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STRATEGIC DILEMMA

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BHUBANESWAR, THURSDAY FEBRUARY 1, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹4



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"EVERY LIFE IS PRECIOUS"

Chief Minister, Odisha

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ED takes Hemant Soren into Custody

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI / RANCHI

The 72-hour-long drama between Jharkhand and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) came to an end late on Wednesday evening with the arrest of the "absconding" JMM leader Hemant Soren. Sources claimed JMM leader was "evasive" in his replies during his questioning and hence was taken into custody under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The sources said the agency put across 15 questions to Hemant

during the second round of questioning in the case. He had to resign as Chief Minister, followed by the probable appointment of the seniormost MLA and State Transport Minister, Champai Soren, to step into his shoes and take up the reins of the JMM-Congress, RJD coalition government. As of the filing of reports, JMM spokesperson Mahua Majhi said that Soren had been taken into custody by the ED. Cabinet Minister Banna Gupta shared with the media that Champai would take over as the new Chief Minister of Jharkhand. Speculation is rife

CHAMPAI SOREN CM DESIGNATE IN JHARKHAND

that someone from Hemant's family, including wife Kalpana (who is not an MLA), could be named to lead the State. Hemant Soren is the first sitting Chief Minister to be arrested in a corruption case. Along with ED officials, Hemant went to Raj Bhawan to meet Jharkhand Governor CP Radhakrishnan and submitted his resignation from the post of chief minister. Sources suggest that Hemant wanted to be arrested in his home State to garner sympathy from the people

during the Lok Sabha elections. A delegation of the JMM-led coalition also met the Governor and submitted a list of support from 47 MLAs, claiming their backing to form the government. Later, Champai Soren said he has staked a claim to form a new government and have the support of 47 MLAs. Champai has been a legislator from the Serikela Assembly constituency for more than three decades since 1991 and is known to be a loyalist of JMM

supremo Shibu Soren. Earlier, legislators gathered at Hemant Soren's residence elected Champai as the leader of the JMM legislative party, with the party spokesperson Vinod Pandey saying that a consensus was reached on his name. Amid hectic political activities, JMM coalition MLAs gathered at the Chief Minister's residence earlier in the day to express their solidarity with their leader. They also signed a letter of support without any name, as speculation is rife that

Hemant's wife will be handed over the reins. Soren's wife, Kalpana Soren, who is not an MLA, was also present at the meeting. By-elections cannot be held in the last year of any Assembly's term, so Kalpana Soren could not have been elected an MLA even if she was named the Chief Minister. Reports were also circulating that Soren's family, including his sister-in-law and JMM MLA Sita Soren (widow of Durga Soren), and Basant Soren, openly oppose any

move to make his wife Kalpana the chief minister. Sita Soren represents the Jama constituency in the Assembly and told the media that she would like to ask why only Kalpana Soren, who is not even an MLA and has no political experience. Insiders say that when a consensus could not be reached on Kalpana Soren as the next chief minister, the party decided to elect Champai Soren as the new chief minister. Party spokesperson Vinod Pandey said that a general consensus was reached on Champai Soren.

ED sources reported that the officers of the ED reached the CM's residence in Ranchi around 1:20 pm to record his statement. The agency was not satisfied with the answers provided by the chief minister. Soren had skipped the 10th summons before his arrest in connection with an investigation into a "huge racket of illegal change of land ownership by the mafia" in Jharkhand. Simultaneously, Soren also lodged an FIR against ED personnel over searches conducted by the agency at his Delhi residence on Monday, officials said.

Introspect, none remembers disruptors, urges PM Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Wednesday that the country is reaching new heights of progress, and its journey of "all-inclusive and all-round" development will continue with the people's blessings. In his customary remarks to the media before the Budget Session, Modi greeted them with "Ram Ram" (an invocation of Lord Ram) and noted that there is a tradition of not presenting a full Budget before the polls. "We will follow the same tradition and present a full-fledged budget before you after a new government is formed," he said, adding that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will, in her Budget to be tabled on Thursday, introduce measures showing a direction. Modi has frequently expressed confidence that his government will retain power in the elections. Ahead of Parliament's last session before the Lok Sabha polls, the PM took aim at Opposition MPs for disrupting parliamentary proceedings, saying those habituated to creating a ruckus and disrobing



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the media on the first day of the Budget session of Parliament on Wednesday. Union Ministers Pralhad Joshi, Arjun Ram Meghwal, Jitendra Singh and V Muralaeeharan are also seen

democratic values should introspect as they meet in the last session before the polls. "If these MPs inquire even in their own parliamentary

constituencies, they will find that no one remembers those behind such ruckus and disruptions," Modi said.

President Murmu celebrates the rise of New Bharat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday hailed the Modi Government's big-ticket reforms in the last 10 years and mentioned that the centuries-old desire to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya has now become a reality, while apprehensions over the abrogation of Article 370 are a thing of the past. In her first address to a joint sitting of the two Houses in the new Parliament building, during which she touched on varied issues ranging from insurgency to inflation, Murmu said a country can progress at a fast pace only when it defeats the challenges of the past and puts maximum energy into building the future. Murmu arrived in a buggy at Parliament House to deliver her address to the joint sitting of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. She entered the House with the "sengol" being carried in front of her. She asserted that the armed forces were giving a befitting reply to terrorism and expansionism. Murmu also mentioned that India is now a prominent voice against terrorism in the world.



President Droupadi Murmu addresses the joint session of Parliament on the opening day of the Budget session, in New Delhi

The government, she said, believes that the grand edifice of a developed India will stand on the four strong pillars of youth power, women power, farmers, and the poor. "In the last 10 years, the country has witnessed the completion of projects for which the people had waited for decades. There was a desire for building the Ram Mandir for centuries, and today it has become a reality,"

she said to thumping desks from the treasury benches. "In cultural history, there are some milestones that decide the future of centuries. In India's history also, there have been numerous such milestones. On January 22, the country witnessed one such milestone. After a centuries-long wait, Ram Lalla now resides in a grand temple in Ayodhya," she said. She said there were apprehensions over the removal of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir "but they have become history now." There is an environment of peace and security in Jammu & Kashmir, with vibrancy in markets instead of the "silence of shutdowns" witnessed in the past, the President said. Incidents of insurgency have gone down in the Northeast, she asserted. The government has also established strict laws against triple talaq, she said. She also mentioned that the Indian economy, which used to be among the "fragile five", is now moving in the right direction and at the right pace due to several reforms undertaken by the government in the last 10 years.

CM presents Mukhya Mantri Edu Award



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

To turn education into a social movement in the State, innovative efforts have been initiated under the 5T initiative to revolutionise the education system. Students, teachers, old students and education officers who have made significant efforts have been awarded "Mukhya Mantri Education Award" for their contribution. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik presented the awards at a special function here on Wednesday. The Mukhya Mantri Education Awards are given in two categories, individual and institutional. Total 7,519 awards were given on the day. A total sum of Rs 138 crore was given as award money. As many as 2,027 meritorious students, 700 teacher trainees, 419 head teachers, 58 Regional Sadan Centre Coor-

dinators, 10 Group Education Officers and three District Education Officers were awarded for best performance in Matric examination in individual award (aecondary) category. Besides, 350 head teachers and 319 teacher apprentices were awarded in the individual award (primary) category. In the formal (secondary) category, four districts, 10 blocks, 1,057 schools, 419 school management committees, 419 old students' committees and 414 gram panchayats received awards. A total of 137 schools were awarded in the formal (primary) category. Apart from this, three formal awards were given in the district education and training institute category. These awards are instituted for overall development of school education and intellectual development of the child.

Five new wetlands earn Ramsar tag, total rises to 80

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Five more wetlands in India, recognised as nature's kidneys for their water-regulating and waste-filtering capabilities, have received the international designation of Ramsar sites, bringing the country's total to 80. The inclusion of these sanctuaries expands the Ramsar-designated areas to cover a vast expanse of 1.33 million hectares. An announcement in this regard was made on the eve of World Wetland Day by Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav, who highlighted the theme of World Wetland Day 2024: Wetlands and Human Wellbeing. The government

plans to observe the day at Sirpur Lake in Indore. Certificates for these waterlogged ecosystems were presented by Dr Musonda Mumba, Secretary-General of the Ramsar Convention, in the presence of Union Environment Secretary Leena Nandan, Jitendra Kumar (DG Forest), and Dr Sujit Kumar Bajpayee (Joint Secretary Wetlands, National Focal Point for the Ramsar Convention). With the addition of more wetlands, Tamil Nadu now boasts the highest number of Ramsar Sites (16 sites), followed by Uttar Pradesh (10 sites). The Ramsar Convention established in 1971, aims to globally protect wetlands. Activities such as

encroachment, industrial development, waste dumping, and poaching are strictly prohibited within these designated areas. An official from the Ministry provided insights into the ecological importance of the newly designated sites. Ankasamudra Bird Conservation Reserve, a human-made Village Irrigation Tank, is rich in biodiversity, hosting various plant and animal species. The Aghanashini Estuary, formed at the confluence of the Aghanashini River and the Arabian Sea, provides diverse ecosystem services and supports a significant population of waterbirds. Additionally, the mangroves



Karaivetti bird sanctuary in Tamil Nadu

bordering the estuary help protect the shores against storms and cyclones. Similarly, the Magadi Kere Conservation Reserve, initially constructed for rainwater storage, is now home to a variety of bird species, including vulnerable and near-threatened species. The Karaivetti Bird Sanctuary, one of Tamil Nadu's largest inland wetlands, serves as a crucial source of groundwater recharge and supports diverse agricultural activities. The Longwood Shola Reserve Forest wetlands provide habitats for globally endangered and vulnerable bird species, making them integral to the Western Ghats and harboring a significant number of endemic bird

species. These wetlands serve as habitats for the globally endangered Black-chinned Nilgiri Laughing thrush, Nilgiri Blue Robin, and vulnerable Nilgiri Wood-pigeon. A total of 14 out of 26 endemic bird species of the Western Ghats are found in these wetlands. The convention to protect wetlands was signed in Ramsar in 1971. Wetlands play a crucial role in flood control, providing water, food, and supporting biodiversity. The global Ramsar list currently includes over 2,500 sites identified by member countries for their ecological services and biodiversity value.

BJP's winning chance remote in K'pada LS seat in 2024

Baijayant made party election pravari in UP to divert him and save his stature

RAJESH BEHERA
■ KENDRAPADA

In a significant development, BJP vice-president Baijayant Panda, who was eyeing to field his candidature for Kendrapada Lok Sabha seat from BJP in the upcoming general election, was appointed BJP election Prabhari of the politically important Uttar Pradesh.

According to the political observers here, since Panda's chance of winning from the seat is very remote, the BJP leadership took this judicious



decision to divert him to UP instead of contesting election in Kendrapada. They said that even the margin of defeat of BJP from BJD is likely to be higher than in 2019. Being the vice president of saffron party, the BJP does not want that Panda loses his importance by repeating his defeat in

Kendrapada Lok Sabha constituency, where he was two times BJD MP earlier in 2009 and 2014, stated the political analysts of the district.

So the saffron party appointed him as BJP election Prabhari(in-charge) of the politically important Uttar Pradesh for the ensuing Lok

Sabha poll with the recommendation of Sangha Paribar, as Panda has a good relationship with Sangha Paribar.

Besides this, the BJP in coastal Kendrapada district has been divided into three groups. While some BJP leaders like former MLA Dolagoibnda Nayak, Alekha Jena, Bhuban Mohan Jena, Duryodhan Sahu and others are in Dharmendra Pradhan camp, Baijyanta Panda manages to control the district BJP unit and his followers are district BJP president Kishore Panda, Kalpana Mallick, Salim Khan among others. Bijay Mohapatra obviously has his own fan base and diehard supporters in the district.

The most important fact is most of the leaders of Panda camp, including the District

BJP president Kishore, have been largely marginalized in the party with them facing protest and humiliation from the partymen frequently.

It is alleged that Panda made his supporters to get a few office bearer posts by recommending their names at the national level though according to many they donot deserve to be in the posts. This has sparked internal feud in the BJP district unit in Kendrapada. Consequently, several senior BJP leaders of the district skipped party meetings, expressing their disenchantment.

It is said that Dharmendra Pradhan's followers in the district are trying to get benefits in the upcoming poll by taking the possible advantage of the absence of Panda.

13 Jatra troupes to perform at Khandagiri Mela

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The famous annual Magha Mela at the Khandagiri-Udayagiri hills in Bhubaneswar will kick off on February 16.

However, opera (Jatra) troupes will start staging plays at the fair from February 18 and continue their shows till February 29, sources said.

At least 13 opera troupes will stage their plays this year, the sources added.

Popular opera troupes Saisamrat, Gouri, Suryamandir, Durgamandir, Shivani, Ashok Samrat, Swarna Mahal, Konark, Swarna Mandir, Kalinga and Tulasi are scheduled to stage their plays at the fair.

Several cultural organisations including Sanatana Seva Sadan, Maa



Mangala Sanskrutika Yuva Parishad, Jayadurga Sanskrutika Parishad, Maa Mangala Natya Sansad, Harekrushna Mahtab Pandal, Niladri Sai Jatra Committee, Indira Sanskrutika Mandap and Nilakantheswar Jatra Committee will provide infrastructure support to the opera troupes to stage their plays.

The authorities of mutts at Khandagiri have already

started preparations for the Magha Mela. They have urged the State Government to provide financial assistance for smooth conduct of the fair.

"We have been organising the Magha Mela at Khandagiri on our own since last many years. The government should come forward to provide financial aid to this religious congregation," said a mutt pontiff.

Sunapur Beach gets Int'l Blue Flag tag

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Sunapur beach in Ganjam district has received the prestigious International Blue Flag certification from the Foundation for Environmental Education.

With this, the Sunapur beach became the second one from Odisha to bag the certification as the Puri beach had won the award in 2020.

The iconic 'Blue Flag' is one of the world's most-recognised voluntary awards for beaches, marinas and sustainable tourism boats. In order to qualify for the 'Blue Flag', a series of stringent environmental, educational, safety and accessibility criteria must be met and maintained.



Central to the ideals of the Blue Flag programme is the aim of connecting the public with their surroundings and encouraging them to learn more about their environment. As such, environmental education activities must be offered and promoted in ad-

dition to a permanent display of information relevant to the site in terms of biodiversity, ecosystems and environmental phenomena.

Toilets, watch towers and solar lighting system are some of the amenities available at Blue Flag beaches.

Pattanayak gets 1st Vishwa Odia Bhasa Samman

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

On the occasion of the First World Odia Language Conference, eminent linguist Debi Prasanna Pattanayak will be honoured with the First Vishwa Odia Bhasa Samman.

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik will felicitate eminent linguist Padma Shri Dr Pattnayak with world-wide recognition of his life-long research on Odia language.

Dr Pattanayak will be awarded a cash prize of Rs 20 lakh. His research has greatly enriched the Odia language.

Dr Pattnayak is well known as a distinguished linguist of



India. He has been the founder Director of the Central Institute of Indian Language, Mysore.

Dr Pattnayak has won several honours for his efforts towards the development of Indian languages. His valuable contribution towards the recognition of Odia language is well-known.

A committee led by G Uma Maheshwar Rao, Vice-President of the Indian Language Council and a former professor of the Language Department of Hyderabad University, Vice-Chancellor of the Odia University Sabita Pradhan, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Culture, Prof PK Swain and Project Director of the Centre of Excellence for Odia Language Studies, Department of Education Prof Basanta Kumar Panda unanimously recommended the name of Prof Pattanayak for this prestigious award.

DA case MLA Panigrahy, spouse to face trial

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

The Special Judge Court Vigilance, Bhubaneswar, has formally framed charges against Gopalpur MLA Pradeep Kumar Panigrahy and his spouse in connection with allegations of possessing Disproportionate Assets (DA) totalling Rs 9, 18, 13, 007.

The trial proceedings were initiated on January 31, following the submission of a comprehensive 3,000-page chargesheet by the Odisha Vigilance on April 20 last.

The case, registered under Vigilance Cell PS Case No. 06 dated October 4, 2021, per-

tains to Section 13(2) r/w 13(1) (b)/12 PC Act, 1988, as amended by PC (Amendment) Act, 2018. The charges were framed based on the orders of the Lokayukta Odisha, focusing on assets allegedly disproportionate to the known sources of income during Panigrahy's tenure as a public servant.

Following the examination of the investigation report, the Lokayukta directed the submission of a chargesheet before the Special Judge Court, Vigilance. The framing of charges marks a pivotal step in the legal proceedings, setting the stage for the commencement of the trial.



Biography of Padmasambhava released

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Maha Bodhi Society of India, Odisha branch, launched the first self-contained biography book on Guru Padmasambhava, who is known as the second Buddha in the world.

Editor, Paurusha magazine and prominent litterateur/researcher Dr Asit Mohanty reviewed the book and stated that there is much evidence to prove that Guru Padmasambhava was born in Odisha. Dr Umakant Mishra described Guru Padmasambhava as the ancestor of the Dalai Lama and the promoter of the Lama community in the world. He said that when Buddhism was disappearing from India, Guru Padmasambhava was located in the foothills of the Himalayas from Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim to Darjeeling and in China and Mongolia.



The meeting was chaired by former Chancellor of Uttarakhand Culture University and Maha Bodhi Society Odisha Branch president

Narendra Kumar Mishra. Dr Saurendra Kumar Mohapatra, Trustee of Maha Bodhi Society, welcomed the guests and Executive Member Dr Karunakar gave the vote of thanks.

Many intellectuals, researchers and writers attended. Dr Bimalendu Mohanty, the first Chancellor of Uttarakhand University of Culture, was honoured.

For PG Program in Fintech for working professionals

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

The IIM Sambalpur on Wednesday signed an MoU with the NSE Academy Limited, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the National Stock Exchange (NSE), to offer joint certification programmes tailored for working professionals.

IIM Sambalpur Director Prof Mahadeo Jaiswal and NSE Academy Chief Executive Of-

ficer Abhilash inked the pact. This collaboration is strategically designed to introduce specialised certification courses addressing the dynamic needs of the finance and technology sectors.

As part of the MoU, the IIM Sambalpur will launch programmes including the first MBA in Financial Technologies (Fintech) and a Post Graduate Program in Management at the Sambalpur and Delhi ISID campuses. These programmes will be facilitated jointly by faculty members and industry experts from IIM Sambalpur and NSE Academy.



This will provide participants with a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of the financial and technology domains.

Prof Jaiswal highlighted his institute's unique approach with reference to the collaboration with industry, academia and societal. He added, "The institute's expansion includes three distinct campuses, fea-

turing a corporate office at Sambalpur and campus at the ISID complex in New Delhi, where MBA working professional programs have been underway since last year. Moreover, the third campus will be a collaborative venture with IIM Mumbai to facilitate various programs. The Executive Education Programme with NSE Academy will run at the Campuses of Sambalpur, Delhi and Mumbai. We are having dual degree program on Fintech with Sorbonne Business School, Paris and also partnering with NSE Academy Limited for the same."

Abhilash Misra said, "This collaboration presents a unique synergy, leveraging the academic excellence and collective wisdom of the IIM Sambalpur's esteemed academicians, professors and researchers. The industry perspective, contributed by the IIM Sambalpur will add valuable insights and real-world applications to future technology programs. Strengthened by the industry's leading fintech expertise, the partnership between the NSE and IIM Sambalpur will promise to bring forth a wealth of knowledge and practical application."

HITTING THE BULL'S EYE

Why big political figures perform strange somersaults

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is in big news yet again primarily because, to remain in power for another full term, he embraced the NDA fold which he had merrily offended despite having won elections on the BJP coalition mandate. The Indian Constitution does not have any provision for a right to recall. So, the unethical political guys have rollicking time once elected. They go merrily overboard, if necessary, to kick mandates to dogs to make personal gains.

It is not exactly clear if Nitish Kumar, the nine-time Chief Minister, is unethical or a clearheaded social worker who is stubbornly keen to keep power so as to keep Bihar safe from political predators of various kinds. Critics have now begun terming Nitish a crook, which is not true. Nitish knows too well, like Naveen Patnaik in Odisha, that once the State slips through fingers, scoundrels and crooks from



BISWARAJ PATNAIK

gangster parties would swoop in to engage in daylight robbery of the worst kind. Detractors keep screaming 'Nitish is a mandate offender', which though technically correct, is not morally so. Nitish had taught the incorrigible Lalu Prasad gang a huge lesson to snatch power to resurrect Bihar from a horrifying state. Even now, he knows that to keep his people happy, he has to continue as boss

no matter if he has to resort to tiny, forgivable wrong means. He is not keen to cling to power like a crook; he is only hell-bent to keep power to smoothen the affairs of an otherwise messed-up State. The BJP crowd is no group of saints as the people know. They are not all 'Modi' who is no-nonsense or a selfless, noble-minded statesman. He means all good. Today, he does not require any testimonial from any great source to be branded a great guy. He is one proven beyond doubt that his moves are all in the best interest of the nation and the people. Even a hardcore critic like Shashi Tharoor is feeling immensely proud to sing 'praise Modi' songs in the open.

Incidentally, Lalu, Nitish and Ram Vilas Paswan had been deeply indoctrinated by both Jayprakash Narayan and Karpooori Thakur for their pro-people ideologies and acts of sacrifice to that effect. These three political greenhorns of the early 1970s turned great political

figures under the tutelage of Thakur as the original guru Jayprakash died early in 1979 after succeeding in dethroning the dictatorial Indira Gandhi in a countrywide mass movement. Thakur, a barber by caste, had shaped himself as a great thinker, philosopher and statesman. He too shaped the 'Bihari trio' just too well from where Jayprakash had left. As time rolled by, the most laudably educated Nitish Kumar gained the highest public esteem for his enviable sense of integrity and truly backbreaking hard work to bring prosperity to Bihar and joy of living to its people mainly by demolishing the incorrigibly corrupt regimes of Lalu Prasad and his spoilt family members. Lalu had virtually eaten up the resources of undivided Bihar mercilessly. Around this time, Nitish materialised as fresh air. An engineer by training, he had to start from the scratch. But as circumstances would be difficult,

Nitish kept changing stands only to retain power to keep the people of Bihar safe.

So, Nitish Kumar has not committed recurrent political somersaults even once. All that he has done is to keep Bihar safe and happy. Therefore, Nitish's unedifying volte-faces are not an insult to voters of Bihar.

Career politicians do not believe in ideological infidelity. Power, wealth and the many vices that often motivate political actors are quite familiar to the Indian voters. Nitish's about-turn in 2017 was not a betrayal of the mandate of 2015 nor in 2022. He did not even betray the mandate of 2020 when his Janata Dal (United) had won the election in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party. Again just to do good to the State two years later, he broke away to form a fresh alliance with the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Congress, which some critics believed was a clear insult of the mandate. His latest comeback

to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance has caused ripples of disapproval as much as public confusion. On a single day, he resigned as Chief Minister, claimed the post again with new partners and was sworn-in as Chief Minister. Not long ago, Nitish was posing as the leader of the anti-BJP alliance. His claim of being a champion of good governance does not appear to be misplaced given his big intention of keeping Bihar safe from extremely crooked political predators.

