously concerned over the escalating hostilities between the two sides and called for an immediate halt to violence and return to the path of diplomacy.
External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held separate telephonic conversations with his Iranian and Israeli counterparts and underlined the importance of avoiding escalation and exercising restraint.
Iran carried out the attack on Israel in response to a suspected Israeli strike on its consulate in Damascus on April 1 that killed seven Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards including a senior general.
Ambassador Gilon, in the interview, said India as a "very respected player in the international arena should put its influence and weight" in bringing things back to normal.
He was asked what role he expected from India in the present situation, given the telephonic conversations of Jaishankar with his counterparts in Israel and Iran.
"I think that we expect from India, as a friend, to be very strong in international community in making sure that Iran stops its destabilisation of West Asia.
"I think West Asia as a region is also very important for India because there are millions of Indians working in that region. Many business connections, strong ones with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar. And, I think, this is very important that India will be active as a part of the international community, in stopping Iran," he said.
Gilon said the Iranians had shot about "350 different UAVs to cruise missiles to surface to surface missiles, all in all about 60 tonnes of explosives", trying to overcome the Israeli defence system by shooting simultaneously.
"Thanks to the US and other friends in the region, and the huge capacity of our air defence and air force, we were able to intercept 99 per cent of these missiles and UAVs and luckily, no casualty. There was one young, seven-year-old girl, a Bedouin Muslim girl from the south of Israel, who was severely wounded, I hope she comes out of it," the Israeli envoy said.
Gilon alleged that the attack was a "clear continuation of the behaviour of Iran" for a very long time, bringing instability in West Asia.
Two days ago, they "changed mould and attacked Israel directly from the territory of Iran" and other territories and also proxies, he said.
"Iran cannot continue this behaviour, if we need we will confront Iran. It is not a choice of ours. We are merely the receiving side here, and we will probably find the right time and moment to retaliate or send back a message to Iran that this is unacceptable.
"We should send the retaliating message that this is unacceptable," the envoy said.
The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in a post on X on Sunday night had said that the close cooperation between the US military and the IDF has led to the "formation of a strong coalition that proved itself last night in the face of Iran's aerial attack".

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

PTI ■ AURANGABAD/NAWADA

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

Addressing election rallies in Bihar's Aurangabad and Nawada districts, Adityanath, without mentioning the Samajwadi Party by name, alleged, "Like the RJD here, we had a family ruling the roost in UP, unleashing goonda raj in the state."

"We put an end to this... Bihar was passing through an 'identity crisis' during RJD's goonda raj. People should ensure that they (RJD) are finished in this electoral battle.

"This election is about family first versus nation. The 'parivaarwadi' (family-centric) party pushed the country towards terrorism, separatism and corruption. Now, we have Narendra Modi's guarantee of a developed and self-reliant India. The country's prestige has grown all over the world under Modi ji's leadership. Its borders are secure," the chief minister asserted.

Adityanath said when the central government is focusing on digital India, RJD leaders are busy talking about the "lantern" (the party symbol).

Their leaders are "opposed" to digital India initiatives of the Centre and Lalu Prasad can't think "beyond his parivar (family)", he alleged.

"RJD is against development… They indulge in 'rangdaari' (extortion) and believe in brandishing the 'tamancha' (revolver). The party leaders are responsible for criminalising politics. I am sure the people of Bihar will give them a befitting reply this time," Adityanath said.

"Today, there is no curfew and riot in UP and everything is fine there. The BJP government stands by its promises and actions. Now, the mafia and criminals either languish in jail or rot in hell. No one dares to threaten women or businessmen in UP. If you indulge in wrong doing, you will be finished ('Ram Naam Satya Ho Jayega')," the CM said.

The NDA government in Bihar will do the same and that is why people of the state must ensure a third term for Modi, asserted Adityanath.

He also alleged that the Congress and its Bihar ally RJD used to question the existence of Lord Ram. "But after the Ram Lalla idol was unveiled in Ayodhya, they changed track and started saying Ram belongs to all," he claimed.

The BJP's manifesto is Modi's guarantee. It reaffirms the dedication to building a developed India, while also reinforcing the firm stance against corruption, Adityanath said.

He charged the Congress and RJD leaders with doing nothing for former Bihar chief minister Karpoori Thakur. "It was the NDA government at the Centre that honoured him with the Bharat Ratna They (the opposition leaders) are exposed now," the UP chief minister said.

The Aurangabad Lok Sabha constituency will go to polls on April 19. BJP's Sushil Kumar Singh is seeking re-election from the seat as NDA nominee, while Rajya Sabha MP Vivek Thakur is contesting from Nawada.

INDIA Bloc has nothing to do with general public: Nadda

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

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

Addressing a poll rally in Mussoorie in support of BJP candidate from Tehri Garhwal Mala Rajya Laxmi Shah, Nadda said on one side there is the BJP's manifesto (Sankalp Patra) which lays the roadmap for a developed India and on the other side the INDIA bloc constituents who have their separate manifestos.

"What will they do for development when they cannot even come together," he said.

Describing the INDIA bloc as a conglomeration of the corrupt who are either in jail or on bail, he said that all they are concerned with is saving their families.

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

The BJP president asked the general public whether they would vote for such people.

"They (INDIA bloc) have nothing to do with you. They are only concerned with their families and saving themselves," he said.

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

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

"The only ones who care about you are your Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party, "he added.

Nadda said this election is not as much about electing a local MP as about electing a government under the leadership of Narendra Modi for a developed India.

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

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

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

Tripura's tribal areas priority for BJP: Shah

PTI ■ AGARTALA

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Before 2014, the budget for the Ministry of Tribal Affairs was Rs 24,000 crore. Under PM Modi, it increased to Rs 1,25,000 crore," he added.

Shah said a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was being set up in Sabroom at a cost of Rs 1,550 crore, and it will attract investments and create employment opportunities for the people of the state.

Attacking the CPI(M), he claimed that the communists handed over guns to the youths, while PM Modi provided them with laptops.

"It is PM Modi who facilitated more than 10 accords in the Northeast, and paved the way for 10,000 youths to return to the mainstream," he said.

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

The union minister said the 40,000-odd Bru tribe people, who had fled their homeland Mizoram following ethnic violence in the late 1990s, were resettled in 2022 in Tripura after living there for years in penury.

He noted that under the Modi government's leadership, efforts were made to establish well-equipped villages to improve their living conditions.

The Union home minister criticized the communists for allegedly instigating conflict among the people of Tripura and failing to foster development in the state.

The CPI(M) ruled the state first for a decade from 1978 to 1988, and then for 25 years – between 1993 and 2018.

Alleging that the Left provided shelter to illegal immigrants in Tripura, Shah urged the people to ensure a third term for PM Modi to stop cross-border infiltration completely.

Responding to the Union minister's statement on the agreement with the Tipra Motha, CPI(M) state secretary Jitendra Chaudhury sought to know the roadmap of the pact and what exactly the Centre is committing to the indigenous people.

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

Rajkot LS seat to remain BJP fortress: Analysts

PTI ■ RAJKOT

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

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

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

The BJP has dropped two-time MP Mohan Kundariya and nominated Rupala, belonging to the Kadva sub-sect of Patidar community. The Congress has fielded former MLA Paresh Dhanani, a Leuva Patidar.

Rupala and Dhanani belong to neighbouring Amreli district.

Three-term Rajya Sabha member Rupala is contesting the Lok Sabha election for the first time. He was an MLA from Amreli in 1991, 1995 and 1998. In the 2022 assembly polls, Dhanani defeated Rupala from Amreli. Dhanani also won the assembly seat in 2012 and 2017 but lost to BJP's Kaushik Vekaria in 2022. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Dhanani contested from Amreli but lost to BJP's Naran Kachhadia.

Rajkot Lok Sabha seat has nearly 23 lakh voters. The Patidars - Kadva and Leuva - are a decisive force with around 5.8 lakh electors.

