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by

Shri Naveen Patnaik

Hon'ble Chief Minister, Odisha

on 29th February 2024
at 5:30 PM

Convention Centre
Lokaseva Bhawan, Bhubaneswar



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DSPL-744

Money laundering: MLA Samal deposes before ED

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Bhandaripokhari BJD MLA Prafulla Samal on Wednesday deposed before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) here in connection with a money laundering case.

The investigators reportedly questioned him over his alleged involvement in the offence.

The agency had earlier summoned the MLA and his son Prayaskanti to appear before it with all relevant documents.

The matter pertains to the alleged misappropriation of funds by the management of Bhadrak Institute of Engineering and Technology (BIET) in Barapada. Prayaskanti is the ex-president of BIET. He is accused of embezzling the funds of BIET and buying lands worth crores of rupees in Bhubaneswar.

Earlier, the ED had on February 15 carried out simultaneous raids at multiple places linked to the legislator and his son. The searches were carried out at 10 places in Bhadrak



town and Bhubaneswar.

The agency had seized a Fortuner SUV and Rs 9 lakh from the house of Prayaskanti located at Palashpalli in Bhubaneswar. However, the vehicle has been registered in the name of Trishna Sky-scraper Limited, a construction company.

"ED investigation revealed that Prayaskanti, Manoj Kumar Goswami (Secretary) and others of BIET society were allegedly involved in misappropriation

of society money by forgery and cheating. Prayaskanti with other associates of the society have engaged in the embezzlement of crores of rupees by way of financial irregularities. It has also been alleged that they engaged themselves in embezzlement of funds and properties (acquired in the name of the BIET) for their personal monetary gain with the help of forged/ fabricated documents," the ED had said in a release.

Gates receives KISS Humanitarian Award

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Global philanthropist Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft and co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was here on Wednesday honoured with the KISS Humanitarian Award 2023 in recognition of his philanthropic work.

The ceremony acknowledged Gates' contributions to enhancing global health and education and addressing climate change through innovative technology solutions aimed at reducing inequality.

The award ceremony featured virtual participation from the staff and students of KIIT and KISS, along with alumni. A notable moment from the event was Mr. Gates's engagement in a meaningful conversation on gender equality, prompted by a question from a KISS alumna.

KIIT, KISS & KIMS founder Prof Achyuta Samanta said, "Awarding Bill Gates with the KISS Humanitarian Award not only honours his exceptional contributions but also elevates the prestige of this recognition."



Gates lauded Dr Samanta's vision and dedication to providing quality education to indigenous communities and highlighted the importance of civic engagement and a community-first approach to education.

Initiated in 2008, the KISS Humanitarian Award is the highest honour of KIIT and KISS dedicated to recognising individuals and organisations that embody the spirit of humanitarian work worldwide. The award consists of a citation scroll and a gold-plated trophy that depicts a great social message given at a public function at KISS.

INBRIEF

RESHUFFLE: BIJAY DASH CMC COMMISSIONER

Bhubaneswar: In a bureaucratic reshuffle on Wednesday, the Odisha Government appointed Puri Collector Bijay Kumar Dash as the Commissioner of Cuttack Municipal Corporation (CMC). Similarly, current CMC Commissioner Siddharth Shankar Swain was posted as the Puri Collector. Mayurbhanj Collector Ashish Thakare was given the charge of Baleswar Collector while Dattatraya Bhausaheb Shinde, the present Collector of Baleswar, was appointed as the Collector of Mayurbhanj district.

SURENDRA SAI DEATH ANNIV HELD AT VSS NAGAR

Bhubaneswar: The Veer Surendra Sai Nagar Unnayan Parishad on Wednesday paid floral tributes to the statue of noted freedom fighter Veer Surendra Sai on his death anniversary. At the function held at VSS Nagar, VSS Nagar Unnayan Parishad general secretary Dillip Dashsharma presided. Utkal



Sammilani State president Ananta Prasad Jena and local Corporator Prabhisini Mohanty spoke about the contribution of Surendra Sai in the freedom movement. Parishad vice-president Prof Jayant Kumar Parida, treasurer Maheshwar Biswal, Nimain Charan Das and Sital Chandra Mohanty also recalled the contributions of the eminent freedom fighter.

In Sambalpur Parking contractor fined Rs 3L for overcharging Rs 12

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

The Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission, Sambalpur has ordered a parking contractor to pay more than Rs 3 lakh to a consumer for overcharging him Rs 12

The court imposed a fine of Rs 2 lakh to the contractor. Moreover, the contractor has also been directed to deposit Rs 1 lakh in the consumer welfare fund of the district.