The opening of the Ram temple in Ayodhya marked a new phase of Hindu consolidation behind the BJP, but the party is always watching out for erosion triggered by caste mobilisation. By redrafting the narrative, the BJP believes it has defanged the limited potency that was left in Nitish Kumar's social justice politics. But the truth not easily recognised is that the BJP has become the biggest beneficiary of the realignment in Bihar. Nitish has

gambled dangerously. It is not unlikely that somehow-misunderstood Nitish may have his last laugh as the biggest loser if one critical mistake is committed by any chance. His political base is now heavily being raided and his legacy stands besmirched. But a true Bihari and a 'difficult to gauge' statesman that he is, Nitish be lauded for his out of the world cunning and wisdom put together.

Nitish's only competitor as we get to see today is the five full-term serving Chief Minister of Odisha Naveen Patnaik, who is aware of the undeniable fact that once power slips from his hand, Odisha will most certainly fall into the wrong hands as it had happened for fifteen painful years. Naveen is unique because he hasn't performed one political somersault once in twenty five years. Volte face of any kind by Naveen has not been faced by the people as he has not lost sight of his basic 'people first' principle even for a moment.

In Jagatsinghpur Man gets 20 yrs in jail in minor girl rape

PNS ■ JAGATSINGHPUR

The Pocso fast-track court Judge in Jagatsinghpur sentenced a man to undergo 20 years imprisonment and pay a fine of Rs 20,000 while delivering a judgment in a minor rape case on Tuesday.

The convict was identified as Jiten Kumar Kandi from Goda village under Erasama block. He had abducted a 15-year-old girl of the locality on September 11, 2019, and moved to Bangalore. The victim's parents had lodged an FIR at Erasama police station

revealing their daughter's disappearance from home and supplied clues informing that Jiten had taken her to Bangalore. Police launched a probe and later picked up Jiten and the minor from Cuttack railway station on September 26, 2019.

After examining 18 witnesses, shreds of evidence and medical reports supplied by the prosecution, the Judge found Jiten guilty and awarded the punishment. The court also directed DLSA, Jagatsinghpur to sanction Rs 4 lakh compensation to the victim.

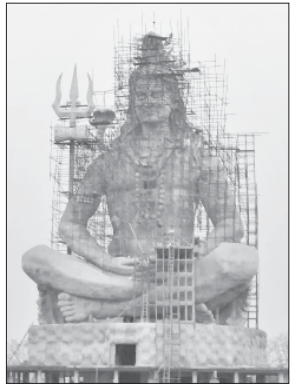
In Jaipur 123-ft Shiva statue to be unveiled on Shivratri

AKSHAY ROUT ■ JAIPUR

Odisha will see a meditative Shiva statue that will be the tallest divine structure in the State. Earlier, there is a 75-feet-high Hanuman statue in Rourkela's Hanuman Batika while there is a 108-feet Hanuman statue at Damanjodi in Koraput.

But to attract tourists, a 123-foot-tall statue of Lord Shiva is set to be inaugurated in Jaipur district on the occasion of Mahashivratri on March 8, Said engineer Tarapasdas Mishra. The statue is being built near the Barahanath Temple on the banks of Baitarani river as part of the Baraha Kshetra development project.

Visitors would have the opportunity to view the Shiva statue using a lift or stairs and also enjoy a sky view of the Baitarani riverfront, an official involved in the project said. The statue has been constructed by a private art organisation based in New Delhi.



In addition to the statue, a beautiful park and a water fountain are being built for tourists. A rest house will also be constructed near the statue for devotees.

The Baraha Kshetra and the Shiva statue are built under the leadership of local MLA Pranab Prakash Das. "The statue on the sacred Baitarani river banks will be a valuable addition to the district's tourism," said local resident Anil kumar Panda. Jaipur already has significant tourism sites such as Dashwamedha Ghat, Baraha Temple, Baruni Ghat and Maa Biraja Temple.

Curtain down on Chandipur Beach Fest



PNS ■ BALESWAR

The 5-day-long Chandipur Golden Beach Festival concluded on Tuesday night.

A scintillating cultural programme was showcased by different organisations, besides putting up a colourful cracker show. Chairperson, Baleswar Municipality Sabita Sahu was the chief guest on the valedictory function. The meeting was presided over by Biplab Mohanty.

Sahu lauded various developments that were carried out

by the Tourism Department in Baleswar. She also spoke about the uniqueness of Chandipur beach.

Harekrushna Dash, Kishor Das, Laxminarayan Mohanty and Sriman Srichandan among others addressed the gathering.

In another development, the six-day annual industrial fair, Expo-2024 kicked off on Wednesday at the ITI ground. The event would culminate on February 4 while as many as 350 stalls would showcase their products.

Gopalpur Beach Fest concludes



PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

The four-day Gopalpur Beach Festival concluded here on Sunday.

Finance Minister Bikram Kesari Arukha and Urban Development Minister Usha Devi graced the ceremony as guests. Brahmapur MP Chandrasekhar Sahu, State Planning Boardmember Ramesh Chandra Chayu Patnaik, Kabisuryanagar MLA Latika Pradhan, Brahmapur MLA Vikram Kumar Panda, IG

Satyabrata Bhooi, Brahmapur SP Dr Sarbana Vivek M, Zilla Parishad executive officer V Kartivasan, Brahmapur Sub Collector Ashutosh Kulkarni and Brahmapur Commissioner J Sonnal also shared the dais.

On the occasion, people who did good business in the Pallishree Mela were felicitated. A souvenir, titled 'Shaamuka', was released.

On the occasion, cultural programmes were organised. Odishi dance was presented on

In Keonjhar Bus helper held for minor girl rape

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Keonjhar police arrested Biswaranjan Munda (19) of Champua police station area and forwarded him to court on Wednesday allegedly for raping an orphan girl.

According to the sources, Biswaranjan is working as a helper in a private bus. After the death of her parents, the orphan girl was staying in her

grandmother's house. The accused allegedly raped her on false promise of marriage.

The matter came to limelight when she became four months' pregnant. During travelling the helper allegedly kept a relationship with the girl, sources said. "After the medical examinations, the accused was arrested and forwarded to court," said Inspector Incharge Champua Police Station Trinath Sethy.

Pandian inspires students in Brahmapur

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

Nabin Odisha and 5T Chairman VK Pandian visited Brahmapur on Tuesday to attend the Nua-O programme.

The Ambapua ground witnessed Pandian actively engaged with college students from various institutions.

Expressing his affinity for Ganjam district, Pandian extended warm wishes for the community's well-being.

During an interactive session with students, he outlined six crucial principles for a successful life. Pandian empha-



sized a holistic approach, suggesting 30 minutes of daily physical exercise to enhance concentration and 15 minutes

Wife killer gets lifer in Keonjhar

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Additional District Judge, Champua Saroj Kumar Das convicted one Ranjan Gagarai of Kolha-Barapada village under Barbil police station and sentenced him to life imprisonment and imposed Rs 10,000 fine on him for killing his wife by setting her ablaze.

The incident took place in the year 2018. According to sources, on May 21, 2018 evening Ranjan burnt his wife by pouring kerosine on her after a quarrel over a domestic matter and fled the spot.

After hearing the shout, neighbours rushed to the spot and rescued her with severe burn injury and admitted her to Barbil medical for treatment. When her condition deteriorated she was shifted to Keonjhar District Headquarters Hospital. She however died while under treatment in the hospital.

Upon receiving a complaint from the family members of the deceased, the police investigated the incident after registering a murder case. Later police arrested Ranjan and forwarded him to court.

ing inspiration from the disciplined routines of accomplished individuals, including cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar.

Venturing into the realm of technology, Pandian advised students to harness the power of social media responsibly for positive endeavours. He underscored the importance of respecting teachers as a foundational element for success.

He highlighting success stories of different Government educational institutions, and the alumni.

Forum holds demo in Brahmapur

Raises various demands

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

The Odisha Development Forum, Brahmapur, conducted a protest meeting near Ramlinga Tank Road, after taking out a rally through the city.

The forum protested continuous negligence to development of Brahmapur and Ganjam. After a meeting, the agitators reached Gandhinagar and garlanded a statue of Mahatma Gandhi and offered floral tributes.

They demanded full-fledged air port in Brahmapur and raising its runway to



2,500 meters; inclusion of suburbs areas of the city in Brahmapur Municipal Corporation administration; development of MKCG Medical College and Hospital; appointment of Professors and construction of new campus of Khallikote College/University; immediate plying of 'Mo Bus' in Ganjam district; resolving of traffic problems of Brahmapur; revival of traditional workshops and units of

Aska, Gopalpur, Digapahandi, Rambha, Polosara, Buguda, Bhanjanagar, Suroda, Hinjili and Khallikote, etc areas, and establishment of new industrial units.

Forum secretary Someshwar Rao, Pritish Panigrahi, assistant secretary Manas Ranjan Patro, Prabir Patnaik, Santosh Kumar Sahu, Ramesh Chandra Sahu, Aditya Rath, Kiran Kumar Panda, Binod Sabat, N Neelamadhab Patro, Y Narayan, J Suryanarayana, K Srinibas Rao, Parthasam, Upendra Sahu, Himanshu, Arabinda Kumar Sahu, Digambar Samantaray, Sanjeeb Kumar Patnaik among others were present.

VSS Airport upgrade to 540-passenger capacity by Mar

PNS ■ JHARSUGUDA

The Veer Surendra Sai (VSS) Airport in Jharsuguda is on the verge of a major expansion, targeting a doubling of its passenger capacity to 540 by March 2024.

Airport Director Sandeep Tiwari made the announcement during the inaugural Airport Advisory Meeting held on Tuesday here.

Chaired by Bargarh MP Suresh Pujari and attended by



Jharsuguda district Collector Aboli Sunil Naravane, the meeting addressed key aspects of the airport's development.

VSS Airport Director Tiwari disclosed that the Ministry of Civil Aviation has designated Veer Surendra Sai Airport as one of 25 airports earmarked

for an upgrade. With SpiceJet presently servicing the Delhi sector, Indigo facilitating flights to Kolkata and Bangalore and Alliance Air covering the Bhubaneswar sector, the airport is a crucial regional hub. Handling a daily footfall of 800-900 passengers, the up-

grade aims to enhance connectivity and travel options.

Tiwari emphasised the strategic importance of the expansion, anticipating an increase in peak-hour capacity from 270 to an impressive 540 passengers. Tenders for the enhancement project have been issued, targeting completion by March 31. The optimistic timeline promises a more efficient and seamless travel experience for passengers in the region.

In Bargarh Patient treated in mobile torch light at DHH

PNS ■ BARGARH

Amid tall claims of technological advance in healthcare service delivery across the State, a critical patient was treated with the help of a mobile torch light due to power outage at the District Headquarters Hospital here on Tuesday night. The incident sparked anger among people after a video of the incident went viral.

The patient, identified as Durbasa Bariha of Kanda village in Gaisilet block, had consumed poison and was rushed to the hospital in a critical state on Monday. He had been put on ventilator support by the doctors. However, his condition deteriorated and he had to be treated by doctors with help of a mobile torch light after oxygen supply was disrupted following a long power cut on Tuesday.

Durbasa's son Rajesh Bariha alleged that his condition be-



came serious when the oxygen supply was halted. He reportedly had breathing difficulty for nearly half an hour before nurses rushed in for immediate attention. However, as the automatic oxygen supply could not function in absence of power, they had to manually administer it through cylinder with the help of the mobile torch light.

A sanitation worker, who reportedly captured the footage, claimed that power outage and medical treatment in the dark are a routine affair in the hospital. Sources said the hospital does not have an au-

tomatic power generator; and whenever there is a power cut, patients are treated in the dark with makeshift arrangements. The situation lasts longer if the man operating the generator happens to be away.

However, hospital superintendent DK Dutt dismissed allegations of a prolonged power cut and said the generator was started immediately. While he admitted that the hospital does not have an automatic generator and needs a diesel-powered generator, he said they do have an inverter backup in certain areas where critical patients are treated.

INBRIEF

RAHUL TO REACH ODISHA ON FEB 6

Bhubaneswar: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi will arrive in Odisha from Jharkhand on February 6 as part of his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. He will reach Birmitrapur and address a public meeting in Rourkela in the evening. He will stay overnight at Vedvyas before resuming his journey.



NEW SYSTEM FOR TICKET DISTRIBUTION IN ODISHA

Bhubaneswar: In supersession of the previous communication on the subject, Congress national president Mallikarjun Kharge has approved the proposal of implementation of a new system for transparent ticket distribution in Odisha. He has also approved the proposal to appoint Praveen Pathak as the chairman of the project with immediate effect, informed AICC general secretary KC Venugopal on Wednesday.

BLIND BODY'S FOUNDATION DAY HELD IN B'PUR

Brahmapur: The 27th foundation day of the Odisha Blind Foundation was held in Brahmapur on Tuesday, in wake of the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. At a function, presided over by organisation's president Bijay Kumar Rath, reputed social activist Bansidhar Nahak, speaker Bhagabat



Bhaskar Panda and journalist were the guests. The speakers said the visually challenged were no less than anyone. Among others, Nityananda Padhi, Susanta Kar and Arabinda Mahapatra were present.

35-FT CLOCK TOWER: NEW ATTRACTION AT CHHATRAPUR

Chhatrapur: A 35-feet-high Clock Tower was on Tuesday inaugurated at Aranbinda School Square of Chhatrapur town by a joint initiative taken by the Ganjam district and Chhatrapur administrations towards beautification of the NAC. Inaugurating the tower, Brahmapur MP Chandra Sekhar Sahu said it would be a great attraction for the public, especially for small kids. Among others, local MLA Subash Chandra Behera and NAC Chairperson Sarmistha Pradhan attended the event.



COVID CENTRE INAUGURATED AT PALLAHARA

Pallahara: A Covid Centre at the Sub-Divisional Hospital here was inaugurated by local MLA Mukesh Pal. The centre has all



casualty facilities like ultrasound, DMLT system X-Ray and blood storage unit. People praised the efforts of MLA Pal.

SCRIBE SUNIL MISHRA HONOURED



Senior journalist Sunil Kumar Mishra was felicitated at the 25th anniversary of daily 'Paryabekshak' at the Jayadev Bhawan in Bhubaneswar on Wednesday.

OPGC CONDUCTS EYE TEST CAMP AT KUMBHARBANDH

Jharsuguda: The Odisha Power Generation Corporation (OPGC) organised an eye test camp in collaboration with Trilochan Netralaya, Sambalpur at the Gram



Panchayat office of Kumbharbandh under Lakhanpur block of Jharsuguda district. This was for the benefit of the villagers residing in the periphery of Ib Thermal Power Station, Banharpali, Jharsuguda. OPGC senior vice-president (operations) Sukanta Kumar Mohapatra inaugurated the camp.

MK AGROTECH LAUNCHES OIL PALM PLANTATION IN ODISHA

Bhubaneswar: Karnataka-based MK Agrotech Pvt Ltd, an edible oil and food company and M11 Industries on Wednesday launched an oil palm plantations programme in Balangir and



Nuapada districts in Odisha. MK Agrotech signed an MoU with the Government of Odisha in this regard.

'ENGINEERS TECH RATH YATRAS ODYSSEY' REACHES ODISHA

Bhubaneswar: World record holder and technology visionary Vimal Daga has unveiled an initiative, '#Be the Creator,' and



inaugurated a National Level 'Engineers Tech Odyssey' in Odisha. After completing its journey through Jaipur, Udaipur, and Delhi, the 'Engineers Tech Rath Yatra', a nationwide initiative for technology students, reached Odisha.

India giving befitting reply to expansionism, terrorism: President

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu said here on Wednesday India's armed forces are giving a befitting response to expansionism and terrorism. It was in an apparent reference to the eastern Ladakh border row with China and Pakistan's proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir.

In her address at a joint sitting of the two houses of Parliament, President Murmu also said India's defence production has crossed the Rs one lakh crore mark as she highlighted the government's efforts to boost the domestic defence manufacturing. She also mentioned indigenous construction of aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, production of light combat combat jets Tejas, plans to produce C-295 transport planes and modern

aircraft engines in India. President Murmu also referred to the increasing role of women in the armed forces and said women are now operating fighter jets and commanding naval ships.

"Today, my government is building modern infrastructure along the entire border. This work should have been done long ago on (a) priority basis. Be it terrorism or expansionism, our forces today are giving a befitting response," she said.

Indian and Chinese troops are locked in an over three-and-half-year confrontation in certain friction points in eastern Ladakh even as the two sides completed disengagement from several areas following extensive diplomatic and military talks.

The President, who is also the supreme commander of the armed forces, said the tangible



results of the government's efforts to strengthen internal security are visible.

"There is a sense of security in Jammu and Kashmir today. The earlier deserted look of

market places due to strike has been replaced by the hustle and bustle of crowded markets," she

said. "There has been significant reduction in the incidents of separatism in the North East," she added. In her first address at the new Parliament building, Murmu also listed the government's initiative to strengthen 'Nari Shakti'. "This year's Republic Day Parade was also dedicated to women empowerment. In this parade, the world once again witnessed the capability of our daughters," she said. "My government has enlarged the role of daughters everywhere -- in water, land, sky and space," she said. President Murmu said "for the first time, women cadets have been given admission in Sainik Schools and the National Defence Academy." She also said "Today, women are also fighter pilots and are also commanding naval ships for the first time."

The president said the tangible results of the Modi government's efforts to strengthen internal security are visible before everyone. She said naxal-affected areas have shrunk and there has been a steep decline in Naxal violence. President Murmu said the central government has, for the first time, brought development to areas which had remained neglected for decades. "The villages adjoining our borders were viewed as the last villages of the country. We recognised them as the first villages of the country. In order to develop these villages, Vibrant Village Programme has been started," she said. The President said remote and faraway islands like Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep were also deprived of development but the government has developed modern facilities

on these islands too. "Roads, air connectivity and high speed internet facilities have been provided there. Just a few weeks ago, Lakshadweep was also connected with under-water optical fibre. This will benefit the local population as well as tourists," she said. The President said under the 'Aspirational Districts Programme', the government has laid emphasis on the development of more than 100 districts of the country. She said in the wake of its success, the government has also launched the Aspirational Blocks Programme. President Murmu said building of airports at various places is also advantageous and now the Northeast is witnessing record tourist arrivals. Now there is heightened excitement about Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep islands, she said.

Scope of Indian foreign policy broadens far beyond constraints of past: President

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu said here on Wednesday the scope of India's foreign policy has gone far beyond the "constraints of the past" and New Delhi firmly placed the country's interests before the world even in this era of global disputes and conflicts.

In her address at a joint sitting of the two houses of Parliament, President Murmu said the successful hosting of the historic G-20 Summit strengthened India's global standing and that the country's efforts in making the African Union a permanent member of the bloc was widely appreciated.

The President said, today India is a leading voice in the world against terrorism. In the backdrop of various conflicts and global turmoil, the government has established India as a 'Vishwa-Mitra' (friend of the world) in these difficult times, she said.

"Even in this era of global disputes and conflicts, my government has firmly placed India's interests before the world. The scope of India's foreign policy today has gone far



beyond the constraints of the past," she said in her first address at the new Parliament building.

President Murmu said the world was introduced to the real potential of India through holding of programmes across the country and that Jammu and Kashmir and North East witnessed such big international events for the first time. "In the last 10 years, another conventional way of thinking has been changed Earlier,

events related to diplomacy were confined to the corridors of Delhi. My government has ensured direct participation of the public in this also," she said. "We saw a great example of this during India's G-20 presidency. The way India connected the G-20 with the public was unprecedented," she added. Murmu said the whole world appreciated the historic G-20 summit held in India. "The unanimous adoption of the Delhi Declaration even in

a fractured environment is historic. India's vision from 'women led development' to environmental issues has become the basis of the declaration," she said. The President said India's "efforts to secure permanent membership of the African Union in the G-20 have also been appreciated." "During this conference, the development of India-Middle-east-Europe corridor was announced. This corridor will further strengthen India's mar-

itime capability," she said. President Murmu described the launch of the Global Biofuel Alliance as a big event as such steps are expanding India's role in solving global problems. "Today, India responds strongly and takes initiatives for the humanity caught in crises. Wherever there is a crisis in the world today, India tries to respond promptly," she said. The President said the government has instilled new confidence in Indians working across the world. "Wherever crisis occurred, we have evacuated every Indian safely through campaigns like Operation Ganga, Operation Kaveri, Vande Bharat," she said. "My government has made continuous efforts to propagate the Indian traditions of Yoga, Pranayam and Ayurveda to the entire world," she said. "Last year, representatives of 135 countries did yoga together at the United Nations Headquarters. This is a record in itself," she added. "The World Health Organization's first Global Centre for Traditional Medicine is being established in India," President Murmu said.

Seminar on progress of national mission for mentoring organised

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) organised a two-day Year End Seminar for Sharing Best Practices and Periodic Review/continuous evaluation of National Mission for Mentoring (NMM) with all stakeholders.

According to a Press Information Bureau Press note, the seminar aimed to bring together the 60 National Mentors, Mentees, Principals, Nodal Officers, academic dignitaries & educational administrators of the country to discuss and review the progress of NMM.

NCTE launched NMM in pilot mode on 29th July 2022 in selected 30 Central Schools (15 KVs, 10 JNVs, 5 CBSE) across the country. NCTE also organized 2-day capacity building workshop for the onboarded 60 mentors on 31st May and 1st June 2023 for the effective implementation of NMM as envisaged in NEP 2020.

NMM, as envisaged in para 15.11 of National Education Policy (NEP 2020), has been established to create a large pool of outstanding professionals willing to provide pro-



fessional and personal support to school teachers across the country and ensure their continuous professional development. NMM recognizes the crucial role of mentoring in the professional and personal development of teachers, as well as the positive impact it has on student learning outcomes. It aims to create a network of mentors who will guide and support teachers in developing the necessary 21st century skills.

This program is not only enhancing the teaching abilities of the mentee teachers but also facilitating a culture of continuous learning, enabling teachers to stay updated and relevant in today's dynamic educational landscape.

Through this seminar, NCTE aimed to foster a collaborative environment for sharing best practices and experiences, as well as to provide a platform for Mentors and Mentees to voice their challenges and suggestions for upgradation. Prof. Yogesh Singh, Chairperson, NCTE graced the Year End Seminar as Chief Guest and addressed the dignitaries and stakeholders present there. Later, he also launched the NMM Webpage in the presence of Ms. Kesang Y. Sherpa IRS, Member Secretary NCTE for the ongoing support and guidance for mentors and other stakeholders. The launch of NMM website is an important step towards enhancing the mentorship ecosystem in the country.

Study reveals less than 1 per cent self reporting rate for mental illness in India

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's recognition as the world's suicide capital, with over 2.6 lakh cases reported annually, starkly contrasts with the less than one per cent self-reporting rate for mental health issues. While this discrepancy reflects individuals' reluctance to openly acknowledge and report their struggles due to societal judgment and stigma, a study by IIT, Jodhpur and USA's Ohio State University has found that those seeking help have to incur significant expenses largely due to reliance on the private sector.

Addressing this issue is crucial to fostering a more supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable seeking help for their mental health concerns, said the study published in the International Journal of Mental Health Systems and Co-authored by Dr Alok Ranjan, Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts (SoLA), IIT Jodhpur and Dr. Jewel Crasta, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA. "The study revealed that the self-reporting of mental illness was less than one per cent based on the 75th Round National Sample Survey, 2017-18. The survey completely relied on the self-reporting of the individuals," Ranjan said. The data was collected from 5,55,115 individuals from randomly selected 8,077 villages and 6,181 urban areas, including 283 outpatient and 374 hospitalisation cases due to mental disorders in India. "Stigma in society acts as a significant barrier to reporting mental health issues. In today's society, the reluctance to report mental health issues persists due to the prevailing stigma. Individuals, fearing



social judgement, often choose silence over seeking help. Destigmatising mental health is crucial to fostering an environment where seeking support is embraced," he added.