There are also 3.5 lakh Koli voters, 2.3 lakh Maldharis (both OBCs), 1.5 lakh Rajputs, 1.8 lakh Dalits, around 2 lakh voters from minorities and 3 lakh from Brahmin and Lohana communities.

Talking to PTI, political analyst Jagdish Acharya claimed the maximum damage Rajputs can do to Rupala is reduce his winning lead by around 50,000 votes.

On the possibility of Dhanani's win with the help of nearly 4 lakh Leuva Patidars and a few thousand anti-BJP Rajput voters, Acharya said the chances are remote.

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

For voters, PM Modi's name and developmental works here are enough reasons to support the BJP, he said.

Rajkot Lok Sabha seat comprises seven assembly segments, all currently held by the BJP.

The saffron party has been winning Rajkot Lok Sabha seat since 1989, barring 2009 when BJP's Kiran Patel lost to Congress' Kunvarji Bavaliya.

Koli leader and Jasdan MLA Bavaliya joined the BJP in 2018 and is currently a state cabinet minister.

"In 2019, BJP's Kundariya won from Rajkot by over 3.68 lakh votes and by 2.46 lakh votes in 2014. This seat is like an unbreachable fortress of the BJP," said Acharya.

"Even if the agitation against Rupala continues, Rajput voters don't have that power to make any difference to the end result. The BJP won with huge margins in the last two elections. A dent of 40,000 to 50,000 votes due to Rajput anger cannot stop the BJP from winning," he claimed.

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

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

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

Congress Ghoshna Patra visionless: Rajasthan CM

PTI ■ JAIPUR

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

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

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

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

He said that Congress had given 'Gareebi Hatao' slogan during its 55 years of rule but did not eliminate poverty.

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

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

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

"We have a proof of 10 years of golden tenure and leadership of PM Modi ji whereas the 'Ghamandiya Gathbandhan' has no intention, no leader and no policy," he said. The Chief Minister said the Centre has worked considering service, good governance and poor welfare as its aim in the last 10 years.

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

"Modi ji's guarantee is like 24 carat gold guarantee," he said.

Sharma said the BJP government has fulfilled all promises, including abrogation of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir or building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya or upliftment of poor from below poverty line.

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

Mandaviya files nomination from Porbandar in Gujarat

PTI ■ PORBANDAR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The cavalcade, which started from Sudama Chowk, passed through Khadi Bhandar, Baluba Kanya Vidyalaya, Old Fountain chowk, Birla Hall, Tajavala Hall, Bhaveshwar Mahadev temple, Khijadi plot, before culminating at Kamla Baug. "We hope that such a high profile candidate will spur Porbandar's development and create employment opportunities and bring industries here," said 27-year-old Deveraj. He along with Modhwadia then went to the DC office where he filed his nomination papers.

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

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

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

Ready to support Congress if it scraps Mhadei project: RGP

PTI ■ PANAJI

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parab further said that the party should also assure that illegal slums in the state will be demolished and policies will be drafted to check the influx of migrants.

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

RGP MLA Viresh Borkar had tried to table the bill in the House, but other parties, including Congress, rejected it.

"If they don't accept the POGO Bill, the Congress should define who is Goan according to them," Parab said.

Parab said that the RGP will wait for the response from INDIA Alliance till April 20.

Goa will go to polls on May 7, and the counting of votes will be held on June 4.

BJP manifesto road map for developed India, says Dhami

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

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

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

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

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

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

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, India will fulfil the vision of Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, he said.

Dhami said 'one nation, one election' guaranteed in the BJP's manifesto will lead to a "welcome change" as frequent elections and imposition of the model code of conduct hamper development.

BJP unveils Sankalp Patra in Andaman and Nicobar Islands

PTI ■ PORT BLAIR

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

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

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

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

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Damage control

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

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

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

PICTALK

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

Avoiding icebergs in troubled times

DEEPAK **SINHA**

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

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

In fact, not only did he attempt to justify his action using that tired old cliché, "it was for our own good", but also added to good effect that those critical would subsequently regret it. An implied threat perhaps? The reasoning in support was that we would never have come to know the specifics of political donations if not for this initiative, which while accurate, could not be further from the truth. There can be no dispute that was certainly not the intention to begin with, otherwise why the secrecy in the first place? Moreover, it was the Government's top lawyers who made every effort to convince the court that the ordinary citizen had no right to such information.

While it may have just been an attempt to brazen through in view of the elections, one cannot help but feel that the Government believes it has not erred and is thus unrepentant and likely to be pushed through again. The Belgian painter and author, Erik Pevernagie, makes a very pertinent point when he writes "politicians are but tantalising storytellers, as they mix facts with fiction, grab our emotion and tell things, they want us to believe. Their factoids are unremittingly reiterated, take a life on their own and in the end become the very truth… until the bubble bursts."

Unfortunately for this Government it seems that the bubble has been pricked, if not burst, as the Supreme Court appears to have finally awakened from its deep slumber. Its actions, though still at a very nascent stage, if followed through, may help in ensuring a level playing field during the forthcoming elections and are therefore exceedingly welcome. More importantly, it has put the bosses of our public institutions, be it public sector companies, the central investigative agencies or the Election Commission on notice.

Moreover, details of alleged linkages that are emerging from the Electoral Bonds issues suggest humungous malfeasance and sordid corruption at an unimaginable scale indulged in by the richest and most powerful within the country for their own personal gain. All of this has been at the cost of the ordinary tax payer. Moreover, we have yet to learn whether foreign entities have channelled in funds through domestic players, as is a distinct possibility. Such interference, if it has occurred, should be a matter of great concern given the impact it may have on national security. In this context, the functioning of the Prime Minister's Cares Fund must also be viewed with suspicion, given its lack of transparency and the various allegations made against it.

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

Both these initiatives were conceived and implemented by the present dispensation in power, which in all probability, will return. It is extremely unlikely therefore, that they will undertake a credible or fair investigation of allegations made. Moreover, our premier investigative agencies also find themselves under a cloud for their acts of omission and commission. For example, the Enforcement Directorate has since 2005 registered approximately 5900 cases. It has completed and filed chargesheets in only 1142 cases and disposed of just twenty-five of these, with twenty-four ending in convictions.

What is worse is its biased actions in investigating politicians. As media reports show, since 2014 the Directorate has probed 121 prominent politicians of which 115, or 95 per cent, belong to the opposition. As per these same reports the Central Bureau of Investigation mirrored the pattern followed by the ED.

In these circumstances, the only credible option remaining is for the Supreme Court to order a judicial investigation under its own aegis, that should be broadcast live to ensure complete transparency and accountability. One does not need to be a soothsayer to suggest that if such a strict and non-partisan step is not initiated at the earliest, we will always remain at the mercy of leeches who will suck the life blood out of our democratic norms, right to good governance and the rule of law.

Finally, from the proceedings in Supreme Court on the Electoral Bonds case one can infer that the manner in which the Chairman, State Bank of India, used the resources entrusted to him by the depositors to defy and hamper the directions of the Court render him patently unfit to hold that appointment.

Just because the party in power appoints him and others to head public institutions and agencies, they cannot see themselves as mere factotums of those who appointed them and do their bidding. One expects far more of them, not least to show integrity of character and follow rules without fear or favour.

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

Screenwriters as architects of emotion

PAWAN **SONY**

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

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

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

This is the essence of screenwriting—not just creating dialogues but sculpting moments that become landmarks in cinematic history. It's about crafting narratives that engage, entertain and evoke a spectrum of emotions, from the laughter that bubbles up during the light-hearted moments in '*3 Idiots*' to the tears that unknowingly fall for the poignant scenes in '*Taare Zameen Par*'.

Screenwriters delve into the depths of the human experience, drawing upon themes of love, loss, victory and defeat to create stories that resonate across cultures and generations. Through their words, characters come to life, embarking on journeys filled with challenges, joys, sorrows and ultimately, growth.