The court also asked the parking contractor to refund Rs 12 at an interest of 12 per

cent per annum and also pay Rs 10,000 towards the litigation cost to the complainant Prafulla Kumar Das, who had been charged Rs 24 instead of the usual rate of Rs 12 for parking his scooter.

As per the complaint, Das had parked his two-wheeler near the parking lot at the Sambalpur railway station on November 1, 2023. He got a parking ticket where he was asked to pay Rs 30. If the parking was for more than 12 hours, then the parking fee was fixed Rs 12. However, the

commuter returned before 12 hours. As per the fixed rule, he should have been returned Rs 18. However, the employee at the parking stand returned only Rs 6 to the commuter. When he asked about the excess amount of charge, the parking employee refused to return the rest of the amount.

Following the incident, Das moved to the Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission seeking justice in the matter. After the perusal of the pleadings and submission of the parties, the commission conducted the hearing.

Youth Cong to gherao Naveen Niwas on Mar 1

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In the 24-year tenure of the Naveen Patnaik Government the youths of Odisha are neglected, tortured and looted. The government doesn't have any special or appropriate scheme to provide employment to the youths, alleged the Youth Congress here on Wednesday.

The government, which had promised to provide 2 lakh jobs every year, should have provided 48 lakhs jobs till now as per its assurance. But unfortunately, more than 2.22 lakh government jobs are lying vacant. Even many youths of the Chief Minister home district Ganjam are migrating to Surat in search of employ-

ment. Whatever industries coming up using the natural resources of the State are not providing employment to local youths, said Youth Congress State president Ranjit Patra.

The BJD Government has failed in every sector, be it health, education or maintaining law and order. Besides, the government is neck deep in corruption. Forty per cent commission is being taken in government schemes. There are multiple scams from mining to chit fund. So, in a bid to overthrow the anti-people government, the Youth Congress would gherao the Naveen Niwas on March 1 with the slogan 'Naveen Hatao, Odisha Banchao,' Patra said.

IIM-S to host 100 CUBES Conclave tomorrow

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

The IIM Sambalpur is all set to host 100 CUBES Conclave on March 1.

The event will be inaugurated by Union Minister for Education, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Dharmendra Pradhan. IIM Sambalpur Director Prof Mahadeo Jaiswal said that the day-long conclave will be embedded with various precursor events like "Startup Open Mic", Fireside Chat", "Master Training Session", and "Exhibitions", among others. These events will set the stage for the momentous event later for the day. The conclave will



witness the participation of the industry leaders, like MD, Bajaj Finserv Sanjiv Bajaj and MD, Parry Enterprises Rashmi Ranjan, among others.

Union Minister Pradhan will also inaugurate "I-Hub Foundation", which is established under Section 8 as a registered company, as IIM Sambalpur's incubator.

As part of the conclave - the startup extravaganza will fea-

ture an exhibition showcasing 50 startups from Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Bargarh, and other districts of Odisha. The event anticipates approximately 1,200 attendees, including 300 startups, as well as key stakeholders, investors, industry mentors, ministry representatives, students, and members of the incubator and venture capital (VCs) or angel investor communities.

HITTING THE BULL'S EYE

BJD to win unless sudden internal rebellion upsets status

Just a few days ago, BJD supporters got the shock of their life when the organising leader of the invincible party declared in the open that there are nearly 10,000 aspirants for 147 legislator seats. This sounds mad as 68 individuals per Assembly seat are hopeful about grabbing a ticket. So, the rest 67 disgruntled guys and girls are likely to revolt unless they have been indoctrinated soundly to stand by the choice of the high command. Interestingly, for good reasons, the BJD has no effective high command which is the party working committee. Naveen Patnaik runs the outfit as a highly adorable supremo only to keep the self-serving political crooks under total control. Naveen, with the support of his trusted aides, mostly smart, highly-skilled bureaucrats, ensures that no party fellow errs on the moral front.