The study also shed light on the significant out-of-pocket expenses incurred by individuals seeking mental health services, largely due to reliance on the private sector. There are also not enough mental health professionals in the public sector too to treat people who do seek help. This is especially true in rural parts of India. Calling the observations as yet another wake up call, Dr Shweta Sharma, Clinical Psychologist and Joint Secretary of the Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists who is not related to the study said "Mental health has not been a significant focus in India, primarily because many issues are perceived to be resolved through psychotherapy, often dismissed as mere conversation. "The value of trained professionals is underestimated. Unclear policies and a lack of awareness among the general population about mental health treatment contribute to confusion regarding whom to consult, when to seek help, and the importance of mental health check-ups. This situation allows untrained practitioners to set

fees arbitrarily, leading people to assume that private practitioners are expensive, and consulting psychologists is a waste of both money and time."

She underscored the need for serious attention to mental health and licensed mental health professionals. "The rising number of suicides among aspiring engineers and medical students highlights the overwhelming stress they face. The government must prioritize policies, shape training programs, and provide health coverage for mental disorders. A well-structured plan, coupled with public awareness, is imperative at this juncture."

The study echoed similar views as it also uncovered a socioeconomic divide, with self-reporting of mental disorders being 1.73 times higher among the richest income group population compared to the poorest in India. The private sector emerged as a major provider of mental health services, accounting for 66.1 pc of outpatient care and 59.2 pc of inpatient care. "A mere 23 per cent of individuals hospitalised for mental disorders had health insurance coverage at the national level. The study revealed that average out-of-pocket expenditures for both hospitalisation and outpatient care were significantly higher in the private sector than in the public sector," Ranjan shared.

ICG to celebrate 48th Raising Day today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) is celebrating its 48th Raising Day on February one. From a modest beginning with just 07 surface platforms in 1978, ICG has grown into a formidable force with 152 ships and 78 aircraft in its inventory and is likely to achieve targeted force levels of 200 surface platforms and 100 aircraft by 2030.

The ICG is now considered to be one of renowned Coast Guards in the world due to its achievements and for the efficiency with which it operates its assets in a challenging envi-



ronment, thereby ensuring round the clock safety and security.

True to its motto "Vayam Rakshamah" meaning "We Protect", the service has to its credit, saving over 11,554 lives

since its inception in 1977 and 200 lives in the year 2023, which translates into saving one precious life every second day. To ensure security in the Maritime Zones of India, the Indian Coast Guard has main-

'Normal to above normal rainfall likely in North India this month'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

After experiencing a drier-than-usual December and January, north India is expected to see normal to above-normal rainfall in February, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Wednesday. Addressing a press conference, IMD Director General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said India cumulatively may experience above-normal rainfall in February. Northwest India recorded just 3.1 mm of rainfall in January, the second lowest since 1901, the IMD said. North India consisting of seven meteorological sub-divisions is most likely to receive above-normal rainfall (more than 122 per cent of the long period average) in February. "Monthly rainfall over the country as a whole during February is most likely to be above normal (more than 119 per cent of the long period



average)," Mohapatra said. Normal to above-normal rainfall is predicted over northeast and central India. Below-normal rainfall is likely over south peninsular India. Most parts of the country are likely to witness above-normal minimum temperatures. Northwest, west central, northeast and parts of east-central India are likely to see above-normal maximum temperatures in February, according to the IMD. Normal to below-normal maximum temperatures are likely in most parts of peninsular

India and parts of east-central India, the IMD said. "Below-normal cold wave days are expected over some parts of central India during February," it said. The strong El Nino conditions -- abnormal warming of surface waters in the central Pacific Ocean -- are likely to weaken steadily and turn to ENSO neutral conditions by the end of the spring season. Most models indicate a transition to La Nina conditions, considered favourable for Indian southwest monsoon, around July-September, Mohapatra said.

NEET PG exam fee reduced by ₹750 for all medical aspirants

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In a significant move aimed to provide financial relief to the numerous candidates participating in NEET PG exams, the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences (NBEMS) has decided to reduce the exam fees by Rs 750 for all aspiring medical professionals. "Any candidate submitting the application form for the forthcoming examination after January 1, 2024 will have to pay the reduced fee," an official from the Union Health Ministry said, citing a notification issued in this regard. The reduced fee would be less than the application fee charged in 2013.

In 2013, application fee for general and OBC category was Rs 3,750, which was raised to Rs 4,250 in 2021 (the current fee). This has been reduced to



Rs 3,500 with effect from January 1, 2024. In 2013, the application fee for SC, ST and PWD candidates was Rs 2,750, which was raised to Rs 3,250 in 2021. This has been reduced to Rs 2,500 now. It may bear recall, the NBEMS has revised the examination date for NEET PG 2024. Earlier, the tentative date was March 3, however, now NEET PG 2024 will be held on July 7, 2024. As per the information, the NEET PG eligibility cut-off has been set to August 15, 2024. Application forms, information bulletin, and other details related to the exam are hosted on natboard.edu.in, said the official.

Kerala Congress leader George joins BJP

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The BJP, struggling to get a mooring in Kerala, got a shot in the arm as a veteran leader of the Kerala Congress (a party representing the interests of the Church) joined the Hindutva party in New Delhi on Wednesday. George, a seven-time legislator of the Kerala Legislative Assembly and former chief whip during the UDF rule (2011-2016) was received to the party by union ministers Rajeev Chandrasekhar, V Muraleedharan, Prakash Javadekar MP, Anil Antony, national general secretary and Radhey Shyam Aggarwal MP. The Pioneer had reported early last month that George was all set to join the BJP. A crusader against corruption

and a fire brand leader, George was the first Christian leader to sound the alarm bell against Love Jihad and Narcotics Jihad which was later taken up by the spiritual leaders of the Catholic community to which he belongs. He also merged the Janapaksham, a political outfit launched by him into the BJP. George's son Shaun and the entire Janapaksham leaders too joined the BJP. "This decision is a fall out of our understanding that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the only national leader who is working sincerely for the progress of India. More and more members of the Christian community will join the BJP in days to come," said George after joining the BJP.



Both the CPI (M) and the Congress aided by Islamist forces had joined hands in the 2021 assembly polls to defeat George, in his eighth hustling in the electoral battle and he lost the poll by a wafer thin majority. Having joined the Kerala Congress as a fiery student leader, George won seven successive elections to the assembly, a rare feat in a State like Kerala. George is joining the BJP at a time when the Marxists and Congress are blaming the BJP for the communal pogrom in Manipur. "The people in Kerala are not aware of the complex reality of the caste politics in Manipur. The entire media has gone gaga over the embarrassment faced by the

BJP due to the Manipur riots. The reality is entirely different and I myself will clear the apprehension in the minds of the community in Kerala," George told The Pioneer. Interestingly, there were suggestions from various Hindu outfits in Kerala to field George as a candidate for the Lok Sabha polls from P a t h a n a m t h i t t a constituency. George said there is no difference between the CPI(M)-led LDF and the Congress-led UDF. "Both the forces are the same and the dofference is only on their names. What they have been doing all these years was to cheat the people," he said. K T Paily, a former official of Indian Railways who is an

active leader of the Catholic community, said George is a force to reckon with in Kerala politics. "But I am not sure about the surge in votes cast during the election. George commands respect all over the State," said Paily. The Christian Alliance for Social Action (CASA) welcomed George's move to join the Hindutva party. "It will pay rich dividends and there is a possibility of the BJP opening its account in Kerala," said Kevin Peter, president, CASA. Father Shaiju Kurian, a priest of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and 47 families belonging to the sect had joined the BJP in December 2023, the first of its kind development in the State.'

Farmers income 'has almost doubled' since 2018: Yogi



PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday said the farmers income "has almost doubled" since 2018 and this "positive trend" extends beyond Uttar Pradesh. The chief minister said the farmers across the country are embracing agricultural diversification, aligning with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "visionary approach", consequently "doubling their income". Inaugurating the 'Kisan Mela' organised by the Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (CIMAP) on Picnic Spot Road here, Adityanath highlighted Prime Minister Modi's transformative vision. The chief minister, according to a press statement issued by the state government, elaborated on how the prime minister set the target of doubling the farmers' income by 2022 and subsequently launched various schemes such as the Soil Health Card, Prime Minister Crop Insurance, Agricultural Irrigation, and Kisan Samman Nidhi for steering the farmers toward economic upliftment, coupled with a robust integration of scientific research and innovation. Underlining the tangible impact of these initiatives, Adityanath said the farmers' income has almost doubled since 2018. "This positive trend extends beyond Uttar Pradesh as the farmers across the country are embracing agricultural diversification, aligning with Prime Minister Modi's visionary approach,

consequently doubling their income," he said. Highlighting the fertile land and abundant water resources in Uttar Pradesh, the chief minister outlined the state's pivotal role in agricultural production, contributing over 22 per cent of the country's food grains despite having 11 per cent cultivable land. He noted the presence of 89 agricultural science centers and four state agricultural universities, with the establishment of the fifth one underway. Adityanath stressed the government's proactive role in connecting the farmers of Uttar Pradesh to medicinal farming and horticulture, and promoting herbal products. This diversification, he explained, has significantly increased the farmers' earnings, becoming a transformative catalyst in improving their lives. The chief minister also inaugurated an exhibition at the fair and inspected the stalls set up while interacting with the farmers. Notably, over 4,000 farmers from more than 15 states participated in the fair. The CIMAP will also launch an 'Aroma Mission App' for the farmers involved in cultivating medicinal plants. This app will act as a bridge between the farmers and the industry. Agriculture Minister Surya Pratap Shahi, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) Director General N Kalaiselvi and a large number of farmers from different states and districts of the country were present in the programme.

Gujarat to bring resolution praising PM for Ram temple



PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

A resolution praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the consecration of Ram temple in Ayodhya will be introduced during the budget session of the Gujarat assembly beginning February 1, a state minister said. The state budget for FY 2024-25 will be presented on February 2. On the other hand, the opposition Congress said they will corner the BJP government on a range of issues including inflation, unemployment, and the recent boat capsized tragedy in a lake in Vadodara, resulting in the death of 12 students and two teachers. The budget session will start with the customary address of Governor Acharya Devvrat. "On the first day, the governor will present the previous year's achievements of the state government in his address to the House," Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Rushikesh Patel told reporters in Gandhinagar on Wednesday. Finance Minister Kanubhai Desai will present the budget on the next day (Feb 2). The budget will reflect the vision of

the state government for the next year and a road map for the next 25 years, he said. "In view of the consecration ceremony of Lord Ram temple in Ayodhya, a resolution praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be brought on February 5," said Patel, who is also the government spokesperson. Considering a representation by MLAs, no sitting of the assembly will be held on Saturdays as announced earlier, he added. The budget session will conclude on February 29. According to officials, a bill proposing amendments to the 'Gujarat Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Laws' has been cleared by the Assembly Secretariat for discussion so far. Some more bills will be cleared later, they added. "Despite tall claims by the BJP government, unemployment is still rampant in the state and events like the Vibrant Gujarat Summit, held in January, only benefited businessmen, not our youths. Congress MLAs will also raise the issue of deaths of 12 students and two teachers in the Vadodara boat capsized incident", said Gujarat Congress spokesperson Manish Doshi.

Sita Soren opposes any move to make Kalpana CM



PTI ■ RANCHI

Amid hectic political activities and questioning of Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren by the ED here on Wednesday, a rift has emerged in his family with his sister-in-law and JMM MLA Sita Soren openly opposing any move to make his wife Kalpana the state chief minister. The objection comes against the backdrop of strong rumours and the BJP claim that Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana will be the first choice for the chief minister's post in case her husband was arrested. Kalpana Soren was also present at the meeting of alliance legislators at the CM's residence on Tuesday. Talking to PTI over the phone, Sita Soren, widow of former chief minister Shibu Soren's elder son Durga, said: "I would like to ask why only Kalpana Soren, who is not even an MLA and has no political experience. Under what circumstances her (Kalpana's) name is being touted as the next chief minister when there are so many senior leaders in

the party." MLA from the Jama assembly seat, Sita Soren, who was out of the city for some personal reasons, was not present in the Tuesday meeting. "I will strongly protest any move to make her CM...", said Sita, who has been an MLA for nearly 14 years. "There are several senior leaders, who could be given the reins of the party. If they want to elect from a family, I am the senior-most in the house and have been an MLA for around 14 years," she said. A senior leader who did not wish to be quoted said several MLAs were absent during the Tuesday meeting at CM's residence here. Earlier this month, Soren had dismissed speculations of his wife contesting from the Gandey assembly constituency and had termed it as a "complete imagination" of the BJP. "Possibility of my wife contesting in the near future is a complete imagination of the BJP... The speculation about handing over reins to her is a fabric woven by the BJP to build a false

narrative," the chief minister had told PTI. The speculations were triggered by the Enforcement Directorate's recent summons to the chief minister coupled with the sudden resignation by the ruling JMM's Gandey MLA Sarfaraz Ahmad in December. The opposition BJP has claimed that Ahmad was made to quit so that the chief minister's wife could contest from the Gandey in case of any eventuality in connection with the ED summonses. Earlier, the ED had recorded the statement of the 48-year-old chief minister on January 20 under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The investigation pertains to a "huge racket of illegal change of ownership of land by the mafia" in Jharkhand, according to the agency. The ED has, so far, arrested 14 people in the case, including 2011-batch IAS officer Chhavi Ranjan who served as the director of the state's social welfare department and deputy commissioner of Ranchi.

Three Rohingya men get 10 years jail for human trafficking



PTI ■ NUH

A court in Haryana's Nuh district has sentenced three Rohingya men to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment in a human trafficking case of 2021. Additional district and sessions judge Ajay K Verma pronounced the sentence on Tuesday. The court also imposed a fine of Rs 10,000 on each of the convicts. According to public prosecutor Pratap Singh, the Child Welfare Committee of Nuh had received secret information in February 2021 that two young Bangladeshi women had been brought to India by some people via Mizoram and Kolkata. According to the police, a Rohingya man identified as Mohammad Ayas had brought the women, aged 19 and 20, to Nuh from Delhi. Later, Mohammad Ayas and two other Rohingya men —

Hafeez Ahmed and Mohammad Yunus — took the two women to Malab village in Nuh district and decided to sell them in Kashmir Valley for Rs 70,000 each, the police said. Acting on the information, a team of the Child Welfare Committee conducted raids at their place in Malab and rescued the women. Following medical examination, it was revealed that the two women were raped and tortured. An FIR was registered under relevant provisions of the IPC at the City police station in Nuh and the three accused were arrested in December 2021. The accused had confessed to the crime and were sent into judicial custody, the police said. "During the trial, the prosecution proved all the charges," the public prosecutor said.

PETA seeks ban on buffalo, Bulbul fights; Gauhati HC to hear pleas

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) India has approached the Gauhati High Court seeking a ban on traditional buffalo and Bulbul bird fights, which were restarted in Assam after a gap of nine years. Filing two separate writ petitions (WP(C) No.: 466/2024 and 468/2024), PETA India alleged numerous violations of the central law in the conduct of these events and submitted their investigations into these two types of fights in Assam. In its first hearing on Tuesday, a single-judge bench of Justice Manish Choudhury heard both the sides and fixed February 1 as the next date for the two linked petitions. The petitions were filed against the Assam government, represented by the chief secretary, commissioner and secretary of the home and political department, and the Animal Welfare Board of India. "Buffaloes and Bulbuls are gentle animals, who feel pain and terror, and don't want to be forced into bloody fights in front of jeering crowds. "PETA India hopes the Gauhati High Court will recognise that this cruelty is a clear violation of central law and prohibit these violent fights," PETA India Advocacy



Associate Tushar Kol said in a statement. The petitions to the HC pointed out that the buffalo and Bulbul fights violate the Constitution of India, The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 and several judgments of the Supreme Court of India. "PETA India also notes that such fights are inherently cruel, cause immeasurable pain and suffering to the animals forced to participate, and contradict the tenets of ahimsa (non-violence) and compassion, which are integral to Indian culture and tradition. "Allowing these events to continue is a regressive step, which threatens to undo almost a decade of progress in human and animal rights," the organisation said. On January 15, traditional Bulbul bird fights were organised after a hiatus of around nine years following a

new set of guidelines issued by the Assam government. It was earlier stopped due to restrictions imposed by the judiciary. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his family members had visited Hayagriva Madhav temple at Hajo in Kamrup district and witnessed the bird fight with hundreds of visitors on Magh Bihu day. "Breathing life into our ancient customs and rituals has been a cornerstone of our policies. After nearly a decade, I was able to witness the bulbuli fight, a quintessential Bihu tradition which was recently revived by our government," he had said after watching. Likewise, the government's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) also allowed buffalo fights, which took place on January 16 in Morigaon, Sivasagar and some Upper Assam districts, with some precautions.



A woman prepares handmade ornaments on the sidelines of the 47th International Kolkata Book Fair, in Kolkata on Wednesday

PTI

Maliwal asked to take oath of office twice after 'inquilab' sloganeering

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Swati Maliwal, former chief of the Delhi Commission For Women (DCW), took oath as Rajya Sabha MP on Wednesday but that came out with a minor controversy. Maliwal, who is known for her blatant statements on issues concerning safety of women, had to take the oath of office twice as after her first oath she raised slogan 'Inquilab Zindabad'. Besides Maliwal, two others - Narain Dass Gupta, Satnam Singh Sandhu- became the first three members to take the oath as MP in the new Parliament building. Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar asked AAP leader Swati Maliwal to take oath twice because of two reasons. First, she took the wrong oath initially as she read the version of



the oath meant for nominated Rajya Sabha members. The second reason was unwarranted sloganeering. Maliwal was elected to Rajya Sabha unopposed. Her party colleague and financial policy expert, Narain Dass Gupta, also took the oath who will be in his second term in the Upper House.

On the brink

The Maldives is running into one crisis after another; now an impeachment motion looms over Muizzu

Generally known for its turquoise waters, pristine beaches and coral reefs, the name of the Maldives as a destination for Indian tourists is currently mud. The archipelago's complex political scenario has raised concerns not only within the country but also in the larger geopolitical landscape. The looming impeachment motion against Md Muizzu, the Maldives President, coupled with a shocking fall in Indian tourist numbers, underscores a shifting dynamic in the Indian Ocean region. The developments have triggered apprehensions about the country's stability. Given its strategic location, the internal political dynamics are crucial not only for the Maldives but also for the Indian Ocean region. As China seeks to expand its influence, India finds itself at a strategic crossroads, requiring thoughtful and proactive measures to counterbalance these developments. The core of the problem is Muizzu's desire to distance himself from India and align with China. The Maldives is the newest country to fall prey to Chinese designs:



The dragon has been steadily increasing its economic and infrastructural footprint in the region by way of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with significant investments in key projects. This has raised concerns in India about China's expanding influence in a region traditionally considered India's sphere of influence. The Maldives has asked India to remove its military base, which is a big loss for India and will make China stronger in the region.

Though India has flexed its soft power and dissuaded its tourists from going to Maldives, that approach may not work with China's support to the Maldives.

But the position of the Maldives has become a little

untenable as it earns the major share of revenue from tourism; the recent decline in Indian tourist numbers has hit it hard. Holding the top spot just three weeks ago, Indian tourist arrivals have now slipped to the fifth position. India and the Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity. The relations have been close, cordial and multi-dimensional: India was among the first nations to recognise the Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with it. Now, India must adopt a nuanced and strategic approach to maintain influence in the Maldives and counterbalance China's expanding footprint. Strengthening diplomatic ties with our neighbour is paramount. Besides, India should bolster economic cooperation by offering viable alternatives to Chinese investments. Initiatives that promote sustainable development and address the Maldives' economic concerns can help strengthen economic ties. It goes without saying that India would have to back the pro-India Maldivian leaders; for example, the pro-India Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has recently claimed a landslide in Male's mayoral election. This is indeed a good sign for India and, if Muizzu is impeached, India could have the chance to re-establish its cordial relations with the Maldives that it has always had.



An artiste hoists 'Thirumudi' (Royal crown) of Muchilot Bhagavathi on 'Perumkaliyattam' festival, in Kannur

Road conditions hinder village development

Deteriorating roads in Bhopalaram village of Bikaner hinder development, affecting health, education and mobility

Development in Bhopalaram village, situated in the Lunkaransar block of Bikaner, Rajasthan, has come to a halt due to the lack of proper roads. The absence of a paved road is a significant challenge for the nearly two thousand residents in the village. According to 47-year-old resident Baluram Jat, the main road connecting the village to the block headquarters was constructed around eight years ago and has not been maintained since, rendering it impassable. The road's deteriorated condition has made it challenging even for families to transport patients to the hospital. During Vimla's childbirth, the ambulance broke down due to the damaged road, forcing the family to arrange a private vehicle to reach the hospital. Vimla, a 28-year-old young woman from the village, noted that her condition worsened due to the road's large potholes. She highlighted that many pregnant women in the village prefer going to their parental homes for childbirth due to these challenges. However,



for those unable to do so, the journey to the hospital becomes exceedingly difficult. The challenging road conditions in the village have significantly impacted the lives of individuals with disabilities as well. Rajaram, a 26-year-old affected by polio in both legs, shared that although the government provided him with a hand-operated bicycle, the deteriorating state of the roads poses a considerable obstacle to his mobility. The uneven and damaged surfaces make it challenging for Rajaram to use his bicycle effectively for travel, exacerbating the difficulties he faces due to his disability. The advancement of development is hindered by deteriorating roads. When the road conditions are subpar in a given area, the progress

in other sectors is inevitably hampered. In Bhopalaram village, Vinod, another resident, points out that the deteriorating road has led to a severe water problem. Water tankers from the block have to navigate the broken road, causing more than half the water to spill before reaching the village. This not only leads to water wastage but also compels villagers to incur additional expenses to procure water once more. The deteriorated road has had a detrimental impact on the education of village girls as well. Seventeen-year-old Malati reveals that she had to halt her education after completing 10th grade because she faced challenges traveling eight kilometres to reach the Higher Secondary School in Lunkaransar Block for her 12th-grade studies. The poor condition of the road resulted in limited transportation options from the village, and her parents couldn't afford to purchase a scooter for her. Malati also highlights that although some portions of the road have been patched with bricks, persistent difficulties will persist until the

entire road is improved. In this regard, the Chairman of the Gram Seva Sahakarita Samiti, Asuram, explains that a space of 50 feet was allocated for this road, but it was constructed only with 20 feet. Due to its small and deteriorated condition, villagers face daily challenges. If there is any hindrance in tendering for the construction of this road, it can also be done under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This would not only improve the condition of the road but also provide employment to people under MGNREGA. Asuram asserts that the village's most crucial need should be promptly fulfilled through the Panchayati Raj Institutions because the road is not just a means of transportation but plays a significant role in opening new avenues for development. It is not only a means of access but is also intricately connected to education, health, and the economy.