Movies and shows like '*Mohabbatein*' and '*Maharani*' which challenge the values of "Parampara, Pratishtha, Anushasan," not only entertain but also inspire reflections and conversations among audiences. In the realm of cinema, screenwriters are the true magicians, crafting the spells of dialogue and narrative that enchant us, make us reflect and sometimes even change our perspectives. Their contributions go beyond the screen, touching hearts and shaping societal narratives.

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

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

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICAL CHESSBOARD

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

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

Abhijeet Nand| *Bhopal*

EXPLORING HUMAN LEARNING

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

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

Shihaab Khan | *Hyderabad*

A CHAMPION OF JUSTICE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "A harbinger of justice and equality", published on April 13, this is my response. The legacy of Dr BR Ambedkar, a towering figure in India's history, continues to inspire millions worldwide. His tireless efforts towards social justice, equality and inclusivity have left an indelible mark on the nation's conscience. Born into poverty, Dr Ambedkar overcame numerous obstacles to become an intellectual powerhouse and a relentless advocate for the oppressed.

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

Priyanka Sharma | *Delhi*

Urban farming

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

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

Khirabdi Tanya Nayak | *Noida*

Send your feedback to:
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FIRST COLUMN

BALANCING WELLBEING IN WORK AND LIFE

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

SAKSHI **SETHI**

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

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

In a competitive and demanding work environment, it becomes crucial to set limits on workload, deadlines and expectations to prevent overcommitment and exhaustion. Numerous studies have also highlighted the importance of setting boundaries to maintain a healthy work-life balance. By defining clear limits on workload, working hours and availability, employees can better manage their work-related stress and maintain a positive attitude towards their jobs. In doing so, they can protect themselves from intrusive inquiries or demands that encroach upon their emotional well-being. Furthermore, boundary setting cultivates respect and professionalism in workplace dynamics and encourages others to treat self with similar respect. By clearly communicating the expectations and limits, the individual establishes a culture of mutual respect and accountability in the workplace. When individuals assert their boundaries assertively yet respectfully, it communicates self-confidence and self-worth, fostering a culture of mutual respect and dignity. Respect for boundaries encourages open communication, empathy and understanding, strengthening interpersonal relationships and teamwork.

Beyond the workplace, boundary setting is equally indispensable in personal relationships and daily life too. In interpersonal relationships, boundaries define acceptable behaviours, emotional intimacy and personal space. Healthy boundaries empower individuals to prioritise their needs, values and aspirations, fostering relationships based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Whether it's setting limits on time spent with certain individuals or communicating preferences regarding personal space, boundaries nurture healthier and more fulfilling connections. Remember, setting boundaries is not about being selfish or uncooperative rather it's about taking care of individual self and ensuring that one can perform their best while maintaining the individual well-being. When done thoughtfully and respectfully, setting boundaries can strengthen the individual's professional relationships and enhance their effectiveness at work.

Remember, boundaries are never about telling other people what they can and cannot do. It is about telling people what they will and will not do. Setting boundaries is an act of self-love and self-respect which is essential for individual wellbeing. Setting boundaries around leisure time, self-care routines and social engagements will allow an individual to recharge, replenish their energy and cultivate resilience in the face of challenges. By honouring their boundaries, individuals assert their agency and reclaim control over their time, energy and emotions.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Challenges galore for NATO@75

K S **TOMAR**

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

One of the biggest challenges being faced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on its 75th anniversary pertains to combating and addressing the severe criticism from some European countries and the spread of right-wing nationalist movements. Hence, it needs to adopt a cautious and balanced approach to stay relevant in the 21st century.

Challenges ahead to stay relent: NATO, with 32 member states and five aligned nations including Japan, New Zealand, Israel, Australia and South Korea, must enhance defence capabilities and security arrangements to ensure mutual trust and better cooperation. NATO also called Washington Treaty, was created on April 4, 1949 to counterweight to Soviet military forces stationed in Central and Eastern Europe after world war 2nd, has traversed a hazardous journey and sustained faith of security and protection from aggressors hinges on its commitment to stay united and germane.

Secondly, NATO's military potential is being perceived as a tool and weapon of the United States to ensure its hegemony over nations that do not pose military threats.

There is a calamitous need to dispel such impressions of supremacy, evident from its 200 military interventions worldwide in 75 years, including 20 major ones like the questionable outcome of combating terrorism in Afghanistan, unlawful interference in Syria, invasion of Iraq, bombing of Yugoslavia, destabilisation of Libya and the creation of ISIS.

Thirdly, as a parting gift, NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg has proposed a $100 billion package of military aid to Ukraine for five years, aimed at avoiding a potential halt in aid if Trump wins the 2024 American presidential elections.

Former President Trump has made it clear to keep his country away from such conflicts and he is seen as pro-Putin, which might upset NATO. Experts feel that NATO members should get this proposal approved at the upcoming meeting in Washington and counter Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

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

NATO Needs Reforms: Foreign policy experts argue that NATO needs to focus on non-traditional threats such as terror attacks, disinformation campaigns, cyber assaults and risks to disrupt supply chains to preserve its allies. Otherwise, it will lose its credentials and effectiveness.

Secondly, NATO must adopt a comprehensive strategy that will be productive and fruitful only if it integrates itself with international organisations besides strengthening its military capabilities.

Thirdly, it should put in place an effective mechanism to foster a shared sense of purpose and make relentless efforts to ensure cohesiveness and unity among the member states. Consensus-building should be the primary motto of the alliance, guided by essential elements like discussion, dialogue, unified planning and political alignments. Fourthly, transparency is obligatory to create mutual trust and internal synergy, as well as to improve coordination among the five main policy formation committees, including the executive working group, political committee, policy formalisation group, military group and senior resource board. Why did India reject the US offer to be part of NATO? From the Indian perspective, experts say that India has already rejected the US offer to be part of an alliance to safeguard against Chinese aggression. India is capable of independently countering such threats and, therefore, does not need the assistance of a military grouping like NATO. If India joins NATO, it will pave the way for the US to establish military bases, which is unacceptable to Delhi. US allies like Australia, Israel, Japan and South Korea have permitted military bases, but India cannot allow the infringement of its sovereignty and degradation of its positioning in the world arena. While maintaining strategic autonomy, India will never jeopardise its age-old trustworthy ties with Russia, which is at odds with America and its allies after the Ukraine conflict.

A United States Congressional committee had recommended that the US should strengthen NATO Plus to safeguard borders from China and enhance its capabilities to counter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region hence it warrants India's inclusion in the organisation.

The successes and failures of the organisation go hand in hand, but conflicts' contamination is spreading among major powers and frozen encounters may always heat up in the future, attributed to growing state brittleness and spillover threats, thereby disturbing the world order.

The recent Global Risk Report has come out with curious findings pertaining to the Global Risks Perception Survey (GRPS) which is the culmination of the analysis of fifteen hundred global experts who have investigated the global risks through three time frames to support decision-makers responsible for balancing current crises and long-term policies and priorities.

One major failure of NATO relates to the lack of allocation of 2 per cent of funds by defence ministers of state members of their GDP agreed upon in 2006 towards security — related expenditures, especially when the United States accounts for two-thirds of the alliance's spending, which needs to be shared by other nations in the organisation.

NATO had focused on restricting communism, discouraging militant nationalism and controlling the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but now the situation has become volatile in post-Cold War era as Russia has indulged in annexing neighbours, posing a threat to other smaller nations as well. Analysts feel that as NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2024, it stands at a vintage point of passing through a litmus test of its core mission of safeguarding the security and freedom of its members, based on a principle-oriented international order and mandate.

Trump's potential return to the White House may jeopardise the existence of NATO as it may encourage aggressors like Putin and give a boost to China's over-ambitious expansion policy to annex Taiwan in the future. Trump may encourage Putin to continue his onslaught on Ukraine, putting Europe's security at risk.