Former and serving bureaucrats have come and gone, the latest being the most trusted VK Pandian,



BISWARAJ PATNAIK

who gave up the coveted job to turn a fulltime politician, is now the de facto highest decision maker in all critical matters including choosing candidates for elections. VK has established a failsafe machinery to keep watch on all potential candidates- particularly those eyeing berths in the State Assembly. He has employed top class survey outfits which go deep into the aspiring candidates' credentials and ante-

cedents. VK and his close team would leave nothing to chance while assessing candidates' winnability. 2024 is a sensitive year as there is much talk of a BJP-BJD pact that will facilitate saffron victory for the Centre and Naveen victory for the State. Modi and Naveen respect each other so much as never to disturb one another on power-sharing issues. It is not a secret that Naveen gifted a Rajya Sabha seat to Ashwini Vaishnav who perhaps could not organise a Lok Sabha constituency to battle from. Thus, the happy deal was struck like the last time to have Vaishnav as an Odisha political representative bringing into the State great public goods. Ashwini is of course doing a commendable job for both Modi and Naveen. Consequently, the people of Odisha are benefiting from his projects just too well.

After VK turned a politician, he took complete command over the BJD party affairs. The reason is simple and clear. He slogs like mad

day in and day out to keep the BJD afloat in extreme safety. He has become one of the best poll strategists in India by using latest information technology and a superbly chosen workforce. When he was a plain bureaucrat, Naveen passed instructions on his advice. Now even if he is technically number two in the fold, he is the de facto boss as Naveen desires him to be so. All was so immensely well until recent times. But now that VK is boss, some of the spineless, disgruntled ticket-rejects are clandestinely planning to cause damage to the party so as to have it lose more seats than imagined. The pulse of the people hasn't changed much though. The organising official of the BJD may have said things in a lighter mood about 68 aspirants per single Assembly seat. But a methodical survey indicates the dejected ones will try their best to cause fall of the party somehow by switching loyalty or by internal sabotage.

The party headed practically by

VK has to strictly go by the survey findings and not by the huge amount of money some wealthy ones dish out for tickets or for funding candidates pitted in close by constituencies.

Strangely, for the first time in Odisha, ordinary voters are going to eat up the money and cast vote as per personal choice. Twenty per cent of standard voters are expressing preference for change. For all this, the 2024 elections are not going to be absolute cakewalk for the BJD; nor surely for the Lok Sabha seats. The saffron gang is likely to grab 12-16 seats for which the BJD biggies are least bothered. On the contrary, they would like to keep the Modi-Shah duo happy in return for maximum seats given away to Naveen in the State Assembly. Ashwini will keep playing the good-to-all go-between until 2029.

The precarious condition of the Odisha State BJP leaders is difficult to describe in words. They have been screaming hoarse against the

BJD blunders in vain, nay shamelessly so as the central bosses necessarily offend them to dampen spirit by spending precious time in joyfully close-door meetings with the local adversaries against whom the hapless local saffron midgets have been consuming all their life's stored energy to buy people's hearts. The little public support that they manage to garner gets tossed to the garbage yard as their national leaders do not find it fit to discuss or spill in public the sins of the enemy camp while interacting with the party guys or responding to the media. Aparajita Sarangi today, though safe in her own constituency, is actually a lone ranger as the State party front-liners are by now a fast-vanishing tribe.

All the same, the immensely successful BJD has unknowingly groomed a few self-destroying, arrogantly wicked elements who are likely to ditch the honchos in good time during elections. Western and northern Odisha voters have lost

the initial zeal to support the BJD as of yore, so it seems. The coastal region is relatively safe, most so Cuttack. But Puri will witness the fiercest parliamentary battle as Sambit Patra has been buying hearts for over four and a half years. The constituency needs a local heavyweight, a son of the soil, with no baggage to give a fitting fight.

The Naveen team will not shed a single drop of tear if Ashwini Vaishnav's fraternity wins most berths in the Lok Sabha. They will only celebrate local Assembly victory, which is very likely unless the invisible rebels show up at the last moment to cause loss and setback by systematically planning internal sabotage.

VK's team better beware from now as there is soft murmur already among the ones who feel ignored! The survey findings should be the sole criterion for selection of candidates. Personal preferences or bulging money bags of individuals should never be the reason for choosing any candidate.

DSPL-743

DSPL-747

CM launches projects worth Rs 2,200 cr in Baleswar

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Wednesday unveiled a series of projects worth Rs 2,200 crore in Baleswar, including the inauguration of the Smriti Pith dedicated to Manmath Das and Manoj Das at Shankhari in the district.

In a tribute to both Manmath Das and Manoj Das, the CM hailed their talents and wisdom, crediting their contributions to history



and literature for bringing pride to the nation. He expressed gratitude to the families of Manmath Das and Manoj Das for their support in establishing this memorial. The Chief Minister also introduced the 'Lav' scheme,

granting tribal communities in Nilgiri communal forest rights over minor forest produce. Additionally, land rights certificates were given to slum dwellers of the Remuna Notified Area Council under the JAGA Mission.