(Tamanna is a student of Class 12 from Lunkaransar, Rajasthan. Views are personal. Charkha Features)



TAMANNA BANO

Myanmar: India's strategic dilemma

India needs to evolve a realistic strategic blueprint in line with the 'Neighbourhood First' policy to save Myanmar from China's Belt and Road Initiative

Worried over the influx of refugees and insurgents from across the porous border owing to the unabated crisis, the Indian government has decided to fence the Myanmar border to discontinue the free movement regime (FMR), as with the Bangladesh frontier which may act as a deterrent and preventive measure to control the existing menace.

India must act cautiously: Given Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu's honeymoon with China, India needs to evolve a realistic strategic blueprint in line with the 'Neighbourhood First' policy to save Myanmar from China's overtures to the junta through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), besides supporting border areas rebels by brokering peace between warring groups and army generals in this violence-plagued country. India took a cautious stand when the army, known as Tatmadaw, engineered a coup on February 1, 2021. India had diplomatically and indirectly supported the junta, refraining from openly supporting the democratic forces led by Aung San Suu Kyi, which has now put it in a dilemma. India faces the challenge of checkmating China, which is dangerous because it supports some ethnic groups.

In this complex scenario, "OPERATION 1027" was undertaken in December 2023 by "The Three Brotherhood Alliance" comprising the Taang National Liberation Army, AA and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, which had shaken the junta. An offensive against the junta had dealt it a devastating blow, prompting China to support it.

'The Three Brotherhood Alliance' had captured key roads and military posts, hitting the cash-strapped junta's revenues and obstructing troop movements. Reports from the conflict zone suggested that the surprise attacks on the Shan state were followed by the AA opening a front against the army in its base in Rakhine state on the west coast. It was a coordinated attempt by insurgents to spill over to Kayah State



bordering Thailand to the east and the Sagaing region and Chin State, bordering India. It was in violation of a ceasefire in force between the armed groups and the junta over a year.

The bold move threatens the military's control over crucial trade routes to China thereby hitting its interests. It was a welcome step for China when the army led by Min Aung Hlaing dethroned the elected government, but now the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, thereby challenging the junta.

The Brotherhood is Junta's biggest challenge: The alliance has been successful in cutting off the junta from a stretch of land that handles about 40% of bilateral border trade with China; around \$1 billion of the trade comes from natural gas piped into China. The fighting erupted recently in Shan, Kachin and Chin states, which are situated in the country's north as well as in Rakhine state in the west. Three Brotherhood fighters have claimed they have overrun dozens of military posts across the region and seized major roads leading in and out besides forcing the surrender of over 100 soldiers of the Myanmar army, demoralizing the junta. The armed groups have taken the fight to the Tatmadaw in Kayah State in the country's east which is important to the Myanmar army.



CHINA HAS URGED MYANMAR TO RESTORE BORDER STABILITY EVEN AS THE JUNTA'S CONFLICT WITH ARMED GROUPS INTENSIFIES

India must rethink its strategy: India will need to rethink its old-fashioned position towards Myanmar before the fallout threatens its interests. India feels the US should seize the moment to enhance engagement with India in Myanmar and work to alleviate the humanitarian situation thereby supporting the anti-junta forces and establishing a federal democracy. India has tried to maintain equidistance between the military generals and pro-democracy political parties to ensure that the junta does not fall into China's lap.

Junta to hit back: The army generals were not ready for the alliance's huge offensive, which set off a chain reaction, cornering the junta. Armed groups are reported to have taken control of fifty towns and villages and 100 posts. Army chief Hlaing has promised to undertake a counterattack on terrorists in the north, which might expose the junta's weakness.

Armed rebellion by ethnic armed organizations has dealt a diplomatic blow to the army generals who have been exposed; China will be directly impacted. The Ukraine war had come as a blessing in disguise for the junta as the US and EU were preoccupied with it. The Hamas attack on Israel has further alienated Western powers from Myanmar but the attack by armed groups may change the entire scenario. The

National Unity Government (NUG) formed by opposition lawmakers in Burma is considered close to the West, which is feeling encouraged after the successful offensive by the armed groups.

China's double speak: China has urged Myanmar to restore border stability even as the junta's conflict with armed groups intensifies. Myanmar has been asked by China to 'cooperate' with it to maintain stability on the common borders. China's official stand is intriguing; "As a friendly neighbour, China sincerely hopes that Myanmar will restore stability and development as soon as possible, and supports all parties in Myanmar to properly resolve differences within the constitutional and legal framework and achieve reconciliation through dialogue."

A recent visit by Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong holds significance after armed groups stepped up an offensive, which put Chinese residents and infrastructure at risk. Some former diplomats are surprised over the 'Dual Policy' adopted by China, which has been actively supporting the militant groups. The United Wa State Army (UWSA) in Myanmar's north-eastern Shan state receives weapons and political sustenance from China.

(The writer is a political analyst and an expert on South Asia, views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GANDHIAN PRINCIPLES

Sir — Considering the war foreboding and sense of anarchy around the geo-political world order, it's a good time to practice and remember the ideological principles of Gandhi Ji. Mahatma Gandhi was popularly called as 'Father of Nation' and "Bapu". He was killed following a prayer vigil in New Delhi on January 30, 1948. He teaches us the canon of non-violence, civil disobedience, the welfare of all, interfaith harmony, equality social justice and constructive work but world order is dysfunctional. Rather the current situation of countries is filled with atrocities and savagery, and destroying one or the other. There is a spread of anti-humane dispensation among the nations vis-a-vis the Russia-Ukraine war, entire West Asia giving a sense of anarchy and retaliation between Iraq, Gaza, Yemen, Pakistan and the Indo-Pacific extent where Philippines and Taiwan are acting against the power but India too has dealt with the external as well as internal crisis of Naxalism, security threats in Parliament, suspension of 141 Members of Parliament for the first time in the history. Gandhi ji believed that change could be achieved through peaceful means, advocating for dialogue and understanding even in the face of adversity and ensuring that the benefits of progress reached every stratum of society. Let's hope that everyone should practice and follow the Gandhian axioms that are carved out to build the better society that we desire.

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur

SUICIDE IS NOT A SOLUTION

Sir — In a shocking incident a JEE aspirant from Kota, Rajasthan committed suicide just days ahead of the exam. The year 2023 has already witnessed many student aspirants committing suicide in Kota due to exam pressure and the latest tragedy yet again pinpoints how entrance exams are causing severe mental agony, panic and pressure among young students. The suicide cases occurring in Kota and elsewhere in the country pinpoint how much men-

Rhino killing is a cause of concern



In March 2023, the carcass of a rhinoceros was found, with its horn missing, in Assam's Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve, which houses nearly seventy per cent of India's rhino population. Later, in December, another Rhino was spotted dead due to suspected spear penetration; surprisingly its horn was intact. These incidents took place after an uneventful 2022 when no rhino was harmed. Now, poachers have struck again by killing an adult female rhino and decapitating with its horn. The carcass of the animal was

found on January 22. Poaching is the biggest threat to the one-horned rhinos. Local poachers, hand-in-glove with international smugglers, pose a big threat to the rhinos.

The Assam government had set up a special task force to achieve zero poaching of rhinos in 2022. The task force, set up by the Assam government, and consisting of dedicated commandos, did a commendable job by ensuring nil poaching of the endangered animals in 2022. So, it can safely be assumed that there was a massive breach in security or that a few unscrupulous elements in the park were hand-in-gloves with the poachers that resulted in the latest rhino killing. The entire security apparatus including the CCTV cameras require an extensive examination and overhaul. At the same time, a methodical review of logistics, personnel and training would not be out of place.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

tal tension students experience and also expose certain flaws in the exam system and the societal beliefs prevalent which focus only on marks, passes, ranks and success. It is high time that the Ministry of Education in the States and the Centre take the matter seriously and take suitable measures so that our young students do not make such harsh decisions just in the name of exams and how it is conducted. Parents and teachers have to inculcate in children the mentality to face problems with courage and willpower and to face challenges boldly.

M Pradyu | Kannur

CRUX OF BUDGET FOR 2024-25

Sir — An economy on relatively placid waters and the sanguine prognosis of an assured continuity of the govt in office should help focus on a largely marginalised key element of any budget: the fiscal deficit. Whereas In Defense two-thirds go towards salary, pensions and establishment expenses, the Operating Ratio for Railways was 98.14% in 2023, ie, to earn Rs100, the expenses are Rs 98.14. There is little left for

capital outlays. With allocations to infrastructure on Defense and Railways being the highest in these two, deficit financing is inevitable. And then, even the most self-assured govt has to make space for an election year largesse. Issues in the agricultural sector and the income of farmers have been the bugbear of this govt. Ever since the agitation over the Farm Bills, the government has been wary of this huge vote bank. The yearly assistance of Rs 6000 may go up to Rs 9000. This will be a big outgo on top of various subsidies already in place. Tax-paying public is another sector that needs to be kept happy in an election year. However, the scope for concessions in personal taxation may stay cosmetic. The budget is expected to set the fiscal deficit at a vulnerable 5.3% against street estimates of 5.5%. The actuals may take it even beyond. The crux of budgeting for 2024-25 must hence lie in managing the wily Deficit - Inflation twins.

R Narayanan | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

THE DIVINE WISDOM OF BHAGAVAD GITA

The Gita implores us to recognise the significance of fulfilling our duties



Let me start with verse # 3.8 of the Bhagavad-Gita, which is, “You should always do your duty. Because action is superior to inaction. Maintenance of the body will also not be possible through inaction.” We all know what our duties are according to time, place and circumstances. We also know that neglecting our duties impacts our maintenance. For example, a student does not pay attention to his studies. What happens subsequently? He finds it hard to maintain himself. For whose benefit was this verse spoken? Let me take another verse, which is very famous. I am referring to verse #2.47, which goes like this, “You have a right only in action, not ever in predetermining fruits. You should not speculate about the fruit of action; your attachment to inaction also should not be there.” For whose benefit was this verse spoken? Do we really have any other right except to do our duties? And we must not neglect to do them. As regards the results of our actions, the right to decide them has been kept by God with Himself. Can you imagine what will happen if all of us are free to decide the results? Complete chaos. And who will lose in such chaos? We will. The third verse chosen by me is very telling, in which Lord Krishna promises, “People who worship Me with undivided attention, meditating on Me, for these regular practitioners of yoga, I help in getting what one does not have and provide security of what one has.” This is wonderful. What more could we ask for? Therefore, do what the Lord instructs. How else to decide about who deserves such enormous mercy? Verse after verse the Lord is cajoling us to do what will fulfil all our desires, which are according to dharma. God couldn’t be a party to anything against dharma. Could He?



The fourth verse in this connection is: “Where there is yogeshwara Shri Krishna and where there is Arjuna (meaning us), there will be opulence, victory, wealth and morality.” (18.78) What are our desires generally? That we should succeed in our endeavours. We would if we were aiming for what is according to morality, i.e. dharma. The same is about wealth. Don’t we need enough resources for our maintenance? Not only wealth, there will be ‘saubhagya’ (good fortune). Who benefits from all these? We do; God doesn’t because He is complete in all respects. (3.22) The next verse is about gaining peace and a perfect destination. Lord Krishna instructs, “In all respects, take My shelter only. By My mercy, you will achieve supreme peace and the eternal abode.” What is it that we lack after gaining material needs, comforts, etc.? It is peace, which is what God is promising. Not only that, God is also assuring eternal abode, which is free from the defects of this material world. How nice it will be to not be subjected to repeated birth and death? God is prepared to grant this also. As a matter of fact, God is always wanting to give. He has so much to give if we become deserving. Isn’t that fair? How do we become deserving? Lord Krishna describes, “Develop My consciousness; become My devotee; make sacrifices for Me; and offer obeisance to Me.” (18.65) One may feel that all these activities relate to God. No, far from it; they only purify our existence. I will take up one more verse, which is, “Having My consciousness, you will cross all impediments by My grace.” (18.58) This is quite an amazing offer from God. Aren’t we all struggling with one problem or another throughout our lives? We do, but our ego comes in the way. We are not prepared to accept that somebody can be superior to us and to such an extent that we have to take His shelter and His alone. (18.66) We would rather suffer but won’t do as instructed by God. Do we realise that our acts will benefit the world if we obey God’s instructions? We will become better persons by following dharma.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher, views are personal)

Tread the WTO quagmire with caution

The battle for a permanent solution to Public Stock-Holding programme is a difficult one; India must fight it deftly

In a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) – held on October 2, 2023, in Geneva, the European Union (EU) agreed to consider India’s demand for a permanent solution to public stock-holding (PSH) program for food security. This is a significant change of stance since March 2023, when the EU along with the USA and Canada had challenged it. The issue will be taken up for deliberation in the 13th ministerial conference (MC) of the WTO (World Trade Organization), scheduled from February 26-29, 2024 in Abu Dhabi. The MC is the highest decision-making body of the global trade watchdog (read: WTO) that includes 164 member countries. While, the USA and EU countries want a comprehensive discussion on agriculture encompassing the value-chain, market access, and export restrictions besides the PSH program, India has categorically stated “it won’t negotiate any other issue in the agriculture sector till a permanent solution on PSH is found”.

It has also conveyed that support measures given to its poor farmers like input subsidies such as on electricity, irrigation, fertilizer and even direct transfers are non-negotiable. Under the PSH program, government agencies like the Food Corporation of India (FCI) buy agri-produce such as wheat, rice/paddy, and coarse cereals from farmers at the minimum support price (MSP) and distribute it at a subsidized price of Rs 2/3/1 per kg respectively to meet the needs of India’s poor and vulnerable population under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) that was enacted in 2013. From January 1, 2023, these staple foods are given to the beneficiaries ‘free’; initially in force till December 31, 2023, this arrangement has been continued for five years till December 31, 2028. The excess of MSP plus handling, storage and distribution cost over the realization from the sale (that is, Rs 2/3/1 per kg prior to January 1, 2023, and ‘zero’ thereafter) is paid as a subsidy from the Union Budget. This can be bifurcated into two components (a) subsidy to the farmer, which is the excess of MSP of, say, rice over its international price also known as External Reference Price (ERP) in WTO parlance and (b) subsidy to the food consumer, being the excess of ERP over the price paid which currently is ‘nil’. The WTO is concerned with (a) branded as “product-specific” subsidies. It requires some explanation. The international price/ERP of any commodity is based on global demand-supply forces and is determined in a competitive manner. All farmers irrespective of their country of location are expected to receive this price. In case, because of the intervention by the government of a member country say India, the farmers therein receive a price/MSP higher than this, they are presumed to have been subsidized to the extent of excess of MSP over ERP. The WTO is also concerned with subsidies on agricultural inputs like fertilisers, seeds, irrigation, power, etc., referred to as “non-product specific” subsidies. The developed countries argue that such subsidies distort international trade; hence these need to be curbed. Their argument found acceptance at the WTO.



ONE WONDERS WHETHER A MERE DECLARATION BY PRIVATE TRADERS ACQUIRING SUCH STOCKS WOULD SATISFY THE DEVELOPED COUNTRIES. WE HAVE ALSO SEEN INSTANCES OF HEAVILY SUBSIDISED FOOD (NOW FREE) BEING SMUGGLED TO NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Accordingly, under the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), the total of product and non-product-specific subsidies or aggregate measurement support (AMS) is capped at 10 per cent of the value of agricultural production for a developing country (for developed countries, this threshold is 5 per cent). If a member country gives AMS over 10 per cent, it is a violation. The AoA came into force in 1995. For India, until 2005, MSP was less than ERP. Thereafter, MSP has been higher than ERP and, in the last decade, this gap widened. During 2018-19, in the case of rice, for instance, AMS was at 11 per cent, exceeding the 10 per cent cap. During 2019-20, it was even higher at 13.7 per cent. For over a decade or so, India along with other developing countries has been making efforts at WTO to wriggle out of the situation. In the 9th Ministerial Conference (MC) held in Bali (2013), it secured sanction for a “peace clause”. It said, “If a developing country gives AMS in excess of 10 per cent, no member will challenge this until 2017 when the WTO would look for a permanent solution.” In the General Council (GC) held in December 2014, this sanction was modified to say “The peace clause will stay till a permanent solution was found.” However, the peace clause comes with several riders, such as the submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not “trade distorting.” Besides, programs implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the ‘peace clause’.

India has invoked the ‘peace

clause’ several times at the WTO for breaching the 10 per cent ceiling in case of subsidy on rice - the latest being for the marketing year 2020-21. However, developed countries have objected to such invocation. They want India to be more transparent about its PSH program and put in place safeguards to prevent ‘illegitimate’ exports. But, this can’t go on ad infinitum. The WTO should go for a permanent solution within a time-bound manner. In fact, the MC held in Bali (2013) had implicitly given a deadline of 2017 “.....no member will challenge this until 2017 when the WTO would look for a permanent solution.” Unfortunately, the GC held in December 2014 deferred it indefinitely. India has done right by insisting on a deadline now. However, its stance for the 13th MC isn’t the right way to go. India is trying to delink PSH from a comprehensive look at agriculture. It is attempting to delink things that are intertwined with each other. The PSH program involves buying food from the farmers and distributing it to the beneficiaries. Here, we are talking about the entire supply chain involving procurement, handling, storage, distribution and so on. So, the issues of market access, and sale in the domestic and international markets can’t be brushed aside. India’s PSH program is open-ended under which the government’s agencies buy the highest possible quantities of wheat and rice from the farmers at ever-increasing MSP. Since these purchases are unrelated to the requirement under the NFSA (courtesy vote bank politics), sur-

plus stocks with agencies are inevitable which they dispose of by auctioning to private traders etc under the Open Market Sale Scheme (OMSS). Under OMSS ‘all the bidders are compulsorily asked to give an undertaking that they won’t export it’. One wonders whether a mere declaration by private traders acquiring such stocks would satisfy the developed countries. We have also seen instances of heavily subsidized food (now free) being smuggled to neighbouring countries. It won’t come on record but it disturbs the global demand-supply equation. India should put everything on the table and talk. It is widely recognized that the formula for the computation of AMS under the AoA suffers from several flaws. The ERP used for comparing with MSP (albeit current) dates back to 1986-88. This is bound to “artificially” inflate the subsidy. By using the current ERP, India’s subsidy will automatically go below the 10 per cent threshold. Besides, AoA calculation doesn’t exclude subsidies given to resource-poor farmers. These farmers mostly produce food for self-consumption meaning they don’t have a surplus to sell. So, the question of subsidies to them distorting trade doesn’t arise. Their exclusion will also reduce the AMS. Meanwhile, the government should end the open-ended procurement and restrict purchase only to what is required for giving to the NFSA beneficiaries. It should also consider switching to ‘giving subsidy in cash’ using DBT mode.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)



Nitish’s ninth move on Bihar’s political chessboard

With Nitish Kumar’s latest move, Bihar has witnessed a seismic shift, with ramifications extending far beyond the State’s borders

The political chessboard of Bihar has recently witnessed a profound transformation, sending ripples across the entire nation. As the Lok Sabha elections loom on the horizon, every twist and turn in Bihar’s political saga holds the potential to significantly impact the grand political finale. Nitish Kumar’s latest move, switching sides for the fifth time in just over a decade and assuming the Chief Minister’s role for the ninth time, has added an intriguing layer to the unfolding drama. While Nitish’s political acrobatics have grabbed the spotlight, the BJP’s strategic gamble in this intricate game has not gone unnoticed. Amidst the evolving scenario, questions arise about Nitish



Kumar’s commitment to social justice, considering his shifting allegiances and recent embrace of temple politics. The perplexity deepens as Bihar grapples with the implications of this political manoeuvre on the Mandal forces, reflecting the state’s political narrow-mindedness and the weakening influence of caste arithmetic. The focus now shifts to the RJD, founded on the accomplishments of

the charismatic Lalu Yadav, whose legacy seems at odds with its preparedness for the future. While Nitish manages to retain power through an alliance with the expanding BJP, questions persist about his credibility, especially in comparison to the broader social coalition led by the RJD. The isolation of the RJD in Bihar and the BJP’s steady progress as a formidable alternative force set the stage for a crucial message ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The recalibration of the “social justice” agenda, impacted by Nitish’s move, necessitates a reassessment of the BJP’s influence in this domain. The political dynamics have shifted beyond the tradition-



al Mandal vs. Mandir narrative, evolving into a complex interplay of Mandal vs. Mandal and Mandir plus Mandal, with “good governance” emerging as a pivotal factor. Nitish Kumar’s decision to realign with the BJP becomes a litmus test for the leadership of Tejashwi Yadav, the young successor of the RJD, who faces the challenge

of navigating a family feud and maintaining the party’s political standing. As Tejashwi positions himself as a “development man,” distancing from his father’s rule characterized as “jungle raj,” the RJD embarks on a campaign to showcase its achievements, especially in job creation. The political chess match intensifies, with Tejashwi asserting that the game has just begun, and the RJD will strategically reveal its cards in due course. The RJD’s shift toward economic justice signals a new direction, expanding its support base beyond traditional voters. The repercussions of Bihar’s political upheaval reverberate nationally, drawing reactions from prominent leaders

across party lines. As Bihar’s political maestro, Nitish Kumar, navigates through another historic yet controversial chapter in his two-decade-long career, the political landscape awaits the settling of dust from Sunday evening’s events. In the intricate tapestry of Bihar’s political narrative, Nitish Kumar’s recent manoeuvre stands as a pivotal chapter, influencing not only the state’s dynamics but resonating across the national political spectrum. As the dust settles on the dramatic events of Sunday evening, Bihar finds itself at a crossroads, with implications stretching far beyond its borders. The ever-evolving alliances and strategic shifts have re-

defined the contours of political discourse, challenging conventional narratives of Mandal, Mandir, and governance. Nitish Kumar’s alliance with the BJP, marked by its expanding influence in the state, prompts a reevaluation of political equations and the potential impact on the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Tejashwi Yadav, stepping into the limelight as the face of the RJD, navigates the party through the challenges of a family feud, asserting a commitment to economic justice and development. The RJD’s attempt to redefine its image, distancing from the perceived shortcomings of the past, sets the stage for a renewed political strategy. As Bihar becomes a battle-

ground of ideologies, the reactions from national leaders underscore the significance of these developments. The shift from social justice to economic justice, coupled with the evolving political landscape, necessitates a recalibration of strategies for all stakeholders. In the end, Bihar’s political arena remains unpredictable, with each move sparking debates and reflections on the past, present, and future of the state’s political trajectory. As the nation watches the unfolding drama, the implications of Bihar’s political metamorphosis will continue to resonate, shaping the contours of Indian politics in the days to come.

(The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)

Imran, wife sentenced to 14 years in prison

AP ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced on Wednesday to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment each in a corruption case, a day after the beleaguered leader was given a 10-year jail term for leaking state secrets.

The verdict by an accountability court, which comes eight days before the February 8 general elections, has added to the legal woes of the 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician's bid to return to power. Khan is already serving a three-year jail term after being convicted of corruption in a separate Toshakhana case on August 5 last year.

Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) faced numerous troubles before the election starting with the denial of its election symbol, the cricket bat, to the rejection of nomination papers of Khan, former foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and several other party leaders. Accountability Court Judge Mohammad Bashir conducted the hearing at Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail, where Khan is incarcerated.

In the Toshakhana corruption case, he was accused of retaining expensive state gifts they received during his tenure as Pakistan's premier from 2018-2022. Khan and his wife were also barred from holding any public office for 10 years and slapped with a fine of Rs 787 million each. Bushra Bibi, 49, did not appear before the court on Wednesday.