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

A call to vote responsibly beyond party lines

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

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

RAVI **KOCHHAR**

As citizens, it is imperative that we transcend party lines and critically evaluate the progress of our nation. Are we moving in the right direction? Are there tangible improvements in various sectors? Are we receiving value for the taxes we pay? These are fundamental questions we must ask ourselves as we assess the state of our nation.

While political parties often prioritise winning elections, it is our duty as responsible citizens to vote for candidates who prioritise the welfare of the people and deliver on their promises. Over the past 75 years, India has made remarkable strides, earning recognition as a responsible global player. Whether it's our nuclear capabilities or our humanitarian efforts during crises, we have demonstrated our commitment to progress and compassion.

The electoral process grants us the opportunity, every five years, to hold our leaders accountable for their actions. We must evaluate their performance across various sectors, including:-

1. Infrastructure Development: Assess the improvement in infrastructure, particularly in terms of connectivity by rail, road and waterways, which directly impacts ease of doing business and facilitates movement across the country.

2.Industrial Growth and Policies: Evaluate the government's plans and policies for industrial growth and decision-making processes, ensuring there is no policy paralysis hindering progress.

3. Impact on Poor and Middle Class: Examine how Government policies impact the poor and middle class, with a focus on initiatives aimed at upliftment and improvement.

4. Healthcare Sector Performance: Evaluate the government's performance in the healthcare sector and assess the affordability and accessibility of healthcare for all citizens.

5.Education and Skill Development: Analyse initiatives in education and skill development, focusing on improving literacy rates, bridging urban-rural gaps and empowering the youth.

6.Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity: Assess improvements in digital infrastructure and connectivity, particularly in urban-rural sectors and how they benefit citizens.

7.Agriculture and Rural Sector: Review Government initiatives in agriculture and rural development and their impact on rural communities.

8. Transparency and Accountability: Ensure transparency and accountability in public administration, with efforts to curb corruption and promote good governance.

9.Foreign Policy and International Relations: Evaluate the government's performance in foreign policy and international relations, considering India's standing on the global stage.

Remember, our national identity, symbolised by our flag, transcends religious and caste divisions, uniting us as one nation. As we exercise our right to vote, let us remember the significance of our national flag and the unity it represents. Your vote holds immense power. History has witnessed elections being decided by a single vote. Therefore, before casting your vote, consider crucial factors such as the government's performance and policies, rising above religious and caste affiliations for the greater good of the nation.

While this list is not exhaustive, it underscores the importance of informed decision-making and prioritising the wellbeing of our nation. Let us unite in our commitment to building a stronger, more prosperous India.

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

Israeli military warns Palestinians not to return to Gaza

AP ■ DEIR-AL-BALAH

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

Northern Gaza was an early target of Israel's war against Hamas and vast parts of it have been flattened, forcing much of the area's population to flee south. While around 250,000 people are said to be living in the north, the Israeli military has prevented most displaced people from returning throughout the six-month-long war, saying the area is an active battle zone.

The military has reduced the number of troops it has in Gaza and has said it has loosened Hamas' control over the north, but Israel is still carrying out airstrikes and targeted operations in the area against what it says are reorganizing militants, most prominently at Gaza's main hospital, Shifa, which is in ruins after a two-week raid and fighting last month.

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

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

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

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

Anaam Mohammad, who was displaced from the northern city of Beit Hanoun and was trying to return, said the military was allowing women and children to cross, but when a group of Palestinians did not make room for them to pass, two tanks arrived and opened fire. Forces also threw smoke bombs, dispersing the crowd.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its tally, but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead.

Israel says it has killed over 12,000 militants during the war, but it has not provided evidence to back up the claim.

PM Sunak's Rwanda bill returns to House of Commons

PTI ■ LONDON

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

The peers want to water down the hardline legislation that seeks to deem the East African country safe in law to block legal challenges to migrants being flown out to Rwanda while their asylum claims are assessed. It returns its voting journey as Parliament resumes after an Easter recess and the fresh wrangles over the bill unfold against the backdrop of small boat crossings by asylum seekers across the English Channel hitting a new daily high for 2024 – at 534 on Sunday.

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

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

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

Blinken calls Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi FMs

AP ■ WASAHINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, Biden reached out to the Congressional leaders on the greatest foreign policy crisis of his presidency. "Biden convened a call this afternoon with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries to discuss Iran's unprecedented attack against Israel. On the call, the president discussed the urgent need for the House of Representatives to pass the national security supplemental as soon as possible," said the White House.

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

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

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

"The best way to help Israel rebuild its anti-missile and anti-drone capacity is by passing that supplemental immediately. As I said, Israel expended about over a billion dollars in defending itself and the security supplemental would replenish the kind of anti-missile and anti-drone defences that are in the Arrow, in the David's Sling, and in the Iron Dome," he said.

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

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

FBI opens probe into Baltimore bridge collapse

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Man arrested after stabbing at church service in Sydney

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

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

NSW Ambulance service said it had treated a man in his 50s for multiple cuts and taken him to a hospital, and three others were treated for one or more cuts at the scene.

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

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

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

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

US Prez Biden to host Iraqi leader

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

In addition, Iranian proxies have initiated attacks against US interests throughout the region from inside Iraq, making Monday's meeting between Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani all the more critical. The talks will include a discussion of regional stability and future US troop deployments but will also focus on economic, trade and energy issues that have become a major priority for Iraq's government, according to US officials.

Biden and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin are both expected to address the US troop presence in meetings with al-Sudani. "It is not the primary focus of the visit … but it is almost certainly going to come up," one senior US official said last week.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trump in court for historic hush money trial

AP ■ NEW YORK

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

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

Judge Juan M. Merchan has written that the key is "whether the prospective juror can assure us that they will set aside any personal feelings or biases and render a decision that is based on the evidence and the law."

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

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

The charges centre on USD 130,000 in payments that Trump's company made to his then-lawyer, Michael Cohen. He had paid that sum on Trump's behalf to keep porn actor Stormy Daniels from going public, a month before the election, with her claims of a sexual encounter with the married mogul a decade earlier. Prosecutors say the payments to Cohen were falsely logged as legal fees in order to cloak their actual purpose. Trump's lawyers say the disbursements indeed were legal expenses, not a cover-up.

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

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

Regardless of the eventual outcome, the trial of an ex-president and current candidate is a moment of extraordinary gravity for the American political system, as well as for Trump himself. Such a scenario would have once seemed unthinkable to many Americans, even for a president whose tenure left a trail of shattered norms, including twice being impeached and acquitted by the Senate.

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

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

Israel response to Iranian attack shows what Kyiv needs: Kuleba

AP ■ KYIV

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

A recent Russian aerial campaign targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure and other targets has wrought extensive damage, and Ukrainian officials have pleaded with the country's Western allies to provide more air defence systems as the war stretches into its third year. Israel's defence system, with assistance from the US and Britain — countries that are also supporting Ukraine's war effort — is credited with preventing serious damage or casualties in Sunday's attack by Iran using more than 300 drones and missiles.

Kuleba, speaking to reporters in Kyiv, urged Ukraine's allies to "give us what we need and we will do the rest of the job."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made the same point late Sunday, referring to the Iranian attack. "The whole world sees what real defense is. It sees that it is feasible," he wrote on Telegram.

Russia last week fired nearly 130 exploding drones, more than 80 Russian missiles and nearly 700 guided aerial bombs at Ukraine, Zelenskyy said Sunday on the social platform X. He has pleaded with allies to send more Patriot systems.

However, the Institute for the Study of War noted there are key differences between the challenges faced by Israel and by Ukraine. "Russian forces launch drones and missiles from throughout occupied Ukraine and in close proximity to Ukraine from within Russia, affording Ukrainian air defenders a fraction of the time that Israel and its allies leveraged to successfully blunt the mass Iranian missile and drone strike," the Washington think tank said in an assessment late Sunday. The scale and improved accuracy of recent Russian attacks have unnerved Ukraine's defenders. They say Kremlin forces now have better intelligence and fresh tactics in their campaign to destroy Ukraine's power grid and crush its economy. Moscow has also apparently learned how to exploit gaps in air defences across the huge country.

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

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

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

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

AP ■ PARIS

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

Sudan descended into conflict in April last year when simmering tensions between the military and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces exploded into open fighting in the capital, Khartoum and elsewhere across the country.

Members of Sudan's civil society and local NGOs are involved in the Paris meeting, but neither the Sudanese army nor its rival the RSF have been represented.

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

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged the international community to donate generously and support the UN's life-saving efforts to help Sudanese people, trapped in the "nightmare of bloodshed".

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

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

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

Review says Abbey Gate bombing wasn't preventable

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

Former Marine Sgt Tyler Vargas-Andrews told the House Foreign Affairs Committee last March that Marines and others aiding in the evacuation were given descriptions of men believed to be plotting an attack. Vargas-Andrews, who was injured in the blast but not interviewed in the initial investigation, said he and others saw a man matching the description and might have been able to stop the attack, but requests to take action were denied.

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

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

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

Family members of those killed in the blast received similar briefings over the past two weekends and some are still unconvinced.

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

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

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

The families, however, also said they were relieved to get more details about their loved ones' deaths, saying the initial briefings were not as good.

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

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

Team members said they also are planning to speak with the troops who were interviewed this time, to share the results of the report. They said the review also could not completely rule out claims that militants did a test run of the bombing several days earlier. But after reviewing photos and other intelligence, the team concluded it was unlikely that three men seen carrying a large bag — which troops deemed suspicious — were doing a trial run.

More broadly, the team said the review brought some new details to light, including more discussion about the possible bombing test run. But they said overall it confirmed the findings of US Central Command's initial investigation into the bombing: that it was not preventable and that reports of threats prior to the bombing were too vague.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Iran Prez to visit Pak on April 22

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

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

The visit also assumes significance as it comes amidst ongoing efforts by Pakistan and Iran to deepen their cooperation which received a temporary setback earlier this year.

In January, Pakistan, in retaliation to Iran's cross-border strikes, carried out precision strikes using killer drones and rockets to target terrorists inside Iranian territory, the report said.

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

Bilawal urges politicians to unite around 'Charter of Reconciliation'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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

Bilawal, a former foreign minister, was speaking at a public gathering on Sunday in the Larkana district of the Sindh province of Pakistan to mark the 45th death anniversary of PPP founder and his grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Former Pakistan prime minister Bhutto, 51, was executed by the military regime in 1979.

Bilawal emphasised the necessity for political figures to unite around a 'Charter of Reconciliation', as he urged them to engage in constructive political dialogue at the table, The Business Recorder newspaper reported. He urged politicians to have a political dialogue to improve the country's system, democracy, and institutions through amendments.

Asserting that political stability can only be achieved through the 'Charter of Democracy' and 'Charter of Reconciliation', he said that the PPP will be at its forefront, the Dawn newspaper reported.

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

Bilawal also said certain politicians are driven by personal ego and are willing to jeopardise the nation for their own gain, in an apparent reference to jailed former prime minister Imran Khan, who has been accusing the current government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of stealing the mandate of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in the February 8 general elections. Warning of the looming threat of military intervention if politicians failed to prioritise national reconciliation and persisted in trading insults, he cautioned against the detrimental consequences, according to The Express Tribune newspaper. "It won't foster Pakistan's development or strengthen its economy; rather, it will only undermine democracy and harm the people," Bilawal was quoted as saying.

Underscoring the necessity for judicial reforms, he noted that 90 per cent of the Charter of Democracy points had been accomplished, with only the remaining 10 per cent about the judiciary.

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

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

The plea was filed in Islamabad High Court (IHC) by Shoaib Shaheen on behalf of Bushra Bibi, seeking the former first lady's medical examination in the Shaukat Khanum Hospital, which is owned by Khan's charitable organisation, ARY news channel reported. It stated that Bushra, 49, was poisoned in sub-jail Bani Gala (Imran Khan's home in Islamabad), and therefore, her medical examination should be conducted, the report said. Earlier this month, during the hearing of a corruption case in the Adiala jail, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party founder Khan informed the judge that there had been an attempt to poison his wife and said that she had marks on her skin and tongue as a side effect of the "poisoning".

However, Bushra Bibi's personal physician conducted a medical checkup and ascertained that she had not been given any poisonous substance.

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

ASEEFA TAKES OATH AS PAKISTAN MP

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

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

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

18 killed in landslides at Indonesia island

AP ■ TARA TORAJA

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

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

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

Loosened by torrential rain, mud poured from surrounding hills onto four houses just before midnight Saturday in the Tana Toraja district of South Sulawesi province, said local police chief Gunardi Mundu. He said a family gathering was being held in one of the houses when the landslide hit.

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

Dozens of soldiers, police and volunteers joined the search in the remote hillside villages of Makale and South Makale, Mundu said. Rescuers early Sunday managed to pull out two injured people, including an 8-year-old girl, and rushed them to a nearby hospital.

Downed communications lines, bad weather and unstable soil were hampering the rescue efforts, Muhari said.

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

Germany's Scholz warns against dumping during China visit

AP ■ BEIJING

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

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

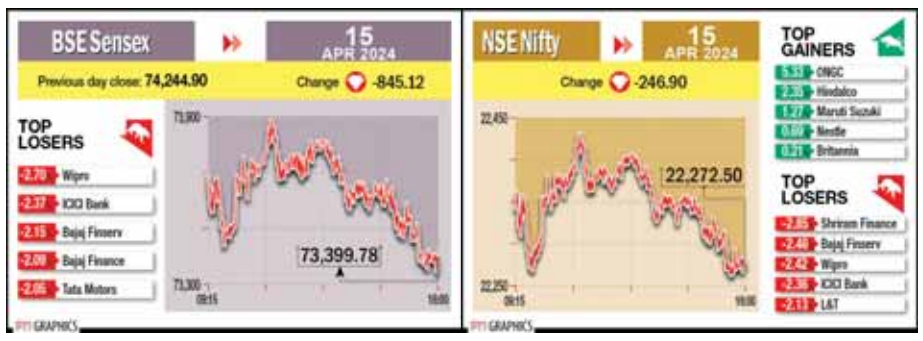
"The one thing that must always be clear is that competition must be fair," Scholz told students at Tongji University in Shanghai, according to German news agency dpa. "Of course we would like our companies to have no restrictions, but conversely we behave exactly how we are demanding here," he said, adding there must be no dumping or overproduction.

The European Union is mulling tariffs to protect its producers against cheaper Chinese electrical vehicle imports, which some fear will flood the European market. The head of Germany's auto industry association, the VDA, expressed opposition to such tariffs ahead of Scholz's visit. Hildegard Müller told the Welt am Sonntag newspaper in comments published Saturday the tariffs would not help the European and German auto industries and instead "could quickly have a negative effect in a trade conflict."

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

Sensex, Nifty tank over one per cent

PTI ■ MUMBAI



Stock markets took a beating on Monday with benchmark Sensex and Nifty tumbling over 1 per cent as escalating conflict in the Middle East and weak trends from global markets unnerved investors.

Extending losses to the second session, the 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 845.12 points or 1.14 per cent to settle at a more than two-week low of 73,399.78. During the day, it plunged 929.74 points or 1.25 per cent to 73,315.16. The NSE Nifty declined 246.90 points or 1.10 per cent to finish at 22,272.50. Key indices had plunged by over 1 per cent in the previous session on Friday due to profit taking by investors at record high levels. Sensex lost 1,638 points or 2.19 per cent while Nifty plunged 481 points or 2.13 per cent to slip below the 22,300 level in two straight sessions.

Foreign fund outflows and hotter-than-expected US inflation data also played spoilsport for the markets.