At the outset of the hearing, Judge Bashir asked Khan if he recorded his statement. To this, the former premier said that he would submit his statement once his lawyers came. "I have been deceived as I was only called to mark my attendance for the hearing," Khan said. Following the verdict, Bushra Bibi arrived at the Adiala jail and surrendered before the authorities.

"Why are you in a hurry? Even yesterday, the conviction was announced in haste," the ex-prime minister said, referring to the verdict in the cipher case a day earlier. "My lawyers are not here yet. I will submit the statement after showing it to them when they come,"

TOSHA KHANA CORRUPTION CASE



Imran said, adding that he had appeared before the court only to mark his attendance.

He then exited the courtroom, after which the court sentenced the ex-premier and his wife in absentia. Khan won the election in 2018 on a ticket of anti-corruption, but has been embroiled in political controversy and alleged corruption cases since he was dramatically ousted in a parliamentary no-confidence vote in April 2022. Reacting to the verdict, PTI's current chief Gohar Khan said the judgment only served to lower the respect of the judiciary. "The accused were not given time and the process was hurried to conclude the trial," he said, adding that the defence was not given the right of cross-examination. "Complete destruction of every existing law in Pakistan in 2 days. Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi have faced yet another kangaroo trial in which no right to defence was given to both. Like cipher, this case has no basis to stand in any Higher court. It's shameful how a complete disregard and mockery of law is in place," PTI said in a post on X. Separately, the PTI in a statement said that these decisions, reached in haste, cannot impact the fervour, any PTI supporter talks of, around election time.

It alleged that the star witness was changed and a witness who's a part-time worker did an evaluation of gifts by showing photos, while no cross-questioning was allowed, no final argument concluded and decision popped up like a predetermined process in play.

"This ridiculous decision will also be challenged," the

party announced. Khan's sister Aleema Khan said that the "judicial system has buried itself" today. Last month, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) filed a fresh case against the two in an accountability court for retaining a jewellery set which included necklaces, earrings, bracelets and a ring worth Rs 1.57 billion received from the Saudi crown prince against undervalued assessment. Khan and Bushra had only paid Rs 9 million and had fixed the price of the jewellery set through a private firm, reports said. The sentence comes just a day after a special court established under the Official Secrets Act sentenced Khan and Qureshi to 10 years in prison for the breach of state secrets. The latest conviction and sentencing are Khan's third since 2022 when he was ousted from power in 2022.

Previously, Khan was convicted in the Toshakhana case on August 5, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. The previous Toshakhana case was filed by the Election Commission of Pakistan in the charges of hiring the sale of state gifts. According to reports, Khan and his wife received 108 gifts from various heads of state, out of which they kept 58 gifts. They were also undervalued by them while paying a mandatory price to the state.

Under the rules governing Toshakhana - a Persian word meaning "treasure house" - government officials can keep gifts by paying a price for them but first the gift should be deposited. The two either failed to deposit the gift or got it for a low price by allegedly using their authority.

Court reserves verdict in Imran Khan & wife's marriage case

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A Pakistani high court on Wednesday reserved its verdict on a petition seeking the dismissal of a case challenging the 'un-Islamic' marriage of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan to his third wife, Bushra Bibi. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) Chief Justice Aamer Farooq heard the case filed by Bibi's ex-husband, Khawar Maneka, in November last year. The Express Tribune newspaper reported.

It sought legal action against 71-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party supremo Khan for marrying his present wife while she was reportedly on iddat period. The iddat period (three months) is a waiting period that a Muslim woman must observe on account of the death of her husband or the dissolution of the marriage.

During the hearing on Wednesday, PTI party lawyer Salman Akram Raja said that the case was only aimed at humiliating the petitioners, highlighting that the complaint against Khan's marriage was filed five years and 11 months after the nikkah in November 2023. The counsel for Maneka told the court that witnesses had testified in the trial court that Bibi was in another marriage with Imran at the time of their marriage ceremony, the report said. Following arguments by the counsels of both parties, the court reserved a verdict on the case, it said.

Earlier this month, a trial court indicted Khan and Bibi in the marriage case. Bibi, 49, hails from a family of landowners in Punjab. Her first marriage, which lasted about 30 years, was to Maneka, who is from a politically influential Punjab family. Earlier in the day, an accountability court sentenced the former prime minister and his wife, Bibi, to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment in a corruption case. In the Toshakhana corruption case, the jailed PTI founder was accused of retaining expensive state gifts they received during his tenure as Pakistan's premier.

EU leaders exhort allies to do more for Ukraine

AP ■ BRUSSELS

The leaders of five European Union countries urged their neighbours and allies Wednesday to ramp up military support for Ukraine, while the bloc's defence ministers debated ways to help meet the war-ravaged country's ammunition shortfall. In their appeal, the leaders of the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany and the Netherlands warned that Europe's security is tied to the fighting that started almost two years ago with Russia's invasion of its neighbour.

"Our ability to continue to support and sustain Ukraine's defense, both during the winter and in the longer term, is decisive," they wrote in the Financial Times newspaper. "In fact, it is a matter of our common European security." With neither Russian nor Ukrainian troops demonstrating an advantage in the drawn-out conflict, fears are growing

that public support for Ukraine's war effort is waning. EU and NATO leaders, who are among Ukraine's main backers, have shifted from praising the country's battlefield gains to celebrating its ability to survive against a more powerful enemy.

The prospect of Donald Trump returning to the White House after the US presidential election in November is also driving leaders and military officers to demand that Europe must do more to defend itself. During his last term, Trump undermined confidence among NATO allies that the US would back them in a security crisis.

In the Financial Times, the five leaders said it was vital to speed up arms deliveries up given that the war was unlikely to end soon. "Russia doesn't wait for anybody, and we need to act now. If Ukraine loses, the long-term consequences and costs will be much higher for all of us," they wrote. "We Europeans have a special responsibility. Therefore, we

must act. Europe's future depends on it."

According to EU estimates, Ukraine was firing around 4,000 to 7,000 artillery shells each day last summer, while Russia was launching more than 20,000 shells a day in its neighbour's territory. Russia's arms industry far outweighs Ukraine's, and Kyiv has relied on Western help to match Moscow's firepower.

Yet the 27-nation EU's plans to produce 1 million artillery rounds for Ukraine have fallen short, with only about a third of the target met. Senior EU officials have said they now expect the European defence industry to be capable of producing around 1 million shells annually by the end of this year. But the shells will not arrive quickly. NATO's procurement agency said last week that delivery of ammunition orders can take anywhere from 24 to 36 months. Even the five leaders conceded that deliveries could take a year.

Hungary opposes billions in new EU aid for Ukraine

AP ■ BRUSSELS

European Union leaders at a summit on Thursday will focus on the one member state blocking a 50-billion-euro (USD 54 billion) war support package for Ukraine: Hungary, the country in the bloc with the closest ties to Russia. Almost two years after Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine, the war has ground to a virtual stalemate and Ukraine desperately needs financial assistance.

"Securing agreement is vital for our credibility, and not least for our commitment to provide steadfast support to Ukraine," EU Council president Charles Michel said in his invitation letter to leaders of the 27-member bloc. The aid requires unanimous support. But Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban vetoed it at a previous summit in December and continues to oppose it.

"In December, we still had a little time. But from March onwards, Ukraine will start

running into difficulties according to international financial institutions," a senior EU diplomat warned ahead of the meeting in Brussels. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in accordance with EU practices. For most EU countries, helping Ukraine is crucial to protect the bloc from Russia's threats and maintain its credibility on the global stage.

"Ukraine is on European soil. It is a European country. And if we want a peaceful and stable Europe, we need to be credible in terms of our own security and defense vis-à-vis all our neighbours," French president Emmanuel Macron said. Orban has repeatedly angered EU leaders since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. He criticised EU sanctions on Russia as being largely ineffective and counter-productive. He pushed for peace talks between Moscow and Kyiv, though he hasn't detailed what that might mean for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

At the previous EU summit, however, Orban did not

prevent the EU from starting membership negotiations with Ukraine. Concerned about democratic backsliding by Orban's government, the EU has frozen Hungary's access to tens of billions of euros in funds. Hungary, with its own economic concerns, has responded by vetoing some EU political decisions.

Instead of unlocking the new aid for Ukraine, Orban has proposed to split it into annual tranches and introduce a review mechanism. But that idea has not been well received because it would allow Orban to block the money later.

If the stalemate remains, it will not mean that Ukraine will suddenly be deprived of EU assistance. The EU diplomat said leaders will make sure it won't impact Ukraine in the short term. The 26 other countries could decide, on a voluntary basis, to decouple the aid from the EU budget. But it's not their favourite option since it would require approval from several national parliaments, creating more uncertainty.

Russian lawmakers approve bill to confiscate assets of people who 'discredit' army

Moscow (AP): The lower house of Russian parliament on Wednesday approved a bill that would allow the confiscation of money, valuables and other assets from those convicted on charges of spreading "deliberately false information" about the country's military. The State Duma swiftly voted to approve the bill, which is now expected to quickly sail through the upper house and be signed by President Vladimir Putin.

Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin has said that the new law would apply to people who are convicted of publicly inciting "extremist activities" or calling for actions that would hurt the security of the state, as well as "discrediting" the armed forces. Discrediting the armed forces is a criminal offense under a law adopted as part of a sweeping government crackdown on dissent after Moscow sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022. "Everyone who tries to destroy Russia, who betrays it, must suffer the deserved punishment and pay compensation for the damage inflicted on the country, at the cost of their property," Volodin said. The proposed law does not appear to include real estate among the assets that can be seized. The existing law against "discrediting" the Russian military, which covers offenses such as "justifying terrorism" and spreading "fake news" about the armed forces, has been used extensively to silence Putin's critics.

RUSSIA SAYS IT HAS SWAPPED 195 POWS WITH UKRAINE

Kyiv (AP): Russia's Defence Ministry says Russia and Ukraine have exchanged 195 prisoners of war each. The Russian Defence Ministry said the swap was conducted on Wednesday. The announcement came a week after Russia alleged that Ukrainian forces shot down a military transport plane carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war who were to be swapped for Russian POWs. The Defence Ministry said that missiles fired from across the border brought down the transport plane in Russia's Belgorod region on January 24.

Chinese rocket scientist expelled from advisory body

Beijing (PTI): China's national political advisory body has expelled a prominent Chinese rocket scientist from its Standing Committee for corruption, as the People's Liberation Army continues the purge of its missile force previously headed by the dismissed defence minister Gen. Li Shangfu. The decision to expel Wang Xiaojun from the 14th Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) was taken at its meeting here on Monday, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

The Standing Committee is composed of a core group of senior members. Wang is formally expected to be expelled from the CPPCC during its annual session here next month as the Standing Committee doesn't have the power to do so. Wang's expulsion is considered significant as he led the development of the Long March 7 rockets used to carry essential supplies to China's under-construction space station called Tiangong, as well as

launching satellites. Besides being the leading rocket scientist, Wang also led the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, a premier research body.

His expulsion followed the government's probe into allegations of corruption against the top officials of the Chinese military's key wing, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force.

It adds to the mystery of last month's major purge of the Chinese military in which nine senior generals of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including senior officials of the country's Rocket Force, were dismissed from China's Parliament—the National People's Congress, (NPC). The Force, which handles the PLA's missiles division, was previously headed by former Defence Minister Gen. Li Shangfu, who was summarily dismissed last year on the charges of corruption. The dismissal of Li, whose whereabouts are not known yet, came after that of Foreign Minister Qin Gang, who met a similar fate.

China defends President Xi accepting Af Taliban envoy's diplomatic credentials

PTI ■ BEIJING

China on Wednesday defended its President Xi Jinping receiving the credentials from the official of the Taliban-headed interim government in Afghanistan, saying that it is a "normal diplomatic arrangement" and urged the international community not to exclude the Afghan militant group even though it is yet to respond to global concerns.

Xi on Tuesday received the credentials of ambassadors from several countries, including from Bilal Karimi, the Taliban-appointed Afghan ambassador in what was termed the first diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul, which is yet to get official recognition internationally. "It's a normal diplomatic arrangement for China to receive the new ambassador to China sent by the Afghan interim government and for him to present his credentials to the

Chinese leader," China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a media briefing here on Wednesday. When asked to state clearly if the move amounts to recognition of the Taliban government, he said, "You asked whether China officially recognises the Afghan interim government? I would like to say that China believes that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community." China is committed to a foreign policy of friendship towards all Afghan people and has maintained diplomatic ties and exchange and cooperation in various areas with Afghanistan, Wang said.

"We hope that the international community will step up engagement and exchange with the Afghan interim government, encourage it to actively respond to international concerns, jointly help with Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, and sup-

port Afghanistan's effort to combat violent terrorist forces and contribute to regional peace, stability and prosperity," he said. Without referring to the global concerns over the Taliban's ban on women's education and work and its inclination to share power with other political groups in the war-torn country, Wang said China hopes Afghanistan will further respond to the expectations of the international community.

Meanwhile, Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's chief spokesperson, on Tuesday said, "China has understood what the rest of the world has not."

"We are not in a unipolar world," he posted on X, while calling on Russia, Iran and other countries to take similar steps and upgrade bilateral diplomatic relations with Kabul. According to the state-run Xinhua news agency, Xi told the new ambassadors that China is seeking deep friendship and

mutually beneficial cooperation with their countries. Matthew Miller, spokesperson for the US State Department, said whether Beijing has officially recognised the Taliban regime is for Chinese officials to clarify.

"I have seen some comments from them to the contrary," Miller told Voice of America (VOA) on Tuesday. For the US, Miller said, the Taliban's relationship with the international community depends on their actions. "China may be getting ready to break ranks and take the final technical step either within the UN system or outside of it through a bilateral initiative," Omar Samad, a former Afghan ambassador was quoted as saying by VOA. China along with Pakistan and Russia maintained its embassy in Kabul after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, following the withdrawal of American troops from the country.

UN's top court is ruling in a case in which Ukraine accuses Russia of backing terrorists

The Hague (AP): The United Nations' top court is ruling on Wednesday in a case in which Ukraine accuses Russia of bankrolling rebels in 2014 and discriminating against Crimea's multiethnic community since its annexation of the region. It is the first of two decisions by the International Court of Justice linked to the decadelong conflict between Russia and Ukraine that exploded into a full-blown war nearly two years ago.

Wednesday's legally binding final ruling comes in a case filed in 2017, accusing Moscow of breaching conventions against discrimination and the financing of terrorism. Kyiv wants the court to order Moscow to pay reparations for attacks and crimes in eastern Ukraine, including the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, which was shot down by Russia-backed rebels on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 passen-

gers and crew. At hearings last year, a lawyer for Ukraine, David Zions, said that pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine "attacked civilians as part of a campaign of intimidation and terror. Russian money and weapons fuelled this campaign." Among the attacks was the downing of MH17. A Dutch domestic court convicted two Russians and a pro-Moscow Ukrainian in November 2022 for their roles in attack and sentenced them in their absence to life imprisonment. Also, the Netherlands and Ukraine are suing Moscow at the European Court of Human Rights over MH17. Russia denies involvement.

Another lawyer for Ukraine, Harold Koh, said that in Crimea, Russia "sought to replace the multiethnic community that had characterised Crimea before Russia's intervention with discriminatory Russian nationalism."

Billionaire Sultan Ibrahim sworn in as Malaysia's 17th king

AP ■ KUALA LUMPUR

The billionaire sultan who rules Malaysia's Johor state was sworn in as the nation's new king on Wednesday under a unique rotating monarchy system. Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar, 65, took his oath of office at the palace and signed the instrument of the proclamation of office in a ceremony witnessed by other royal families, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Cabinet members. A coronation ceremony will be held later.

One of the richest men in the country, Sultan Ibrahim has an extensive business empire ranging from real estate to telecoms and power plants. The candid monarch has close ties with Anwar and his rule

could bolster Anwar's unity government, which faces a strong Islamic opposition. Nine ethnic Malay state rulers have taken turns as king for five-year terms under the world's only such system since Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957. Malaysia has 13 states but only nine have royal families, some that trace their roots to centuries-old Malay kingdoms that were independent states until they were brought together by the British.

Sultan Ibrahim's election to the national throne by his fellow rulers in October was widely expected based on an established rotation order. Sultan Nazrin, the ruler of Perak state and next in line to the throne, was reelected as deputy king.

KING'S ROLE

Known as the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, or He Who is Made Lord, the king plays a largely ceremonial role, as administrative power is vested in the prime minister and Parliament. The monarch is the nominal head of the government and armed forces, and is highly regarded as the protector of Islam and Malay tradition. All laws, Cabinet appointments and the dissolution of Parliament for general elections require his assent. The king has the power to proclaim an emergency and pardon criminals.

Sultan Ibrahim succeeded Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah of Pahang state, who presided over a tumultuous period that included COVID-



19 lockdowns and political instability. The political influence of the king has grown in recent years. Sultan Abdullah intervened in the past to decide who became prime minister, including naming Anwar as prime minister after 2022 general elections led to a hung parliament. Sultan Ibrahim has indicated he will maintain a hands-on approach. He said in a media interview last month that he would not want to waste five years on the throne as a "puppet king" but will focus on fighting graft and deepening unity in the country. The sultan and other rulers have also warned against attempts by the opposition to oust Anwar's government, calling instead for political stability.

WHO IS SULTAN IBRAHIM?

Sultan Ibrahim, whose mother is English, is also vocal about welfare issues and takes annual road trips on his motorbike to meet the people in his state. He has also made no secret of his wealth. Earlier Wednesday, the sultan flew from Johor to Kuala Lumpur on his private jet, a gold-and-blue Boeing 737. Apart from a fleet of jets, he has an extensive collection of cars and motorcycles, as well as properties abroad. Sultan Ibrahim is also the only ruler with a private army — a condition agreed upon for the state to join modern-day Malaysia. Sultan Ibrahim's high corporate profile — including a stake in the multibillion-dollar Forest City

development project in Johor with China's beleaguered developer Country Garden — has raised eyebrows amid concerns of a possible conflict of interest. He has said in the media interview recently that he plans to revive a high-speed rail link project with Singapore and bolster the troubled Forest City project.

But the sultan has defended his business dealings. In 2015, he quipped that he has to "earn a living, like ordinary Malaysians" as he cannot rely on his 27,000 ringgit (\$5,700) monthly state allowance. His wife Raja Zarith Sofiah, who is from another royal family, is an Oxford graduate and a prolific writer who has authored several children's books. They have five sons and a daughter.

Blame game erupts between Maldives ruling, oppn parties

PTI ■ MALE

Hours after the Prosecutor General of Maldives was attacked by unidentified persons on Monday, a blame game has erupted between the ruling and the opposition parties that called the attack “politically motivated,” according to local media and social media reports. “Prosecutor General Hussain Shameem was attacked on a street in Male City. He is receiving treatment for his injuries at the ADK Hospital,” Sun.mv, a news portal, said.

Former Maldivian president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih described the attack as “politically motivated,” prompting the Home Minister Ali Ihusan to ask him to share information to back his claim. In a post on X, Solih, also the interim leader of the largest opposition outfit, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), said: “Politically motivated acts of violence have no

place in a democratic society and I call on the government to be swift in bringing the perpetrators to justice.”

Home Minister Ali Ihusan asked Solih to share information to back his claim that the violent attack on Prosecutor General Shameem was politically motivated. Responding to Solih’s post on X from his official designation’s handle of Minister of Homeland Security and Technology, Ihusan said, “Maldives police (@PoliceMv) is currently investigating this case. Former President declaring that the attack was ‘politically motivated’ suggests that former President has credible information about motive and people behind this attack.”

“I would like to request former President to please share the credible information referred here with the Police immediately. I have asked investigators to coordinate with former Presidents office in this regard. Police is treat-

ing this case as top priority and will bring perpetrators to justice,” he said.

Meanwhile, condemning the attack on Shameem, the MDP said in a statement: “The alleged close ties between top government officials and criminal gangs were resulting in open violent assaults on top state officials.” The MDP accused President Muizzu’s administration of failing to provide proper protection to officials charged with fulfilling constitutional duties and responsibilities.

“This party also notes that after having successfully driven down violent assaults in the Maldives during the former administration, such crimes have increased after President Muizzu took office,” the portal reported, quoting the MDP statement.

Muizzu, considered to be close to China, defeated India-friendly incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the presidential runoff held in

September last year. “This party believes that such fearless attacks on top state officials are a result of the close ties that top government officials have with criminal groups operating in the Maldives, and because of the protection the government provides these criminal groups,” the opposition party said.

The MDP also called on the government “to sever its alleged ties with criminal groups,” and to run a proper investigation into the attack on Shameem and bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Prosecutor General’s Office (PGO) said in a statement that Shameem was attacked with a weapon by two people on a motorbike. “While neither the PGO nor the police have specified the type of weapon used, a police spokesperson had said earlier that they had ruled out the use of a sharp-edged weapon,” the news portal said.

EU aims to launch Red Sea naval mission within 3 weeks

AP ■ BRUSSELS

The European Union plans to launch a naval mission in the Red Sea within three weeks to help defend cargo ships against attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen that are hampering trade and driving up prices, the bloc’s top diplomat said Wednesday.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said he wants the mission to be up and running by February 17. Officials say that seven EU countries are ready to provide ships or planes. Belgium has already committed to send a frigate. Germany is expected to do the same. Last week, US and British forces bombed multiple targets in eight locations used by the Iranian-backed Houthis. It was the second time the two allies have conducted coordinated retaliatory strikes on the rebels’ missile-launching capabilities. The Houthis have waged a persistent campaign of drone and missile attacks on commercial ships since the start of the Israel-Hamas war



in October, but Borrell insisted that the EU mission will not take part in any military strikes. “This is the purpose: protection of the ships. Intercepting of the attacks against the ships. Not participating in any kinds of actions against the Houthis. Only blocking the attacks of the Houthis,” Borrell told reporters before chairing a meeting of EU defence ministers in Brussels.

The ministers were expected to decide later on Wednesday which member country should lead the naval effort — France, Greece and Italy are vying for that role —

and where the mission’s headquarters should be based.

Borrell said that businesses have been demanding EU action, given the trade implications of forcing merchant ships to bypass the Red Sea on their way to and from Europe.

“Many European firms asked us to do that because their business model is suffering a lot due to the high increase in cost and having to go down to South Africa,” he said, referring to the alternative route that commercial ships are taking. “It’s affecting prices, it’s affecting inflation. So, it’s a natural endeavor for us to try to avoid this risk.”

US announces overhaul of its annual lottery for H-1B visas

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The US has announced a major overhaul of its annual lottery for the H-1B speciality occupation visas, popular among Indian IT professionals, to curtail the potential for fraud and improve and streamline the registration system. Separately, the US on January 29 has formally launched a pilot programme to renew the much sought-after H-1B visas domestically, a move that is likely to benefit thousands of Indian tech professionals.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. The new overhauled system, among other things, includes the provision of a beneficiary-centric selection process for registrations by employers. As a result, unlike in

the past when multiple applications by an individual often resulted in abuse in fraud of the system, the H-1B visa applications would now be counted and accepted based on individual applicants.

Even if one individual files multiple applications for various companies, they would be counted as one application based on their personal credentials like passport numbers.

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) also announced a set of new rules which are aimed at strengthening the integrity of and reducing the potential for fraud in the H-1B registration process.

This includes reducing the potential for gaming the registration system and ensuring each beneficiary would have the same chance of being selected, regardless of the number of registrations submitted on their behalf, the federal agency said on Tuesday.