Analysts said the renewed conflict in the Middle East, proposed changes in the India-Mauritius tax treaty and the hotter-than-expected US inflation proved to be major drags. From the Sensex basket, Wipro, ICICI Bank, Bajaj Finserv, Bajaj Finance, Tata Motors, Larsen & Toubro, Tech Mahindra and HDFC Bank were the major laggards.

Nestle, Maruti and Bharti Airtel were the gainers.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong settled lower while Shanghai ended in the positive territory. European markets were trading on a mixed note. Wall Street ended significantly lower on Friday.

"Geopolitical tensions and higher-than-expected US inflation impacted investor sentiment and dragged the indices to a lower note. The major casualties were the mid- and small-cap indices due to their rich valuation and expectation of moderation in earnings growth in Q4FY24.

"On the other hand, the European market opened on a positive note while oil prices inched lower as market participants expected that the diplomatic efforts were likely to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 1.04 per cent to USD 89.51 a barrel.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 8,027 crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

"The escalating geopolitical tensions in West Asia prompted a decline in the 30-share BSE Sensex and the NSE Nifty. Market indices traded lower, influenced by the heightened tensions between Iran and Israel, leading to losses across major sectors. Notably, the broader small and midcap segments also saw declines," said Suman Bannerjee, CIO of hedge fund Hedonova. Official data released on Monday showed that wholesale inflation rose marginally to 0.53 per cent in March compared to 0.20 per cent in the preceding month due to an increase in prices of vegetables, potato, onion and crude oil.

Retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85 per cent in March, inching towards the Reserve Bank's target of 4 per cent, according to official data released on Friday.

India's industrial production growth accelerated to a four-month high of 5.7 per cent in February 2024, mainly due to the good performance of the mining sector, according to official data released on Friday.

The Income Tax Department on Friday said the amended India-Mauritius protocol on double taxation avoidance agreement (DTAA) is yet to be ratified and notified by the department.

India and Mauritius on March 7, 2024, signed an amendment to the DTAA and included a principal purpose test (PPT) in the pact which aims to curtail tax avoidance by ensuring that treaty benefits are granted only for transactions with a bona fide purpose.

Wholesale inflation inches up marginally to 0.53 per cent in March

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Wholesale inflation in the country rose marginally to 0.53 per cent in March compared to 0.20 per cent in the preceding month due to increase in prices of vegetables, potato, onion and crude oil.

The Wholesale Price Index (WPI)-based inflation was in the negative zone from April to October and had turned positive in November at 0.26 per cent. The inflation in March 2023 was 1.41 per cent.

"The annual rate of inflation based on all-India Wholesale Price Index (WPI) number is 0.53 per cent (provisional) for the month of March, 2024 (over March, 2023)," the commerce and industry ministry said in a statement on Monday.

Food inflation moved up marginally to 6.88 per cent in March from 5.42 per cent in the same month a year ago, data showed. Inflation in vegetables was 19.52 per cent, up from (- 2.39) per cent in the same month a year ago.

WPI for potato witnessed a jump of 52.96 per cent against a deflation of 25.59 per cent, while for onion 56.99 per cent as compared to (-) 36.83 per cent in March 2023.

The data showed that inflation in the crude petroleum segment rose by 10.26 per cent in March this year against a deflation of 23.53 per cent in March 2023 due to hardening of crude prices globally.

However, retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85 per cent in March mainly due to cooling food prices.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) based retail inflation was 5.09 per cent in February and 5.66 per cent in March 2023. Previously, CPI-based inflation was the lowest at 4.87 per cent in October 2023.

The inflation in the food basket was at 8.52 per cent in March, down from 8.66 per cent in February, according to the data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) last week.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The staffing industry grew 3.6 per cent in October-December 2023 as compared to the previous quarter, the Indian Staffing Federation (ISF) said on Monday.

ISF, the apex industry body representing manpower outsourcing industry, released the Flexi Staffing Industry Employment growth report for Q3 FY2024 (October-December 2023).

The staffing industry witnessed a 3.6 per cent growth in December quarter FY24 in comparison to July-September period, recording a robust demand for flexi (contract) workforce, ISF said in a statement.

The staffing industry grew at 16.4 per cent year-on-year in the period January-December 2023.

The rise in employment was particularly notable in key sectors such as e-commerce, retail, FMCG, logistics, manufacturing, hospitality, tourism, aviation, energy etc, it stated.

The report highlighted that as of December 2023, the total formal flexi workforce employed by members of ISF reached 1.62 million.

The reported figures for new flexi jobs by ISF represent the combined contribution of both General Flexi Staffing and IT Flexi Staffing industries.

General Flexi Staffing (i.E. Excluding IT Flexi Staffing) contributed with new employment growth at 3.8 per cent quarter-on-quarter in Q3 FY24.

However, the IT staffing witnessed a decline from past quarters in Q3 at (-)0.4 per cent QoQ.

Lohit Bhatia, President, ISF said, the flexi staffing industry continued a double-digit new employment growth trend at 16.4 per cent YoY, reflecting its strong performance. The industry is currently at Rs 1.34 lakh crore.

ISF is the apex body representing flexi staffing companies, formed to provide a platform for recognized employment, work choice, even compensation, social security and health benefits for the temporary workforce; that constitutes a sizeable segment of India's total workforce.

Rupee falls 6 paise to settle at 83.44 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee declined 6 paise to settle at 83.44 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, in line with deep losses in equity markets and an elevated dollar against major rivals overseas amid geopolitical tensions.

However, weakening crude oil prices in the international markets and positive domestic macroeconomic data restricted the rupee's fall, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.46 and traded between 83.42 and 83.47 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 83.44 (provisional), registering a loss of 6 paise from its previous close.

On Friday, the rupee declined 7 paise to settle at 83.38 against the US dollar.

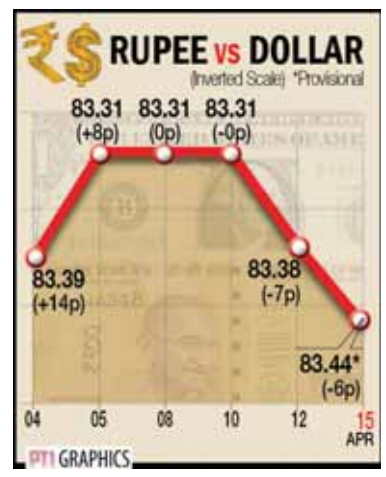
Anuj Choudhary Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the Indian rupee weakened on a strong US dollar and a decline in domestic markets. However, the sharp downside in the rupee was contained amid upbeat domestic macroeconomic data and possible intervention by the central bank.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on heightened global tensions in the Middle East, which could impact global equities and strengthen the dollar further," Choudhary said, adding that "traders will take cues from India's trade deficit and US retail sales data. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.20 to Rs 83.80".

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.15 per cent lower at 105.68.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, declined 0.94 per cent to USD 89.60 per barrel.

On the domestic equity market front, Sensex declined 845.12 points, or 1.14 per cent, to settle at 73,399.78. The



Nifty fell 246.90 points, or 1.10 per cent, to close at 22,272.50.

According to the latest government data released on Monday, the wholesale price index-based inflation in the country rose marginally to 0.53 per cent in March compared to 0.20 per cent in the preceding month due to increased prices of vegetables, potatoes, onion and crude oil.

Another data released on Friday showed retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85 per cent in March mainly due to cooling food prices, inching towards the Reserve Bank's target of 4 per cent.

The country's industrial production growth accelerated to a four-month high of 5.7 per cent in February 2024, mainly due to the good performance of the mining sector, according to official data released on Friday.

India's forex reserves jumped by USD 2.98 billion to a fresh peak of USD 648.562 billion for the week ended April 5.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Friday as they sold shares worth Rs 8,027 crore, according to exchange data.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Private equity funding in the real estate sector fell 16 per cent last fiscal to USD 3.67 billion on lower interest from foreign investors, according to Anarock.