“We’re always looking for ways to bolster integrity and

curtail the potential for fraud while improving and streamlining our application processes,” said USCIS Director Ur M Jaddou.

“The improvements in these areas should make H-1B selections more equitable for petitioners and beneficiaries and will allow for the H-1B process to be fully electronic based on registration, if applicable, until final decision and transmission of approved petitions to the Department of State,” he said. USCIS also said the initial registration period for the fiscal 2025 H-1B cap will open at noon on March 6 and run through March 22.

During this period, prospective petitioners and their representatives, if applicable, must use a USCIS online account to register each beneficiary electronically for the selection process and pay the associated registration fee for each beneficiary.

Starting February 28, companies will be allowed to open their account which can be used

to start and complete the registration process.

USCIS said this final rule contains provisions that will create a beneficiary-centric selection process for registrations by employers, codify start date flexibility for certain petitions subject to the congressionally mandated H-1B cap, and add more integrity measures related to the registration process. According to USCIS, under the beneficiary-centric process, registrations will be selected by a unique beneficiary rather than by registration. This new process is designed to reduce the potential for fraud and ensure each beneficiary would have the same chance of being selected, regardless of the number of registrations submitted on their behalf by an employer, it said.

Starting with fiscal 2025, which begins on October 1, 2024, initial registration period, USCIS will require registrants to provide valid passport information or valid travel documentation for each beneficiary.

The passport or travel document provided must be the one the beneficiary, if or when abroad, intends to use to enter the United States if issued an H-1B visa. Each beneficiary must only be registered under one passport or travel document, it said.

USCIS is also clarifying requirements regarding the requested employment start date on certain petitions subject to the congressionally mandated H-1B cap to permit filing with requested start dates that are after October 1 of the relevant fiscal year, consistent with current policy. Also, the H-1B final rule codifies USCIS’ ability to deny or revoke H-1B petitions where the underlying registration contained a false attestation or was otherwise invalid. Also under the new rule, USCIS may deny or revoke the approval of an H-1B petition if

it determines that the fee associated with the registration is declined, not reconciled, disputed, or otherwise invalid after submission, it said.

In a statement, American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Director of Government Relations Sharvari Dalal-Dheini said the new H-1B registration process will revise how lottery registration is run and create a more equitable system.

“After last year’s registration period, when more than 750,000 registrations were submitted for 85,000 visas, it was clear that the existing system was unworkable. AILA and our partners advocated for exactly the sort of changes announced in this rule;

changes that will ensure a beneficiary-centric lottery process to level the playing field,” she said. “It is commendable that DHS took steps to shift from a flawed model to one that will create a fairer system in time for this year’s registration period,” Dalal-Dheini said.

Meanwhile, the pilot programme to renew the much sought-after H-1B foreign work visas domestically will allow H-1B visa holders who are currently in status to renew their visas in the US before a temporary trip abroad. An announcement in this regard was made during the historic State visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June last year.

Notices under SARFESI Act for Loan Account No. LBPNP0004952659, LBND00005332938, LBPNP0004952664 Name of the Borrower Rajeev Ahuja/ Rekha Rani/Versha Rani property HOUSE NO 231 EWS, MEASURING 51.25 SQ YARD, SITUATED IN HOUSING BOARD COLONY PANIPAT WITHIN THE LIMIT OF M.C. ABADI KNOWN AS WEAVERS COLONY TEHSIL AND DISTRICT PANIPAT HARYANA and 13.2 dispatch date is May 09th, 2023, were published as Demand Notice under section 13(2) dated May 03rd, 2023 & Symbolic notice under 13(4) dated November 05, 2023 and same was also published in The Pioneer + Uttam Hindu 13(2) notice publication dated July 12, 2023 & 13(4) notice publication dated November 09, 2023 respectively. We wish to mention that inadvertently and unintentionally a typographical error has occurred in the said notices and address mentioned as, PART OF HOUSE NO 842, WARD NO 7, INSIDE MC LIMITS PANIPAT HARYANA, measuring area 31 Sq Yard And 13.2 Dispatch date mentioned in publication as May 03rd 2023. We therefore, request you to please read the HOUSE NO 231 EWS, MEASURING 51.25 SQ YARD, SITUATED IN HOUSING BOARD COLONY PANIPAT WITHIN THE LIMIT OF M.C. ABADI KNOWN AS WEAVERS COLONY TEHSIL AND DISTRICT PANIPAT HARYANA and 13.2 dispatch date is May 09th, 2023.

Date : February 01, 2024
Place : Delhi

Authorized Officer
ICICI Bank Limited

10k Indian construction workers to reach Israel



PTI ■ JERUSALEM

With Israel’s construction sector suffering a severe manpower crisis post the October 7 conflict with Hamas, some 10,000 workers from India are to make their way here starting next week, industry sources said on Wednesday. These 10,000 workers will reach in batches of 700 to 1,000 a week, a source in the Israel’s Builders Association (IBA) told PTI here.

With Israel’s latest conflict with Hamas in Gaza a little short of four months, and a ban on the entry of Palestinian workers and the departure of several thousand other foreign workers, the Israeli construction industry has been facing a deep crisis and several ongoing projects are getting either stalled or delayed.

Following the conflict, Israel has banned the entry of Palestinian workers. The departure of several thousand other foreign workers, the Israeli construction industry has been facing a deep crisis.

Israeli business daily The Calcalist in a report in Hebrew last week said that the quota of foreign manpower for the construction industry has been increased from 30,000 to 50,000 and that the Israeli government last month approved the arrival of 10,000 workers from India. The IBA source confirmed to PTI that the details in the Calcalist report

were correct.

When asked about the arrival of the first batch of workers, the source said, “We hope they’ll come next week.”

The workers to arrive in Israel would be part of the private recruitment track, which was approved by the government in parallel with the bilateral (inter-governmental) track to enable rapid recruitment of workers into the construction industry.

The IBA is looking to hire workers also from other countries such as Mexico, Kenya and Malawi. Screening of workers is said to have begun three weeks ago in India, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan. “To date, out of about 8,000 workers examined, about 5,500 have been found suitable for work in Israel – the vast majority Indian,” The Calcalist had reported.

“The Indian construction workers are at a high professional level. Many of them were previously employed in the Gulf countries, so these are skilled manpower. Most of them are fluent in English, and those who have worked in the Gulf also know Arabic, which is a great advantage,” an industry source was quoted by the business daily as saying.

The selection process is led by IBA’s CEO Igal Slovik and Izchak Gurvitz, who heads the associations’ division dealing with workers’ issues and the selection team.

PUBLIC NOTICE

My Client Sh. Manish Juneja S/o Sh. Prithvi Raj Juneja, R/o A – 1/73A, Maa Shakti Apartment, Near Maa Kali Mata Mandir, Paschim Vihar, West Delhi – 110063 do hereby declare that the companies namely (i) Juneja & Bhel Trading (OPC) Pvt. Ltd., (ii) ZIRPHIMATIC traders Pvt. Ltd., (iii) Shum – Star Globewell Business Solutions Pvt. Ltd., are not belongs to my client as some people on the pretext of job take his sign on some unknown papers and make him director of the companies. He is not responsible for the acts of the said companies.

Piyush Sharma (Advocate)
(D/1395/2021)
Chamber No. F-611
Karkardooma Courts, Delhi-32

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Mudrit Bhardwaj S/o Shri Satish Kumar Sharma R/o B-63, Manas Apartment, Mayur Vihar, Phase-1 Extension, Delhi-110091, have changed my name Mudrit Bhardwaj to Mudrit Bhardwaj for all future purposes

PD(254)C

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY
e-TENDER CALL NOTICE
No. EM/WSO-II/Sweeping Machine/02/2023/
Date: 29.01.2024
e-TEN No. EM/WSO-2024
Name of the work “Hiring of 01 no. of Truck Mounted Conveyerised Mechanical Road Sweeping Machine for a period of (03+02)years”. Estimated cost: **Rs.6.61,00,020/-** excluding GST and cost of Diesel. Last date & time of submission of bid: **dt. 19.02.2024 up to 18:00 Hrs.**

Refer our website for details
<https://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app>
Sd/- Executive Engineer (M)
Workshop Division-II
Paradip Port Authority
Ch.No. M-7, Near SBI, Western Wing, Tis Hazari Court, Delhi-54

PUBLIC NOTICE

To be known to all, **SH. GULSHAN GANDHI** S/o LATE SH. B.S. GANDHI & **SMT. MEENU GANDHI** W/O SH. GULSHAN GANDHI both R/o BG-7/135, PASCHIM VIHAR, NEW DELHI-110063 allottee(s)-allottee of PROPERTY NO. 137, BLOCK-C, PLOT-36, SECTOR-36, ROHINI, DELHI, have applied for certified copies & conversion from leasehold to freehold in DDA. The original documents i.e. Demand Cum Allotment Letter, Possession Letter, Site Possession Slip & other Relevant Documents of the above said property have been lost. An EIR/MCAR No.1392475/2024 dated 30/01/2024 to this effect has been lodged in PS, Crime Branch, Delhi.

Any person(s) claiming any right, interest, having any objection or found in possession of original documents, may write/contact with above named person at above Address/Phone No. 965054488 within 15 days from the date of publication of this notice. The person claiming any right, interest, objection with respect to this property, can personally inform or write to Deputy Director (I&B) Romi, Delhi Development Authority, Vides Sadan, New Delhi-110023.

Naveen Aggarwal (Advocate)
Ch.No. M-7, Near SBI, Western Wing, Tis Hazari Court, Delhi-54

कार्यालय नगर निगम, हरिद्वार
पत्रांक- 503 / संदीपो / 2023-24 पुनः ई-निविदा सूचना दिनांक- 31.01.2024

नगर निगम हरिद्वार द्वारा स्वच्छता सर्वेक्षण-2024 हेतु परामर्श सहायता एवं अन्य समस्त कार्य कर्म के माध्यम से कराये जाने हेतु www.uktenders.gov.in पर ई-निविदा आमंत्रित की जाती है जिसका विवरण निम्नानुसार है:-

| S.No. | Scheduled/Information | Date | Time |
|-------|---|------------|----------|
| 1 | Date of Online publication | 01.02.2024 | 01:00 PM |
| 2 | Document Online Download start Date | 01.02.2024 | 01:00 PM |
| 3 | Bid submission Online Start Date | 01.02.2024 | 02:00 PM |
| 4 | Bid Submission Online End Date | 09.02.2024 | 02:00 PM |
| 5 | Offline Submission of Hard/Original copy of Contract End date | 09.02.2024 | 03:00 PM |
| 6 | Bid opening Date | 09.02.2024 | 04:00 PM |

निविदा की विस्तृत जानकारी www.uktenders.gov.in से प्राप्त की जा सकती है। उक्त तिथियों/निविदा में कोई भी संशोधन मात्र www.uktenders.gov.in पर ही Publish किया जायेगा।

सहायक नगर आयुक्त
नगर निगम हरिद्वार

verka
Hear from us, Hear the Difference

THE PUNJAB STATE CO-OPERATIVE MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION LTD.
SCO 153-155, SECTOR 34-A, CHANDIGARH-160022, EPABX No. 0172-5041812,66

Notice Inviting Tender www.verka.coop

e/sealed tenders are hereby invited for the purchase and supply of following items:-

| Sr. No. | Name of Work/Item | Period/Tentative Qty |
|-------------|--|---|
| 1. | For Verka Mohali Dairy • Polyfilm/Polyliner scrap. • Disposal of other Unservicable material lying in main store/Procurement store. | Annual 12 lac 8 lac |
| 2. | For Verka Chandigarh Dairy Manual Tenders:- • Lids for Ice Cream cups (65ml & 80 ml) • Lids for Ice Cream cones (125ml) | Annual/ 12 lac 8 lac |
| e-Tenders:- | • Chikki • Krisp Refined Palm kernel Oil • Mango Pulp- Concentrate • Ice Cream Cones with foil wrappers(125ml)(Butterscotch, Chocolate & Cookie delight) | Annual/ 9000 kg 11,500 kg 35 MT 8 lac |
| 3. | For Verka Patiala Dairy Labour contract for providing of unskilled, semi skilled, skilled, highly skilled and suitable/eligible personnel for different posts through outsourcing. | Annual |
| 4. | For Verka Bathinda Dairy Operation, Repair and Maintenance of Pouch filling Machines, Tray washer. | Annual/ 35000 ltr. to 70000 approx.ltr per day |
| 5. | For Verka Ludhiana Dairy a) Outsourcing the activity for Housekeeping and Horticulture work. b) Supply, Installation and Commissioning of:- • GLC Machine • RP-HPLC Machine. | Annual/ One time purchase 01 No. 01 No. |
| 6. | For Verka Amritsar Dairy Hiring of can route vehicles for lifting of milk from DCS to MCC (Capacity: 1 ton & above 2 ton). | Annual/ 53 No's |
| 7. | For Verka Jalandhar Dairy Providing Un-skilled, Semi- skilled, Skilled, Highly skilled labour through service provider who is having EPF/ESI no. and labour providing License. | Annual/ As per requirement |

NOTE:
1. For complete details regarding above tender (NIT), please visit our website i.e. www.verka.coop & e Tendering portal i.e. eproc.punjab.gov.in.
2. Corrigendum, if any, will be uploaded on website only.

Dy. General Manager (Purchase)

Office of The General Manager (Admin), Head Office
Uttarakhand PEYAL NIGAM, 11-MOHINI ROAD, DEHRADUN
Off. Ph. : 2678078, 2672404 | Fax : 0135-2672347 E-mail : upsnvsn@gmail.com

Letter No. 49 / Nivida / 27 Date: 31.01.2024

| E-Tender Notice | | | |
|--|--|---|------------------------------|
| S. No. | Name of Scheme | Estimated Cost of Work (Rs. in Lakhs) (Including GST) | Completion Period (in month) |
| 1 | Construction of Proposed Type-2 Qtr. For Fire Station, SIDCUL At Haridwar (Uttarakhand) | 249.10 | 12 |
| 2 | Construction of Proposed Type-2 Qtr. For Fire Station, Mayapur At Haridwar (Uttarakhand) | 334.76 | 12 |
| Name and Address of Officer Inviting the Bid :- | | | |
| Name and Address of Officer Inviting the Bid :- | | General Manager (Admin), Head Office, Uttarakhand Peyal Nigam, Dehradun. | |
| Date and Time of Availability of bid documents in the portal :- | | 01.02.2024 - 12:00 Hrs. | |
| Last Date/Time for receipt of bids in the portal:- | | 19.02.2024 - 17:00 Hrs. | |

Details of subsequent addendum/corrigendum/cancellation etc. may be obtained from the website.

Further details can be seen from the e-procurement portal “<https://uktenders.gov.in>”

General Manager (Admin)

MOULIN COMMERCIAL LIMITED
CIN: L74899DL1982PLC067811
Regd Office: 1, Anand Gram, Aya Nagar, Mehrauli, Gurgaon Road, New Delhi-110047
Company's website : www.moulin.co.in

Extract of Statement of Unaudited Financial Results for the Quarter ended December 31, 2023

| (Amount in lakhs except EPS) | | | | |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| S. No | Particulars | Quarter ended 31.12.2023 (Unaudited) | Nine months ended 31.12.2023 (Unaudited) | Quarter ended 31.12.2022 (Unaudited) |
| 1 | Total income from operations (net) | 29.59 | 86.30 | 21.88 |
| 2 | Net Profit/ (Loss) for the period (before Tax, Exceptional and/or Extraordinary Items) | 12.50 | 27.84 | 6.29 |
| 3 | Net Profit/(Loss) for the period before tax (after Exceptional and/or Extraordinary Items) | 12.50 | 27.84 | 6.29 |
| 4 | Net Profit/(Loss) for the period after tax (after Exceptional and/or Extraordinary Items) | 9.13 | 20.34 | 4.72 |
| 5 | Total Comprehensive Income for the period (Comprising Profit / (Loss) for the period (after tax) and Other Comprehensive Income (after tax) | 10.37 | 20.34 | 4.74 |
| 6 | Equity Share Capital (Earnings Per Share (of ₹ 10/- each) (Basic: (Not annualised) | 57.30 | 57.30 | 57.30 |
| 7 | Diluted : | 1.81 | 3.55 | 0.83 |
| | | 1.81 | 3.55 | 0.83 |

NOTES:
a) The above is an extract of the detailed format of Quarter ended 31.12.2023 Unaudited Financial Results filed with the Stock Exchanges under Regulation 33 of the SEBI (Listing and Other Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015. The full format of the Quarter ended 31.12.2023 Unaudited Financial Results are available on the website of the Stock Exchange and of the listed entity, i.e., www.moulin.co.in.
b) Un-Audited Financial Results for the quarter ended 31st December, 2023 were reviewed by the Audit Committee and approved by the Board of Directors of the Company at their respective meetings held on 30th January, 2024.

For and on behalf of the Board of Directors **s/-**
Ashish Gupta
Managing Director
DIN: 00115090

Date : 01.02.2024
Place : Kolkata

| PUBLIC NOTICE | | |
|--|--------------|-------------|
| The general public is informed that the cars with the following car numbers which have completed their life Petrol Cars 15 Years Diesel Cars 10 Years. The MCD drive was confiscated by Pine View Technology Pvt Ltd and has not been claimed by anyone till now. All these vehicle owners are informed to come to the company's office and claim the scrap value of the vehicle. Otherwise, all these vehicles will be scrapped in the next three days. | | |
| D.95X0594, | MH04BP1622, | DL7C05028, |
| D.95T6722, | TN21Q7481, | UP32NM6295, |
| D.85AH3466, | KL8M4146, | DL3SA0133, |
| D.95X1016, | DL45A4252, | UP15A1515, |
| HR13B6068, | DL95Q3932, | DL95K3907, |
| D.95R9186, | DL95K9992, | DL55U0650, |
| D.9CA1373, | DL95Q2553, | UP78AP847, |
| D.9CMA609, | DL95R0306, | DNU1857, |
| SJ41N167390, | DL45AW0767, | DL3SD7235, |
| D.7CJ0636, | DL75H4707, | HR51M1266, |
| D.2CAH4903, | DN05984, | DL58K4336, |
| DL4CNE1770, | HR26AS9854, | RJ1913M651, |
| UP32BJ4677, | BEAT7173, | UP32CL7426, |
| D.45B97115, | DL55S6810, | UP95M8392, |
| D.95X0429, | DL85AP1974, | UP95S408, |
| IN880456, | DL95Q1958, | PH08V6238, |
| DL3CAB6420, | DL45AK9420, | DL3CBB8817, |
| D.955030, | DL35W9745, | DL55W3030, |
| D.95H3734, | DL95L9894, | DL85AA6573, |
| DL45B5174, | DL55W8399, | DL65Z0907, |
| DL45A2538, | PB35C6669, | DL2CNS6501, |
| DNX3682, | DL3CAW8967, | HR779620, |
| RJ145B7291, | DL15P4723, | DL9CPS731, |
| DL35E0648, | DL45B60378, | DL1CP4212, |
| D.35AY4524, | KA09DE5098, | DL4CND6553, |
| D.35T3025, | DL85U7702, | DL9C8R740, |
| CNH785, | GJ10M0660, | DL4CNC2198, |
| D.9C9270, | DL45B87506, | DL13C0262, |
| D.2CAJ1397, | DL35AF8522, | HR26BW407, |
| D.35F7455, | DL35AE0004, | DL1CL1910, |
| D.45B6317, | DL95R3586, | DL8C2868, |
| D.35G3755, | UP85R3849, | UP79B2044, |
| UA07K4836, | DL85E8565, | DL55E2833, |
| D.45AC9024, | DL55V0226, | DL95P7020, |
| MP04NM2873, | DL35AW7472, | DL95V6063, |
| D.95B0446, | DL95R4259, | DL4CAN8070, |
| D.95L8189, | DL95V5922, | DL3CAZ5450, |
| D.65X8933, | MA35Y081, | DL6CJ0226, |
| D.95L4886, | S00310964, | DL1LL1434, |
| GJ1JQ0060, | NORE93G, | DL85AM3286, |
| D.35AE8727, | UP81E0807, | DL85S4072, |
| D.85AF7033, | DL95R2747, | DL75AM1692, |
| D.95T0185, | DL95L7950, | DL85AA2511, |
| GJ1E1873, | DL35AL0180, | DL85B2423, |
| AP28M9691, | DL45AF6013, | BR01AG5488, |
| D.25L0758, | DL95U5594, | UP44H2925, |
| D.95A9346, | UP15U1887, | DL85AG6588, |
| D.95K2730, | DL95U7239, | DL75A9422, |
| D.9C0U0161, | DL2CAK6542, | DL95T5058, |
| 1812975171, | DL45C04144, | UP0726104, |
| D.8C7H476, | DL4CAB5041, | D2CP6165, |
| D.10CF2649, | DL9C059238, | DL3CBA0914, |
| UP21T2067, | DL2CP8587, | DL6C6G7266, |
| D.9CL8697, | DL95U7685, | DL10C1858, |
| GJ1665932, | DL85AK1501, | DL1C6J373, |
| D.65V5745, | DL45V8120, | BR1E2851, |
| D.75AH1741, | DL65S0768, | DL95Q1842, |
| PB30E6901, | DL95V1799, | DL45B3789, |
| D.85T8822, | RJ14ST0336, | UP65W1456, |
| HR26AR5410, | DL95L9354, | DL95J0260, |
| HR26AA1672, | UP77D7306, | DL95L2924, |
| D.95Z26557, | DL95T3207, | UP84C1823, |
| D.45AA4896, | DL45B59920, | DL45AM7295, |
| UA07B4110, | DL9CQ6066, | DL95Q2473, |
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Import duty on mobile parts cut to 10 per cent

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A day ahead of the interim budget, India has slashed the import duty on spare parts, like battery cover, lens and SIM socket, used in mobile phone manufacturing to 10 per cent, from 15 per cent. The duty cut is aimed at boosting local production and exports, as well as reducing prices in local markets. The finance ministry on January 30, notified the cut in duty on all goods for use in manufacture of cellular mobile phones to 10 per cent. The other components include battery cover, front, middle and back cover of phone, main lens, screw, SIM socket, or other mechanical items. Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw in a post on X said the duty rationalisation would strengthen the mobile phone

manufacturing ecosystem through this measure. “Rationalization of customs duties brings much-needed certainty and clarity for the industry,” Vaishnaw said. GTRI Co Founder Ajay Srivastava said the duty cut will have no impact on improving export competitiveness of mobile phones made in India as all inputs, parts, and components used in the making of mobile phones for exports can already be imported at zero duty under various government schemes like SEZ, Advance authorisation. Firms like Apple use these schemes. “The government should watch out if the benefit of duty cuts are passed to domestic mobile phone buyers through price cuts,” Srivastava said. The Indian Cellular and Electronics Association



(ICEA) Chairman Pankaj Mohindroo said this is a critical policy intervention by the government towards making mobile manufacturing competitive in India. “Electronics have improved from the 9th position a few years ago to India’s 5th largest export in 2024. Mobiles

constitute over 52 per cent of electronics exports thanks to the Production-Linked Incentive Scheme. This is the first industry to leapfrog out of import substitution to export-led growth within the last 8 years,” Mohindroo said. Nangia Andersen India Associate Director- Indirect

Tax, Khushbu Trivedi, said, the import duty on components like battery covers, main lenses, back covers, and other plastic and metal mechanical items has been decreased to 10 per cent with corresponding inputs/ parts used in manufacturing of a few components brought down to nil duty rate in order to promote local manufacturing. Additionally, duties on display assembly parts for LCD panels have been reduced to 10 per cent for better alignment. “The government has in effect slashed the import duty on mobile components with a clear intention of boosting the indigenous assembly of mobile phones. This positive move is poised to facilitate level playing field to Indian companies by enhancing their competitiveness at the global stage, ultimately contributing

to the growth of India’s export sector,” Trivedi added. SW India Practice Leader - Indirect Tax Ankur Gupta said in pursuit of becoming the world’s fourth-largest cellular mobile phone exporter, India is strategically working towards curbing the import of mobile phone components as finished products. “The government is redirecting its focus towards importing raw materials to stimulate domestic manufacturing of these crucial components. The implementation of the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme is a pivotal step taken by the government to incentivize manufacturers within the mobile phone industry, encouraging not only the assembly of complete devices but also the production of individual parts,” Gupta said.

RBI bars Paytm from accepting deposits after February 29

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The RBI on Wednesday barred Paytm Payments Bank Ltd from accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account, prepaid instruments, wallets, and FASTags, among others after February 29, 2024. The Reserve Bank’s action against Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) follows a comprehensive system audit report and subsequent compliance validation report of the external auditors. These reports revealed persistent non-compliances and continued material supervisory concerns in the bank, warranting further supervisory action, the RBI said in a statement.

“No further deposits or credit transactions or top ups shall be allowed in any customer accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, NCMC cards, etc. After February 29, 2024, other than any interest, cashbacks, or refunds which may be credited anytime,” it said. The central bank further said withdrawal or utilisation of balances by its customers from their accounts including savings bank accounts, current accounts, prepaid instruments, FASTags, National Common Mobility Cards are to be permitted without any restrictions, up to their available balance. The RBI in March 2022 had directed PPBL to stop onboarding new customers with immediate effect.



4 members of Finance Commission appointed

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has appointed former expenditure secretary Ajay Narayan Jha and SBI Group Chief Economic Advisor Soumya Kanti Ghosh, and two other members of the newly-constituted 16th Finance Commission. The commission, chaired by former vice chairman of Niti Aayog Arvind Panagariya, will have 4 members, who will be assisted by Secretary Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey, two joint secretaries and one economic advisor. Besides Jha, who was also a member in the previous 15th Finance Commission, retired bureaucrat Annie George Mathew and Artha Global Executive Director Niranjani Rajadhyaksha have been appointed as full-time members of the 16th Finance Commission. Soumya Kanti Ghosh will be a part-time member, the finance ministry said in a notification. “The chairman and other members of the commission shall hold office from the date on which they respectively assume office up to the date of submission of report or

October 31, 2025, whichever is earlier,” the notification added. The government constituted the commission under the chairmanship of Panagariya on December 31, 2023. The panel would submit its report to the President by October 31, 2025. The report would be covering five-year period beginning April 1, 2026. Besides suggesting tax devolution between the Centre and states and revenue augmentation measures, the commission would review the present arrangements for financing disaster management initiatives with reference to the funds constituted under the Disaster Management Act, 2005. Finance Commission is a constitutional body that gives suggestions on centre-state financial relations. The erstwhile 15th Finance Commission under NK Singh had recommended that states be given 41 per cent of the divisible tax pool of the Centre during five-year period 2021-22 to 2025-26, which is at the same level as was recommended by 14th Finance Commission under Y V Reddy.

PTI ■ MUMBAI

India’s gold demand witnessed 10-year decline of 3 per cent at 747.5 tonnes in 2023, and going ahead the spurt in demand could be anywhere between 800-900 tonnes, if prices hold out and are not significantly volatile, the World Gold Council said in a report. The country’s total gold demand stood at 774.1 tonnes in 2022, according to the World Gold Council (WGC) Gold Demand Trends report 2023. “India’s gold demand in 2023 declined by 3 per cent to 747.5 tonnes, strongly influenced by rising gold prices. Although consumer interest remained high, it lagged trade sentiment. October’s price correction during Navratri stimulated a robust consumer response,

boosting Diwali sales in November. “However, demand declined in December as gold prices resumed an upward trend, resulting in a 9 per cent drop in fourth quarter jewellery demand compared to the same period of 2022,” WGC Regional CEO, India, Somasundaram PR told PTI. Price of gold was volatile throughout 2023, with the yellow metal reaching a new high of Rs 61,845 per 10 gm on May 4 in the domestic market and USD 2,083 an ounce in global markets, and this trend continued with the precious metal reaching another high of Rs 61,914 per 10 grams in November 16. Looking forward to 2024, India’s gold demand should benefit from ongoing positive economic conditions and if the



prices hold out are not significantly volatile there is likely to be a big spurt in demand which could be anywhere between 800-900 tonnes, he said. “The subdued demand range of 700-800 tonnes since 2019 attributable to continuous rise in prices, increase in duties, stock market outperformance,

near-term elections spending impact and acceptance of elevated price levels, suggest the potential for a spurt in demand in the near future. However, any short-term impediments to higher demand could arise from another round of sharp price hikes and volatility triggered by global factors,” he added.

ADB mobilises ₹1,250 crore through green bonds

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Asian Development Bank on Wednesday said it has garnered Rs 1,250 crore (about USD 150 million) through its largest local currency green bond issue so far. The issue is structured as a 4-year currency linked bond, with a one-time repayment at maturity and carrying a fixed interest rate of 6.72 per cent per year, ADB said in a statement. The bond is denominated in Indian rupees but settled in United States dollars, with returns to investors indexed to the performance of the Indian currency, it said. Such bond structures are popularly known as masala bonds in the Indian financial community, it said. Proceeds of the green bond will be deployed to finance ADB’s private sector renewable energy and green finance projects, which adhere to ADB’s priority



for tackling climate change, building climate and disaster resilience, and enhancing environmental sustainability, it said. “Sustainability is a key driver for international capital markets, and ADB is long established as a regular issuer of green bonds. The ability to finance climate change projects with local currency green bonds represents the apex of our ambition, while contributing to capital market development,” said ADB Treasurer Pierre Van Peteghem. The bond is listed on the Luxembourg

Stock Exchange. It was arranged by Standard Chartered Bank and subscribed by a group of the UK and US investors. Investors were drawn to the benchmark size for a local currency bond with a green theme backed by a multilateral development bank. ADB has been a frequent borrower in the Indian rupee bond market, debuting in the domestic bond market in 2004 and completing multiple masala bond issues since 2014 to raise more than USD 1 billion equivalent. The latest bond offering represents ADB’s return to the Indian rupee bond market after a 3-year hiatus. ADB issued its first local currency green bond in Indian rupees in 2017. ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members-49 from the region.



India sees 46 per cent of world total real time digital transactions, says Murmu

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has emerged as the world’s second-largest producer of mobile phones and logged a five-fold increase in mobile phone manufacturing in the last decade, President Droupadi Murmu said on Wednesday, outlining the global acknowledgement of India’s prowess in digital transactions and systems. Her first address to a joint sitting of the two Houses in the new Parliament building resonated with references to the rapid expansion of the startup ecosystem, nation’s AI push, speedy 5G roll-out, as well as the semiconductor sector investments. Today, 46 per cent of the world’s total real-time digital transactions take place in India, she said, adding India is among the leading digital economies globally. “Digital India has made life and business much easier in India. Today, the whole world acknowledges this as a great achievement of India. Even developed countries do not have a digital system like India has,” she said. Murmu noted that a record 1,200 crore transactions were done through UPI last month. “This amounts to a record transaction of Rs 18 lakh crore,” she said. Further, India achieved the fastest 5G roll-out in the world, the President said, adding that the Digital Personal Data Protection Act will make the digital space more secure. The startup ecosystem has expanded, growing from only a few hundred startups in the country to more than one lakh today. “Make in India and Aatmanirbhar Bharat campaigns have become our strengths. Today, India is the

world’s second-largest producer of mobile phones. During the last decade, there has been a five-fold increase in mobile phone manufacturing,” she said. Highlighting India’s digital clout, she said other countries of the world are also now providing the facility of transactions through UPI. Digital India has made banking more convenient and disbursement of loans easier. The Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) trinity has helped curb corruption, weeding out fake beneficiaries, and Rs 2.75 lakh crore of public money was prevented from going into the wrong hands. “My government has so far transferred Rs 34 lakh crore through DBT. Thanks to Jan Dhan Aadhar Mobile (JAM), about 10 crore fake beneficiaries have been weeded out from the system. This has helped prevent Rs 2.75 lakh crore from going into wrong hands,” the president said. The facility of DigiLocker is also making life easier, she said, adding over 6 billion documents have so far been issued to its users. Digital Health IDs of around 53 crore people have been created under Ayushman Bharat Health Account. “The number of broadband users has increased 14 times. Nearly 2 lakh village panchayats of the country have been connected with optical fiber. More than 4 lakh common service centres have been opened in villages. These have become a major source of employment,” she said. The government has focused on building modern facilities for remote and faraway islands like Andaman-Nicobar and Lakshadweep, which had been deprived of development.

Hoteliers expect lenient tax

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hoteliers are expecting a more lenient tax structure and an increased allocation in Union Budget 2024-25, which will give a boost to the tourism industry. Amandeep Singh Grover, General Manager of Hilton Goa is hopeful of reforms that standardize offerings within the tourism sector. “This could involve streamlining processes, enhancing infrastructure, and ensuring a consistent and high-quality experience for tourists. Standardization would not only elevate the overall appeal but also position the country as a more enticing destination for travellers, ultimately driving growth and

sustainability in the hospitality sector,” he said. Also, a more lenient tax structure would make hospitality services more accessible and attractive to tourists. “Outbound tourism is rapidly picking up especially with many countries implementing ‘visa-free’ or ‘visa-on-arrival’ strategies, it is important for us to be competitive and relax taxation and make it lucrative for travellers,” he added. Shilpi Khanna, General Manager at Hyatt Centric, Juhu said, “Operational costs in hotels are a big challenge for us. As costs rise, people’s spending power will decrease because of inflation,” Khanna noted that the hospitality industry was the

worst-hit sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. 2023 was a good comeback year for the sector, but it still could not cover the losses. “Our appeal to the government is to please look after the taxation policy of the country. We are looking for lower income tax for the smoothness of the business,” she said. Khanna suggested that the government should relax taxes on LTAs (Leave Travel Allowances) so that travel and tourism are encouraged, which will provide a big boost to the hotel industry. She also called for an increased budget allocation for the industry. Harkaran Singh Seth, General Manager of Radisson Blu

Mumbai International Airport said, “The hotel industry is the seventh pillar of the country. There should be multiple bodies to look after the hotels for ease of business. There should be a single window for approval of our projects, for faster implementations. It will create easier ways for cash flow and contribution towards the economy.” Singh said that easier loans will create more opportunities for the industry. He emphasised on increasing the budget allocation for the sector, saying that the allocation should be increased to Rs 3,000-3,500 crore. “Reducing LTA would help every employee for the future. Domestic tourism should also be increased by the government,” Singh added. He also emphasised on a single-window approval system.



Mercedes-Benz sets eyes on smaller cities

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

German carmaker Mercedes-Benz is looking to expand its presence in the smaller cities in India where demand for luxury models is expected to grow robustly over the next few years. The automaker, which on Wednesday introduced new GLA and AMG GLE 53 models, plans to enhance its sales and service infrastructure in the non-metro cities to cater to the needs of the increasing number of customers. “We are clearly seeing that there is a lot of growth happening in mini metros in India and we are now increasing customer car parc in these cities,” Mercedes-Benz India Managing Director & CEO Santosh Iyer told PTI in an interaction. To cater to the needs of the customers, the company is opening up 20 new workshops in 10 new cities like Jammu, Kanpur and Patna, he added. “So we are very clear that in these mini metros, customers should not be driving a car for more than two hours to get the service done. So you want to go

closer to these customer pockets,” Iyer said. The penetration of luxury cars in such cities remains low as compared to the metros and thus offers more opportunities for growth, he noted. For Mercedes, top metros currently account for around 70 per cent of the sales annually. “Rest 30 per cent comes from...Mini metros and other smaller markets,” Iyer stated. The luxury car market in India accounts for just over 1 per cent of the total passenger vehicle sales of around 40 lakh units annually. Mercedes-Benz is currently the leading player in the market. Iyer said for Mercedes-Benz in the eight large cities and metros, the penetration level is at 2.5 per cent but in the smaller cities and towns, it is at 0.4 per cent. On Wednesday, the company launched the new GLA SUV priced between Rs 50.5 lakh and Rs 56.9 lakh (ex-show-rooms). The AMG GLE 53 4MATIC price starts at Rs 1.85 crore. It can be customised with over 7,000 combinations with prices going up to Rs 2.2 crore.

Markets settle one per cent higher

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices climbed nearly 1 per cent on Wednesday on buying in HDFC Bank and Reliance Industries. Investors are eyeing the two important events lined up ahead — the interim budget and the US Fed interest rate decision — to derive further cues from. Recovering all the early lost ground, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 612.21 points or 0.86 per cent to settle at 71,752.11. During the day, it zoomed 711.49 points or 1 per cent to 71,851.39. The Nifty climbed 203.60 points or 0.95 per cent to 21,725.70. Among the Sensex firms, Sun Pharma, Tata Motors, State Bank of India, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti, Bajaj Finserv, Power Grid and UltraTech Cement were the major gainers.



Larsen & Toubro declined over 4 per cent after its December quarter earnings. Titan also ended lower from the 30-share pack. In Asian markets, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower while Seoul settled in the green. European markets were trading on a mixed note. The US markets ended mostly down on Tuesday. “A positive build-up was reflected in

Indian markets prior to the interim budget, although expectations are low, the market anticipates a lower fiscal deficit supported by buoyant tax revenues. The overall trend in the market is akin to a saw-saw, and the buy-on-dips strategy is effective as of now. Global market cues are mixed ahead of the FOMC meeting, and US 10-year yields were marginally down,” said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.91 per cent to USD 82.12 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,970.52 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark fell by 801.67 points or 1.11 per cent to settle at 71,139.90 on Tuesday. The Nifty declined 215.50 points or 0.99 per cent to 21,522.10.

MANJU ADDS 10KM GOLD TO HER KITTY

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Punjab's international race walker, Manju Rani enjoyed a good run in the National Open Race Walk Championships here on Wednesday, winning the gold medal in the senior women's 10km competition. A day after winning gold in the women's 20km event, she dominated the senior women's 10km race to brighten her prospects of competing in the inaugural marathon race walking mixed relay that will feature at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Manju's gold medal winning time in 10km was 45:20.00s. The promising Punjab race walker had paired with Ram Babu to win bronze in the 35km mixed relay race walking team event at the Hangzhou Asian Games last year. Manju was elated to have won back-to-back gold medals at the national competition. "My main focus will be the mixed relay event this year and I hope to represent India at the Olympic Games," Manju said. The senior 10km race walk was



included in the programme by the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) to select potential athletes for the national team that will compete at the April 20-21 World Athletics Race Walk Team Championships to be held in Antalya, Turkey. During the Turkey competition, the world's top 22 teams will get automatic qualification for the Olympic Games. The final selection of the national team for Turkey will be done in March. In the men's 10km event, Sahil of Punjab outclassed more experienced athletes to claim gold. Patala's Sahil, 22, clocked 39:25.00s. He had finished fifth in the men's 20km race walk on Tuesday. Paramjeet Singh Bisht of Uttarakhand was second with a time of 39:36.00s, while Asian bronze medallist Vikash Singh of Delhi was third clocking 39:47.00s. Goa's Vijay Omkar Vishwakaram won the men's 35km race with a time of 2:39:19.00s, while the women's 35km gold went to Bandana Patel of Uttar Pradesh, whose gold-medal winning time was 3:11:06.00s.

Srikanth moves to second round of Thailand Masters

PTI ■ BANGKOK

Indian shuttler Kidambi Srikanth opened his campaign at the Thailand Masters badminton tournament with a straight game win over Chinese Taipei's Wang Tzu Wei here on Wednesday. The former world number toiled hard for 45 minutes to get the better of Wang 22-20 21-19 and enter the second round. He will take on compatriot Mithun Manjunath who defeated Hong Kong's Jason Gunawan 21-17 21-8 in his first round men's singles match. S Sankar Muthusamy Subramanian also started his campaign with a 21-14 21-17 straight game win over Leong Jun Hao of Malaysia. Sameer Verma made a first round exit, going down to Hong Kong's Angus Ng Ka Long 14-21 18-21 while Kiran



George retired after trailing 17-21 in his round of 32 match against China's Lei Lan Xi. Malvika Bansod and Ashmita Chaliha cruised to the second round of the women's singles event. While Ashmita defeated Wong Ling Ching 21-10 21-16, Malvika got the better of Peru's Ines Lucia Castillo Salazar 22-20 21-8. Malvika will next face Thailand's Busanan Ongbamrungphan, who knocked out India's Imad Farooqui Samiya 21-14 21-18.



Avani to spearhead Indian challenge at Women's Asia-Pacific

PTI ■ PATTAYA (THAILAND)

The eloquent Avani Prashanth will be accompanied by five other Indians as the region's finest young golfers get ready for the sixth Women's Amateur Asia-Pacific Championship here. This week the event returns to the Siam Country Club, which hosted the tournament two years ago. As many as 22 countries will be represented by 90 golfers. Besides Avani, India will be represented by Vidhatri Urs, Mannat Brar, Heena Kang, Keerthana Rajeev Nair and Saanvi Somu. A little over a dozen of the 90 golfers are in the world's Top-100, and they will rub shoulders with players who are from countries in different stages of development of the game. Avani said, "This tournament is a bookmark event for all of us in our calendars. It gives us exposure to play against the best in Asia, so that is definitely one big advantage. "And just what the APGC does for all of us we're all so grateful for. And not only do we get to play with the best, but also make lifelong relationships that will become useful when you start playing on the LPGA or LET together. "And I think once you win I think it's great because that gives you a head start as a

young amateur and what you should and should not do." Defending champion, Eila Galitsky of Thailand, added, "So just what Avani said. It is great exposure, and the opportunity to just make friendships from around the world, around Asia, and the opportunity to get to play majors and compete with the top pros in the world is truly amazing." While Avani is looking to make her fourth, and possibly, her last shot at WAAP, Galitsky is banking on a change in fortunes at the Siam Country Club. If the 17-year-old Galitsky, the winner at the Singapore Island Country Club last year, wins again, she will become the first player to defend her WAAP title and also the first two-time winner of the region's premier amateur event for women. In 2022, Galitsky struggled with her putter at the Siam Country Club's Waterside Course and was tied 35th. Avani, at 42nd, is two places behind Galitsky in the World Amateur Golf Ranking. Avani and Galitsky, who have forged a friendship going back to the time they were Under-10, have competed often against each. In six previous clashes around the world, they are tied 3-3 as their personal score.

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

Asian Games bronze medalist Vishnu Sarvanan became the first Indian sailor to qualify for successive Olympics as he made the cut at the World Championships here on Wednesday. A Subedar from the Mumbai-based Army Yachting Node, the 24-year-old secured qualification for the upcoming Paris Games by finishing 26th out of 152 participants in ILCA-7. He thus becomes the first Indian sailor to make the cut for Paris 2024. Vishnu secured the top rank among Asian countries, surpassing gold medallists from Singapore in the Asian Games and medal winners from Hong Kong and Thailand in the Continental Qualifiers. Vishnu concluded the competition with an overall score of 174. Following the

standard rule, his least score of 49 in a race was subtracted, resulting in a net score of 125. The weather condition was windy and at its challenging best at the Adelaide Sailing Club, taking a toll on the sailors. 'NUMB FINGERS, LEGS DESTROYED': So gruelling has been the race that Vishnu's fingers have become "numb" and "legs are destroyed". "I can't even hold my phone now, fingers have become numb, legs are destroyed. But it's all worth it. You get to go to Olympics," Vishnu told PTI. The ILCA 7 race refers to a specific category within the ILCA (International Laser Class Association) sailing class. The ILCA 7 is a type of sailboat, specifically a single-handed dinghy designed for racing. Sailors in ILCA 7 category races need to master various



sailing techniques, including tacking (changing direction into the wind) and gybing (changing direction with the wind at the stern). It requires physical fitness and endurance as sailors need to be agile and capable of making quick adjustments and balance the boat with his body weight - taking the whole pressure on the spine. Vishnu could not qualify from the Asian Championships in Thailand in December and he

took the setback in his stride. "Setback is always nice to have. It kept me focused. Here all in the top-10 were above 35 years, more than 10 years older to me. I can learn from their experience. It's good for me," he added. At Tokyo Olympics, Vishnu competed in the men's laser category and finished 20th in a field of 35. Making it to the finals is the target for Paris Olympics, while the ultimate target is to

get a medal at Los Angeles 2028. "In reality top 15 will be my goal, but if I make top-10 and reach the medal race it will be very good. I know how difficult it is going to be. Let's see how it goes," he said. "For me, 2028 is the real chance where I can win an Olympic medal. I've age on my side and will have time to improve." **ROLE MODEL NEERAJ SIR:** Sailing may not be a followed sport in the country but he believes that it can be made popular by winning a medal, like Neeraj Chopra has done in javelin throw. "True, it's still not very popular. But it will be when I win an Olympic medal, just like Neeraj sir. I hope I can be the one who can inspire a generation," he said. The sport requires heavy investment in terms of equipment and boat,

something he could afford because his father, Ramachandran Saravanan, was a retired Army officer and former sailor. "It depends on how you integrate it into the culture. With our extensive coastline, establishing a base in each coastal school, supported by the government, can involve a one-time investment in limited equipment that can last for 20 years," said the 2019 Under-21 World Championship bronze medallist. "This way, children can gain knowledge about the sport, similar to playing football or cricket in school. Many of us played these sports at some point, even if we didn't necessarily pursue them further," he concluded. Vishnu was first coached by Alex Dennishook and for last two years he is being trained by Milan Vujasinovic under TOPS.

Former Tokyo Olympic official says he is not guilty of taking bribes

AP ■ TOKYO

Haruyuki Takahashi, a former Tokyo Olympics organizing committee member, appeared in a court on Wednesday and said he was not guilty of taking bribes connected to the Tokyo Games. A former executive with the powerful Japanese advertising company Dentsu, Takahashi is charged with accepting around 198 million yen (USD 1.4 million) in exchange for awarding Olympic contracts for the Tokyo Games held in 2021. Wearing a grey suit and blue tie, Takahashi sat silently while



one of his defence lawyers read from a document for about two hours before a panel of three judges at Tokyo District Court. His lawyers argued that the money Takahashi received was

not bribes but legitimate consulting income as a sports marketing expert. The defence also argued the Tokyo organizing committee had no power to make marketing decisions on

sponsors or licensing, which was the realm of Dentsu, the powerful Japanese advertising company that headed Tokyo Olympic marketing. The defence acknowledged Takahashi held power with Dentsu, where he previously worked. It also acknowledged Takahashi had close relations with International Olympic Committee officials and others in the sports world. The next trial date was set for February 22. The indictment says Takahashi received bribes from business suit retailer Aoki Holdings, publisher Kadokawa and others. Sun Arrow, one of the companies implicated,

produced the stuffed toy version of the Olympic mascot, Miraitowa, and the Paralympic version, Someity. About a dozen people have already been convicted in related bribery cases, but all have received suspended sentences. The myriad corruption investigations around the Tokyo Olympics are the latest to soil recent Games. French investigators have this year's Paris Olympics under scrutiny over how contracts are awarded. Though the Olympics are funded partly by private money, they also rely heavily on taxpayer funding. In the case of Tokyo, at least 50% was public money. Tokyo says it officially spent USD 13 billion on the Tokyo Games, but a government audit says it might be twice that much.