In its report, Capital FLUX, real estate consultant Anarock pointed out that the private equity (PE) deals in Indian real estate have declined to USD 3,674 million in 2023-24 from USD 4,358 million in the previous year.

The PE inflow in real estate stood at USD 5,138 million in 2019-20, USD 6,377 million in 2020-21, USD 4,236 million in 2021-22 financial year.

"The decline in PE investments in Indian real estate has been due to lower activity by foreign investors, due to global macro-economic factors and geopolitical instability," said Shobhit Agarwal, MD & CEO of Anarock Capital. The share of foreign capital in total investments declined to 65 per cent in FY24, against 76 per cent in the previous year.

As per the report, PE investments by domestic investors have increased to 29 per cent of the total capital inflows into Indian real estate during the last fiscal as compared to 24 per cent in the previous year.

Out of the total PE inflow in FY24, Anarock said the share of pure equity deals stood at 73 per cent while debt 24 per cent.

In the previous year, the share of equity deals was 66 per cent and debt 32 per cent.

The office segment dominated PE transactions in FY24 with a 57 per cent value share.

This was largely due to the GIC-Brookfield REIT deal, which accounted for about 40 per cent of the total transaction value last fiscal, the consultant said.

"While there has been a consistent share of PE investments in residential real estate at 28 per cent, there is a yearly decline of 17 per cent in the same by value," said Agarwal.

"This is due to a very high base in FY23, when investments had doubled over the previous years," he explained.

While the number of deals in FY24 is largely constant, the aggregate deal value has reduced due to a sharply lower average deal size.

The average ticket sizes have reduced to USD 75 million in FY24 from USD 79.2 million in FY20.

Ola Electric cuts prices of entry level e scooter

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Ola Electric on Monday slashed prices of its entry-level scooter S1 X by Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000 across variants, bringing it at par with conventional scooters.

The new S1 X was launched in February this year with a price range of Rs 79,999 to Rs 1,09,999 across three variants.

In a virtual address, Ola Electric Chief Marketing Officer Anshul Khandelwal said the prices of the company's entry-level scooter have been reduced with immediate effect and deliveries would start next week.

Under the new prices, S1 X with 4kWh battery will now cost Rs 99,999, down from Rs 1,09,999 announced earlier. Similarly, S1 X with 3kWh battery has been priced at Rs 84,999 instead of Rs 89,999 earlier. The S1 X 2kWh battery variant will cost Rs 69,999 (introductory price), reduced from Rs 79,999 earlier, he said.

"We feel that India needs much more. India needs a price at which they (consumers) can truly adopt EVs," Khandelwal said.

An average scooter is priced at Rs 1 lakh, he said adding consumers have given feedback that they would think about electric scooters when prices are at the price of petrol scooters.

"We thought why not do that. Let's just ensure that we give you everything and much more than a petrol scooter," he asserted.

Ola Electric's announcement comes just over a week after rival Ather Energy introduced a range of family electric scooter 'Rizta' priced between Rs 1,09,999 lakh and Rs 1,44,999 (ex-showroom Bengaluru).

The company said the S1 X range marks its entry into the mass market segment. It comes with an 8-year/80,000 km complimentary battery warranty.

The entry-level electric scooter offers an IDC-certified range of 190 km, 143 km, and 95 km in 4 kWh, 3 kWh, and 2kWh variants, respectively. It has a top speed of 90 kmph in 4kWh and 3kWh variants, and 4.1 seconds and 85 kmph in the 2 kWh variant, Ola Electric said.

Khandelwal said electric scooter adoption in India as of March 31, 2024, stood at 25 per cent and 9 per cent in the overall electric two-wheeler market, adding the "future is truly electric".

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Power has asked all thermal plants using imported coal to operate at full capacity for another three and a half months till October 15 to avoid electricity shortage amid rising demand in the country.

The ministry has projected peak power demand of 260 GW during the summer season (April to June) in view of longer heat wave duration. Peak power demand had touched all-time higher of 243 GW in September 2023.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted above-normal maximum temperatures in most parts of the country during summer this year.

A power ministry notice to 15 imported coal-based thermal power projects on April 12 stated, "It has now been decided to extend the time period for Section 11 directive to generating companies having imported coal-based plants, up to October 15, 2024."

In October 2023, the ministry extended the deadline for these imported coal-based plants to operate at full capacity from

November 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024.

In February 2023, the ministry had invoked Section 11 of the Electricity Act 2003 to avoid any outage due to a sudden rise in power demand.

The direction was for three months from March 16 to June 15, 2023, which was extended till September 30, 2023 and later till October 31, 2023.

In October, the duration for running these imported coal based power plants at full capacity was further extended till June 30, 2024.

Peak power demand was estimated to touch a record high of 229 GW during summer in 2023.

However, unseasonal rains affected demand as people used fewer cooling appliances like air conditioners which guzzle electricity.

International Youth Economic Forum to be held on June 8

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The International Youth Economic Forum, organised by the Roscongress Foundation, will be held on the last day of Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum 2024 (SPIEF) on June 8.

It will bring together young entrepreneurs, managers, talented students, postgraduates and scientists, including those awarded scholarships, grants and prizes of the president of the Russian Federation, said the SPIEF.

The agenda of the (SPIEF 2024) Youth Day is to cover all areas of self-fulfilment of the younger generation including business support measures, development of youth professional communities, international scientific and technological projects, tourism, environmental protection and much more.

"This year, the format of the SPIEF 2024 Youth Programme will be conceptually changed in favour of practice-oriented content at the Forum venue and it will contain new formats aimed at creating opportunities for self-fulfilment of young talented leaders, developing the institute of mentorship and involving young people in addressing issues on the global socio-economic agenda," said Anton Kobyakov, adviser to the president of the Russian Federation and Executive Secretary of the SPIEF Organising Committee.

He said the main goal will be to create a permanent, innovative and inspiring platform for talented young people and a talent pool will be formed for the leading Russian companies.In order to ensure that SPIEF functions as an effective mechanism for interaction, business communications and fruitful dialogue between the youth community, representatives of the authorities and world-class experts, the SPIEF Organizing Committee will accredit Youth Day participants without a registration fee.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mahindra Susten on Monday said it will foray into the hybrid renewable energy segment by setting up a Rs 1,200-crore 150-megawatt solar wind energy project in Maharashtra.

The project includes installation of a 101 megawatt (MW) wind and 52 MW solar capacity, Mahindra Group said in a statement. The facility is expected to generate 460 million kilowatt-hour (kWh) of clean energy, offsetting 420,000 tonne of Co2 emissions.

Mahindra Group will develop a 150 MW hybrid RE (Renewable Energy solar + wind) project at a total project cost of about Rs 1,200 crore, said Mahindra Susten, a part of Mahindra Group and a leader in renewable Independent Power Producer (IPP) business.

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

The company aims to commission the project within the next two years. It will have more than 80 per cent locally manufactured components, the company said.

Anish Shah, CEO & MD, Mahindra Group, said, "Energy transition is a key global and national priority to address climate change. This project is a tangible example of our commitment to sustainability, as a consumer of green power, and building 'Planet Positive' businesses, as the developer of the project."

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

BAYER LEVERKUSEN WINS FIRST BUNDESLIGA TITLE

AP ■ LEVERKUSEN (GERMANY)

It's "Neverkusen" no more. Coached by Xabi Alonso, Bayer Leverkusen won the Bundesliga title for the first time Sunday to end Bayern Munich's 11-year reign as champion. In the end, it wasn't even close - Leverkusen leads second-place Bayern by 16 points after stretching its German record unbeaten run to 43 games across all competitions this season.

Florian Wirtz scored a hat trick as Leverkusen routed Werder Bremen 5-0 and the game ended with a pitch invasion Sunday to secure the club's first-ever German league title with five games remaining.