Russia to host Serbia for first friendly against European team since Ukraine invasion

AP ■ NYON (SWITZERLAND)

Russia is set to host Serbia for a friendly in Moscow in March for its first men's national team soccer game against a European opponent since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Russian Football Union said in a social media post on Wednesday that the game will be played on March 21 at Dynamo Moscow's stadium. UEFA confirmed it had permitted for the game. Russian national teams and clubs are banned from UEFA competitions, but that suspension does not apply to friendlies. Since the invasion of Ukraine saw Russia removed from international soccer competitions, the Russian national team has mostly organized friendlies against teams from Asia and Africa, as well as one game against Cuba in November. A game against Bosnia-Herzegovina was planned in late 2022 but never took place following objections from some Bosnian players. The Russian women's national team played friendlies against Belarus, China, Iran and Paraguay last year. Serbian soccer has close ties to Russia, whose state energy firm Gazprom still sponsors storied club Red Star Belgrade after being dropped by UEFA as its longstanding commercial partner within days of the war starting in Ukraine.

Davis Cup: Aisam drops hints of playing singles against India

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Aisam ul-Qureshi, Pakistan's most successful tennis player, does not play singles on the ATP Tour, but when national duty demands it, he willingly takes up the responsibility, and the Indian team might have to contend with him on the opening day of the Davis Cup World Group I tie, starting Saturday. The opening day of the tie will feature in two singles, and Aisam could play in one of those against either Ramkumar Ramanathan or N Sriram Balaji, who will most likely play on Saturday. Aisam, 43, had even played against Indonesia in the home grass court tie in September 2023. He also did the singles duty against Lithuania (2022), Japan (2021) and Slovenia (2020). "I have always considered myself to play singles, but I don't do it every single time. I am preparing for everything, singles and doubles, and the same goes for everyone in the team. We will see. We have one more day of training," Aisam told PTI. Aisam has 41-22 win-loss record in singles in 48 matches he has played in 44 nominations. Former Davis Cup captain Hameed ul Haq also reckons that if Aisam and veteran Aqeel Khan play the singles, the tie won't be a lop-sided affair. "We have got some good results on grass but the Indian team is also very good on this surface. They know what is required. I feel India have better chances to win this tie but since Pakistan has two very experienced players in Aqeel Khan and Aisam ul haq Qureshi, if they play singles then the contest will be tight," he said.



For the second consecutive day, persistent drizzle disrupted Pakistan Davis Cup team's practice session, while the Indians were also forced to stay indoors on Wednesday. On Tuesday also, when the Indian team was nearing the end of its three-hour session, heavens opened up, forcing an early closure of their session. Aisam said not getting to hit for two days in a row, indeed affects the preparations. "Definitely, these things affect the preparations. At the end of the day, these things are not in our control. We need to focus on things we can control and

prepare in best way possible. I am sure Indian team's training has also been affected but it is what it is," said world number 154 Aisam, who was a top-10 player in doubles in 2011. "Hopefully, the weather will be good on Saturday and Sunday so we can have a wonderful tie, Insha-allah," he added. Pakistan captain Mohammed Abid remained optimistic and opted looking at the brighter side. "Well, the players are now well rested. The bodies are relaxed now," he said before leaving with Mohammed Shoaib and Barkat Ullah for a gym session.

PTI ■ PUNE

Manipur took top spots in three events in the women's category while Services and Army produced dominating show in the men's category of the Open Sprint National Rowing Championship here on Wednesday. The Manipur women reserved their finals berth in the lightweight double sculls, as the pair of Poonam and Rukhmani clocked eight minutes and 29.3 seconds here at the Army Rowing Node situated in the College of Military Engineering (CME) campus. In the coxless pairs event, Gurbani Kaur and Diljot Kaur came up with an effort of 9:16.4 seconds to top the day. The third final came when the double sculls duo Thangjam Priya Devi and Haobijam Devi produced an effort of 08:46.6 seconds. Also, Maharashtra's Mrunmayee Salgaonkar kept her state's hopes alive by bringing up an effort of 09:40.6 seconds, which won her the single sculls semi-final. In the men's category, Services accumulated five finals while Army secured three final berths. The Asian Games 2022 bronze medallists from Services;



Jaswinder, Bheema, Puneet and Ashish presented a dominant version of themselves by winning the men's coxless fours. Services reached the coxed eights, double sculls, lightweight double sculls, quadruple sculls and single sculls event finals. Additionally, the defending champion Salman Khan finished first in his semi-final by securing a time of 08:32.1 seconds. The Army oarsmen presented their dominance with Asian Games duo Babu Lal Yadav

and Lekh Ram, who did not break a sweat during the coxless pairs with an effort of 07:56.2 seconds to enter the finals. The Army also qualified for the coxed eights and double sculls finals. Among the other exhilarating races was the battle of two Olympians - Balraj Panwar, who represented India at Hangzhou, and Dattu Baban Bhokanal, Rio Olympian. It culminated in the former brushing aside the challenge in the singles sculls and reaching the finals.

NEED TO BE PATIENT WITH LIKES OF GILL, IYER: RATHOUR

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The likes of Shubman Gill and Shreyas Iyer deserve patience amid their current poor run, said India batting coach Vikram Rathour on Wednesday, urging his wards to tackle England's aggression with intelligence in the second Test here.

The Indians lost the opening Test in Hyderabad by 28 runs despite having a 190-run first innings lead. England managed to shock the home favourites with their 'Bazball' approach with Ollie Pope scoring a match-winning 196. The second Test starts here on Friday.

"There are young batters in our team who have not played much Test cricket. So, we need to be a bit patient with them. Batters like (Shubman) Gill, (Yashasvi) Jaiswal and (Shreyas) Iyer will eventually start getting big runs, I'm sure of it," Rathour said at a press conference here.

Although Jaiswal played a knock of 80 in the first innings

of his fifth Test, Gill and Iyer failed to fire, continuing their struggles in the format. While Gill has played 21 Tests, Iyer has appeared in 13 five-day games.

Gill hasn't scored a 50 in his last nine Test innings. Iyer has been similarly off-colour.

Rathour said he expects better application from the side's batters in second Test where the home team will once again miss the services of the redoubtable Virat Kohli.

"There's a difference between playing with intent and playing attacking cricket. I want them to play with intent. If there is the opportunity to score some runs, they should take it," Rathour said.

"They need to decide by looking at the surface and conditions. So, the batters need to possess that intelligence as to which is the best or safest shot on the surface," he explained.

Rathour felt India's batting performance in the second innings of the Hyderabad Test probably lacked discipline.



"Could they have batted with more discipline? Maybe they could have. That's what they need to decide and come up with their plans," he observed.

"But, they need to score runs by playing their shots, as you need to back your strengths. Batting is always about scoring runs. It's not about not getting out but how many runs you put on the board," he said.

England used the sweep shot quite well to blunt the effectiveness of Indian spinners but Rathour said it's not a stroke that can be added overnight to a player's repertoire.

"...You need to be prepared for that by practising it. If you add more shots to your game, it's always beneficial. We played traditionally. The strength of strong areas is going straight when it comes to using our feet.

"We can keep doing that, and of course, if we can add more shots and score through the square of the wicket, that's always an addition," he said.

Rathour also heaped praise on the English batters for playing brave cricket, especially Pope, effectively taking the game away from Rohit Sharma's men.

However, he maintained that England's strong showing has not put his team under any additional pressure.

"They (England) were brave. They took their chances, which worked for them. The kind of innings Pope played was exceptional. I haven't seen too many playing such a knock against our bowling attack," he said.

"I don't think (there's any pressure). We are expected to win while playing in India, and the boys are used to that by now.

"The message to them from the support staff is to play good cricket and not bother about results too much. The other teams also come well-prepared. Since we have won Test matches in Australia, England and South Africa, we also expect them to win a Test in India."

Indian conditions up there with the hardest: Foakes

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

England's Ben Foakes feels the hardest for wicketkeepers as they require frequent improvisation and a tough mind prepared to deal with things occasionally going wrong.

Foakes, who made a Test comeback after 11 months, effected the stumpings of a well-set Ravichandran Ashwin and Mohammed Siraj in India's second innings that sealed England's epic 28-run win in the opening Test of the five-match series in Hyderabad. He also scored 34 in a crucial 112-run partnership with the star of the match Ollie Pope (196) that gave England the decisive lead.

"In conditions like this, it's about trying to think on your feet and learn because it's not natural conditions (for me)," the 30-year-old was quoted as saying by ESPNcricinfo.

"I've obviously kept away a lot and kept to spinners, but I find that Indian pitches, with the variable bounce, are up there with the hardest.

"The more extreme the conditions you know things are occasionally going to wrong so you just have to mentally strong enough to put it out of your mind," he added.

The 30-year-old is bracing up for extreme conditions in the rest of the series as well.

"There is a good chance the next one is going to be a tough one.

"You're in the game, so it's nice as a keeper. It's obviously a very



hard place to keep, and you're aware of that. You're going to have some tough moments or a tough day. But you'd rather be in the game than watching the ball do nothing in front of you," he added.

In their tour of India in 2021, England had won the opening Test only to lose three in a row in the four-match series on rank-turners.

"All three were probably the worst pitches I've batted on. Going into that, I was thinking, 'These are horrific wickets — I just need to find a way to stay in,'" Foakes recalled.

Emphasising a shift in the team's mindset, he said: "I think now the group is more, if that's the situation, you've got to be positive; got to put it (pressure) back on the bowler and put them under pressure.

"Before, there was more of a

fear of getting out and that put us in our shells. Whereas now it's not worrying that you are getting out and accepting that you probably are on those sort of surfaces. But how can you actually go and dominate at times as well?"

Keeping the tough Indian conditions in mind, Foakes was chosen as the specialist wicketkeeper ahead of Jonny Bairstow.

"The thing I've tried to develop when I go in is if we lose a couple of wickets, to expand early," he said about his partnership with Pope.

"But I think generally, throughout my career, when there's been those kind of situations where you have to grind in is when I've been most successful. That's where I need to keep improving, so it fits quite nicely into my game."

Leach skips practice, unlikely to play in 2nd Test vs India

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

England's most experienced spinner Jack Leach is all set to miss the second Test against India starting here on Friday, owing to a left knee injury sustained during the series-opener in Hyderabad. Leach didn't take part in the team's training session on Wednesday and was seen receiving treatment from the physio on the sidelines.

"He's a tough kid, Leachy. So, I am not sure. You never know with Jack. You can never really write him off. We'll see how he pulls up in a couple of days," opener Zak Crawley said at the media conference here.

Leach had jarred his left knee while fielding on the first day of the Hyderabad



Test, which England won by 28 runs.

He played through pain, bowling 26 overs in the first innings and 10 in the second essay despite bruising and swelling around the joint. He was seen limping during Wednesday's training session.

Leach's injury means that off-spinner Shoaib Bashir, who joined the team late in Hyderabad due to visa related issues, could be set for Test debut.

Crawley is confident that Bashir, if given an opportunity, will do well.

"He is a great kid. He has got a lot about him. He knows what he is trying to do with his bowling and he backs himself. I like that and feel like if he got his chance in this series he would go well."

'It will be a tough choice between Sarfaraz, Patidar'

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

India's batting coach Vikram Rathour on Wednesday said it "will be tough" to pick one among Sarfaraz Khan and Rajat Patidar in the second Test against England.

The match begins here from Friday, with hosts India seeking to draw parity after losing the series opener in Hyderabad.

After the first game, India faced injury concerns with all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and KL Rahul being ruled out of the second Test, in addition to the absence of star batter Virat Kohli. This forced the selectors to add uncapped Sarfaraz Khan, Sourabh Kumar and Washington Sundar to the squad, and Rajat Patidar also made the team.

"It will be a tough choice. What value they bring to the team, of course, is that they are superb players. We have seen how well they have done in domestic cricket in the last few years," Rathour said of the reinforcements during a press conference.

"So on these kind of wickets, I think they can really add a lot of value to the team."

He added, "If we have to pick just one out of them, of course, it would be tough. But, that decision will be made by Rahul Dravid and Rohit Sharma."

The playing XI will be finalised keeping in mind the conditions. "It (pitch) is difficult to predict. It will turn, maybe not from the first day, but eventually, it will turn. That's how the wicket looks

like."

'NO QUESTION OF RECOVERY': India slipped to fifth place on the World Test Championship (WTC) table following the loss in

Hyderabad and the hosts would be desperate to bounce back here.

Rathour said that more than recovery, the players need to learn and move on.

EAST COAST RAILWAY

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| E-Tender Notice No. SNTPBBS-022024-JKPRGTA | |
| NAME OF WORK : PROVISION OF AUTOMATIC BLOCK SIGNALLING SYSTEM WITH DUAL MSDAC AND ALTERATION IN EXISTING EIP/RRI STATIONS IN THE SECTION OF JAKHPURA-NERGUNDI, KHURDA ROAD-BHUSUNPUR & BHUSUNPUR-GOLANTHRA OVER KHURDA ROAD DIVISION OF EAST COAST RAILWAY. | |
| Approximate Advertised Value (₹) : 180,07,61,541.02, EMD (₹) : 91,53,800/-, Completion Period of the Work : 24 Months. | |
| Tender Closing Date & Time : At 1100 Hrs. of 19.02.2024 | |
| No manual offers sent by Post / Courier / Fax or in person shall be accepted against such e-tenders even if these are submitted on firm's letter head and received in time. All such manual offers shall be considered invalid and shall be rejected summarily without any consideration. | |
| Complete information including e-tender documents of the above e-tender is available in website http://www.ireps.gov.in | |
| Note : The prospective tenderers are advised to revisit the website 15 (Fifteen) days before the date of closing of tender to note any changes / corrigenda issued for this tender. | |
| Chief Signal & Telecom Engineer (P), Bhubaneswar PR-113/CG/23-24 | |

'Bazball' comes naturally to us: Crawley

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

England opener Zak Crawley on Wednesday said most of his teammates have become better players since embracing the ultra-aggressive 'Bazball' approach, which is way more compatible with their natural game than the traditional "take-your-time" strategy.

England upstaged India by 28 runs in the opening Test in

Test starting here on Friday. "A lot of us play a bit better under this regime," he added.

In contrast, India were also battling a selection crisis in addition to finding answers to their poor performance in Hyderabad after all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and top-order batter KL Rahul were ruled out due to injuries.

The hosts are already without mainstay Virat Kohli, who has

the same, read the conditions on day one and see what happens for there," he added.

India have drafted in Sarfaraz Khan, Washington Sundar and Sourabh Kumar to replace the injured duo. The hosts also have the option of playing

Rajat Patidar, a domestic veteran.

After the loss in spin friendly conditions in Hyderabad, there is a lot of chatter surrounding the possible nature of wickets that the hosts will prepare for the second Test starting here

on Friday. Crawley that's not a concern either.

"They're absolutely a top side in their own conditions. There are four games left, we have got to stick to what we do well and hopefully results come from there," he said.



Hyderabad despite conceding a 190-run first innings lead, showcasing a fighting attitude that stunned the pre-series favourites. England are yet to lose a Test since pioneering 'Bazball' under their New Zealand coach Brendon McCullum.

"I suppose it ('Bazball') comes quite naturally as a lot of our teams are playing more aggressively. The mindset when I first came to England was to backlight or take your time and build a long innings and I didn't think that came naturally to me and a few of the others," Crawley said in a press conference ahead of the second

opted out of the first two Tests citing personal reasons.

Asked what it would mean for the English team, Crawley said his team is more focussed on its performance and planning. "...We haven't spoken about that. It sounds cliched but we stick to our own lead up ... We don't bother about what they are doing," Crawley said when asked if the absence of the duo is a boost for England.

"Two very good players missing out but I'm sure looking at their depth they have two very good players coming in. So, that won't change anything for us too much. We're just trying to play

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| No. Dated. E-mail ID- rwdsoncpur@gmail.com | |
| Government of Odisha "e" procurement Notice | |
| Bid Identification No. TENDER ONLINE SNPR- 15 OF 2023-24 | |
| 1. Name of the work | : Roads Works as per DTGN available in the website. www.tendersodisha.gov.in |
| 2. Total No. of Work | : 9 (Nine) Nos. |
| 3. Estimated Cost | : Varies from Rs 5.04 lakh to Rs.25.21 lakh |
| 4. Period of Completion | : 01(One) Calendar months |
| 5. Period and time of availability of bid document in | : 01.02.2024 at 11.00AM to 08.02.2024 up to the portal for bidding 5.00 PM |
| 6. Date and time of opening of Tender | : 09.02.2024 at 11.00AM |
| 7. Name and address of the officer inviting bid | : S.E.R.W. Division Sonepur |
| (1) Other details can be seen from detailed notice inviting tenders, available in website www.tendersodishagov.in | |
| (2) Corrigendum if any shall only be published in the website: www.tenderodisha.gov.in | |
| Superintending Engineer, Rural Works Division, Sonepur | |
| OIPR-25054/11/0020/2324 | |

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| GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA, "e"-PROCUREMENT NOTICE | |
| OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER, NAYAGARH (R&B) DIVISION, NAYAGARH | |
| WORKS DEPARTMENT | |
| Tender call Notice | |
| E-mail: pwdoffngd34@gmail.com | |
| Bid Identification No. E.E-Nayagarh (R&B) Division- Online 11/2023-24 | |
| The Executive Engineer, Nayagarh (R&B) Division, Nayagarh on behalf of Governor of Odisha inviting percentage rate bid in single cover system in ONLINE MODE form eligible contractors for construction of Building work as detailed in the table below: | |
| 1. Nature of Work | : Building & Electrical works. |
| 2. No of Work | : 6 Nos |
| 3. Tender Cost & EMD | : To be remitted online through a process as mentioned in DTGN. |
| 4. Class of Contractor | : As mentioned in DTGN |
| 5. Available of Bid Document in the Website | : From Dt.01.02.2024 11.00 AM to Dt.08.02.2024 Up to 5.00 pm . |
| 6. Date of opening of Bid | : Dt.09.02.2024 at 11.00 AM |
| 7. The have to participate in ONLINE bidding only. Further details can be seen from the Website: https://tenderodisha.gov.in . Any Addendum / Corrigendum / Cancellation of tender can also be seen in the said website. | |
| Executive Engineer, Nayagarh (R&B) Division, Nayagarh | |
| OIPR-34138/11/0017/2324 | |

O-2344

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER
RURAL WORKS DIVISION RAIRANGPUR (MAYURBHANJ)

E-mail ID: - eerwairangpur@yahoo.com

Letter No. 657 // Date- 30.1.2024

"e" Procurement Notice for Road Works
Bid Identification No – RWDRRP – 28 / 2023-24

1. Name of the work : Special repair to roads for the year 2023-24
2. Estimated Cost : From Rs. 7.92 to 29.14 lakhs (approximately).
3. Class of Contractor : "D", "C" & "B" Class or relevant Class of works license.
4. Period of Completion : 01 (One) calendar months.
5. Tender Paper Cost : as per annexure I/-

The details are as follows.

| Procurement Officer | Bid Identification No. | Availability of tender On-line for bidding | | Last Date & Time of seeking Tender Clarification. | Date & Time of Opening of tender in OIO S.E.R.W. Division, Rairangpur. |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|--|
| | | From | To | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| S.E.R.W Division, Rairangpur. | RWDRRP- 28 / 2023-24 | 02.02.2024 at 11.00 A.M. | 08.02.2024 up to 5.00 P.M. | 07.02.2024 up to 5.00 P.M. | 09.02.2024 at 11.30 A.M. |

Further details can be seen from the website www.tendersodisha.gov.in

OIPR-25107/11/0030/2324

-Sd/-
Er. D.Behera
Superintending Engineer
R.W.Division,Rairangpur

A-1361

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER,
UPPER INDRAVATI RIGHT CANAL DIVISION NO-II
JUNAGARH, KALAHANDI, ODISHA

email: seurcdli@gmail.com

e-Procurement Notice No. SE/UIRCD-II-01/2023-24(3)

No. 44

Dt. 24.01.2024

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| 1. Type of the work | : | C.C.Road, Canal Road, Renovation of canal & Lining works. |
| 2. No. of works | : | 03 (Three) Nos. of works |
| 3. Class of contractor | : | 'D' & 'C' class |
| 4. Bid Identification No. | : | <u>SE/UIRCD-II-01/2023-24(3)</u> |
| 5. Estimated cost | : | Rs.14.27 lakhs to Rs.18.65 lakhs. |
| 6. Period of completion | : | 11/2 & 1 calendar month. (Mentioned against each.) |
| 7. Other details as follows | : | |

| Procurement officer | Bid Identification No. | Availability of Bid On-line | Submission of Bid On-line | Date & time of opening of tender |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Superintending Engineer, UI Right Canal Division No-II, Junagarh Dist- Kalahandi. | <u>SE/UIRCD-II-01/2023-24(3)</u> | From 02.02.2024, 04.00 P.M. to 13.02.2024, 5.00 P.M. | From 02.02.2024, 04.00 P.M. to 13.02.2024, 5.00 P.M. | 14.02.2024 at 11.00 AM in the O/O Superintending Engineer, UI Right Canal Division No-II, Junagarh Dist- Kalahandi. |

(A) Any addendum / corrigendum / cancellation of tender can also be seen in the said Website.

(B) Further details can be seen from Government Website – <https://tendersodisha.gov.in>

Superintending Engineer
UI Right Canal Division No-II,
Junagarh.

OIPR-32016/11/0004/2324

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| GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA | |
| e-Procurement Notice, Superintending Engineer, M.I. Division, Angul | |
| Bid Identification No.- 14 OF 2023-24 | |
| e-mail ID- eemidivision_angul@yahoo.com | |
| Letter No. 206 Date:- 29.01.2024 | |
| 1. Number of Works | : 14 (fourteen) numbers of Civil works |
| 2. Approximate estimated cost | : Varies from Rs. 7.96 lakh 4.69 lakh |
| 3. Cost of Tender Paper | : Rs.2000/- & Rs.4000/- (Non-Refundable) |
| 4. Period of completion | : 03 (Three) Calendar months |
| 5. Date & Time of availability of bid document in the portal | : Dt. 03.02.2024 at 10.00 A.M. to Dt. 08.02.2024 up to 5.00 P.M |
| 6. Last date / Time for receipt of bid in the portal | : Dt. 08.02.2024 up to 5.00 P.M. |
| 7. Date of opening of bid documents | : Dt. 09.02.2024 at 11.00 A.M. |
| 8. Date of lottery if required | : Dt. 13.02.2024 At 11.00 A.M. |
| 9. Name and address of the Office Inviting Bid | : Superintending Engineer, Minor Irrigation Division, Angul. At / P.O.: Hakimpada, College Square, District :Angul, PIN-759143 Ph. No. : 06764- 236522Email ID: eemidivision_angul@yahoo.com |
| 10. The bidders have to participate in ONLINE bidding only. Further details can be seen from the e-procurement portal http://tendersorissa.gov.in | |
| OIPR-32284/11/0014/2324 | |
| Sd/- Superintending Engineer M.I. Division, Angul. | |