"It's indescribable ... I don't think it's possible, or I personally can't even realize it yet," Wirtz told broadcaster DAZN. "I need a little more time in the locker room to really get my head around what we've achieved. But yeah, so far it's just been nice to party outside with the fans and also have a bit of a party in the locker room."

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

The fifth goal in the 90th brought more fans onto the field - hundreds this time - and the referee ended the game amid confusion and jubilation. Thousands of supporters crowded the field waving flags, flares and cardboard copies of the Bundesliga trophy.

Leverkusen finally shed its reputation as perennial runner-up after five second-place finishes in the league and one in the Champions League.

Alonso, who took over as coach when Leverkusen was in the relegation zone in October 2022, reflected on ending Bayern's dominance.

"Perhaps it's healthy for the Bundesliga, also for German football, for another team to win," said Alonso, who won three Bundesliga titles with Bayern as a player from 2015-17.

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

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

Bremen folded after that with substitute Wirtz scoring a goal very similar to Xhaka's, then another on the counter in the 83rd and a third to end the game, his first career hat trick.

Leverkusen is aiming for a historic treble of trophies. Alonso's team will play second-division Kaiserslautern in the German Cup final in Berlin on May 25 and has a 2-0 lead over West Ham after their Europa League quarterfinal first leg.

The title puts the spotlight firmly on an industrial city of just under 170,000, which has been overshadowed by larger, more famous neighbors.

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

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

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

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

ENDING BAYERN MUNICH'S 11 YEARS REIGN

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

AP ■ PARIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But why choose purple?

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

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

PTI ■ MISANO (ITALY)

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

Daruvala, who came to Formula E after four mixed seasons in Formula 2, finished ninth in race two here of the Misano E-Prix on Sunday to collect two points for Maserati MSG Racing.

His previous results in the FIA World Championship status series included two retirements besides a 16th, 20th, 15th and 17th place finish.

The team entered the second race of the weekend after finishing on the podium on Saturday, with driver Maximilian Günther gaining third following the disqualification of Antonio Felix da Costa after a technical breach.

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

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

After activating his first Attack Mode on lap five, Max danced between fifth and ninth before a Safety Car, caused by an accident for Robin Frijns, paused the race on lap eight.

This race neutralisation provided a critical opportunity for Daruvala to close in on the field and when the race was resumed at the end of lap nine, the Indian racer set out on a strong recovery drive.

With the pack punched up, Daruvala vaulted from 20th to 16th on the restart and continued to fight forward, using surplus energy to negotiate his way into the top 10 on the final lap.

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

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

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

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

AP ■ DUESSELDORF (GERMANY)

Three of Bayern Munich's senior figures did something Sunday that no one at the club had done since 2012.

They congratulated another team on winning the Bundesliga.

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

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

The question is how.

Bayern didn't just lose the Bundesliga title to Leverkusen, it lost it by 16 points with five games to go. Bayern wrapped up the crown that early only three times in its 11-year reign. That means a comprehensive rebuild is looming.

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

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

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

Tuchel, though, argued Bayern needed a defensive midfielder as well, and was concerned that the central pairing of Leon Goretzka and Joshua Kimmich were both too keen to make impactful attacking runs, leaving a gap. After wrapping up the Kane deal in August for over $100 million, Bayern switched focus to Fulham defensive midfielder Joao Palhinha and even got him to Munich for a medical before the deal broke down.

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

Eberl may also need to replace left back Alphonso Davies, whose contract is due to expire at the end of next season amid reported interest from Real Madrid.

He's one of seven starters from Bayern's 2020 Champions League final win who are still at the club and whose places in the lineup - with the exception of goalkeeper Manuel Neuer - no longer seem quite as secure.

Another ankle injury rules Dortmund forward Haller out of Champions League

AP ■ DORTMUND (GERMANY)

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

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

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

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

English forward Jamie Bynoe-Gittens also went off with a back problem but Terzic said he "already feels better and we hope he can take part in training with us."

Jadon Sancho missed the trip to Mönchengladbach with illness but was back with his teammates on Sunday and looked set to return to the squad for Atlético.

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

PTI ■ AUGUSTA

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

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

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

"I think being my first Masters, it's pretty cool kind of being the last person in. All in all, it was an awesome week. Had a lot of family out there, and it was a special week for a lot of us."

Theegala said he made few "mental mistakes".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 32-year-old signed off on his fifth appearance at the year's opening major with a 3-over 75 where his scorecard included a mix of five birdies, six bogeys and a double bogey.

The top-12 finishers and ties earn invitations back to next year's Masters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ FARIDABAD

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

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

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

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

Intellectual disability is characterised by significantly below-average intellectual functioning (generally regarded as IQ below 70) combined with impairment in carrying out varying aspects of daily life and adapting to the normal social environment.

"This is my first time working with SOB, and it has transformed me very much. I have become more understandable, compassionate and hardworking," said captain of the women's football team, Ankita.

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

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

RR BRACE FOR NARINE SPIN TREAT AS KKR EYE TOP SPOT

PTI ■ KOLKATA

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

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

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

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

His 1/19 against the Sunrisers Hyderabad or 1/17 against Lucknow Super Giants may have failed to grab attention but those eight overs where he did not concede a single boundary made all the difference in the end for KKR.

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

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

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

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

Their IPL record buy Mitchell Starc has also shut all the noise to return to his elements, claiming two wickets in the last over for his 3/28 against LSG.

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

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

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

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

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

RR have a formidable bowling lineup in Trent Boult, Avesh Khan, Yuzvendra Chahal and Keshav Maharaj, while it remains to be seen if Ravichandran Ashwin is fit for the match.

TEAMS (FROM):

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

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

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Absolutely ordinary bowling, ordinary captaincy: Gavaskar slams Hardik

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

It was the 26 runs that Pandya conceded in the final over with Mahendra Singh Dhoni going hammer and tongs, which proved to be decisive as Chennai Super Kings notched up a 20-run win over MI.

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

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

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

"Third ball is again a full toss on the legs when you know he (Dhoni) is looking for a six."

Pandya finished with figures of 2 for 43 from his four overs and also had a tough time with the bat, managing a mere two runs off six balls at a crucial juncture of the game as MI ended at 186 for six despite a fine 63-ball 105 by former skipper Rohit Sharma.

Pandya has faced fans' ire right from the first match and even at the Wankhede Stadium, boos have followed him, forcing Rohit (against Rajasthan Royals) and Virat Kohli (in MI's game against Royal Challengers Bengaluru) to ask the crowd to calm down a bit.

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He can bat, he can bowl, he can field. He has an X factor about him. I hope very well deep down within my heart that when he comes out on top, I'll sit back and I'll watch everyone sing his praises."

The match witnessed intermittent booing of Pandya who struggled with both bat and ball and also received criticism from former England captain Kevin Pietersen who claimed that the MI skipper has been 'smiling too much'. Pollard said he is seeing Pandya evolving and backed him to turn things around.

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

"What I'm seeing is a guy that is evolving. Obviously, we as individuals, we want to see certain things, but sometimes the game does not demand certain things."

Pollard said while Mumbai Indians would revisit their plans on Dhoni but added that anyone could have been at the receiving end of the former CSK skipper's onslaught, like Pandya experienced Sunday night.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apart from Rashid, Noor Ahmed and Azmatullah Omrzai are playing for Gujarat Titans in the ongoing IPL. Mohmmed Nabi is representing Mumbai Indians and Rahmanullah Gurbaz is part of the KKR squad.

"Back in 2017, it was only me and (Mohd) Nabi, who were there and now we have 7-8 players who are with different franchises, and it is so good to see them not just being a part of the team but also performing," he said. "At the end of the day, it is helping Afghanistan cricket and youngsters back home. So I am quite happy, and blessed to be one of those who brought about this change in mindset of people about cricket in Afghanistan."

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

"For me, those three to four months were hard but I tried to make sure that I am relaxed and when I get back on field, I am fully ready and prepared for it," the champion spinner said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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