Reflecting on proposals from the people of Baleswar during the visit of 5T Chairman VK Pandian to the district, the CM announced the launch of various projects worth Rs 22 billion. Additionally, he inaugurated the city

bus service for Baleswar town.

Stressing his government's commitment to the welfare of the common people, the CM highlighted initiatives such as the Biju Health Welfare Yojana, Lakshmi Bus scheme and interest-free loans for women farmers and youths aimed at fostering development across all sectors. He noted the success of the Nua-O programme for students in instilling enthusiasm and self-confidence among them.

In Kendrapada

Wedding ceremony turns into battlefield

After drunken Baratis create ruckus

PNS ■ KENDRAPADA

A wedding ceremony turned into a battle zone at Kaitha village in Rajnagar in Kendrapada district after some drunk members of the groom's side allegedly created ruckus on Tuesday night.

Later, the irate villagers detained the couple following the group clash with the groom's family. The incident was triggered after some members from the groom's side alleg-



edly misbehaved with the bride's family members and set their vehicle on fire in an inebriated state.

On the other hand, the groom's side claimed that the couple was not allowed to leave the village even after the rituals were completed.

As per reports, Harekrushna Roul's son Manas of

Jaduchandrapur village under Rajnagar police station in the district was getting married to Prafulla Padhiari's daughter Pratima of Kaitha village.

After the baaratis were served dinner, some of them consumed alcohol and started misbehaving. They created a ruckus and even went on to set afire an auto-rickshaw of the girl's uncle which further enraged the villagers resulting in a violent clash.

The Rajnagar police on getting information reached the spot and started an investigation. A case has been registered.

Amrit Bharat scheme

3 rly stations in K'jhar to be redeveloped

Inauguration fest held

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Out of 554 railway stations in the country, three stations namely Keonjhar, Juruli and Barbil will be redeveloped under the Amrit Bharat station scheme. Accordingly, on February 26, the inauguration program was held at the respective railway station. While Padma Shri Tulasi Munda graced the occasion as the chief guest at Barbil, Champua MLA Meenakshi Mahanta was the

chief guest at Juruli.

Similarly, Sadar MLA Mohan Majhi, Rengali MLA Nauri Naik and Nialagiri MLA Sukanta Kumar Nayak were present at Keonjhar railway station. Keonjhar MP Chandrayani Murmu failed to attend the event at Keonjhar, although she had been invited.

Before the start of the virtual inauguration by PM Narendra Modi, cultural programmes were held by students of local schools. They were felicitated for their success in different competitions.

Cong gheraoes Kendrapada DM

With various demands

PNS ■ KENDRAPADA

Thousands of activists of Kendrapada Block and Nagar Congress Committee on Tuesday took out a rally through the main thoroughfare of the township and reached at district Collector's office.

The activists later gheraoed the collectorate where they organized a protest meeting. The agitation was named as "Mati Pai Jail Chalo", presses for various demands for the development of the district.

They were led by the senior Congress leader and former Minister, Ganeswar Behera, former MLA of Aul, Debendra Sharma, former MLA Chinmaya Behura, District



Congress Committee president Lokanath Maharathi and Ratikanta Kanungo.

The demands included setting up of a medical college at Kendrapada, giving university

status to Kendrapada Autonomous College, running a passenger train on Paradip-Haridaspur railway line in Kendrapada and setting up a city hospital at Kendrapada Municipality etc.

Jeevika Samriddhi Project

Vedanta initiative paves path for smart agri-entrepreneurs

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Vedanta Aluminium's agriculture-based sustainable livelihood initiative "Jeevika Samriddhi Project" has been unfolding a tale of transformation among the farmers in Jharsuguda district.

By introducing 'Climate Smart Agricultural Practices' and allied interventions, this flagship project of the company has elevated the lives of over 400 farming households in its initial phases.

With the third phase underway now, the project aims at empowering an additional 500 farming households in the villages of Parmanpur, Kumudapali and Dalki in the district.

Sharing his transformative journey through the implementation of "System of Rice Intensification (SRI)" method of paddy cultivation, an elated Manbodh Pradhan from Parmanpur village informed, "SRI reduced my input costs and increased my productivity. Now, I'm harvesting 51 quintals of paddy from 2 acres,"

Sharing another success story from Gudigaon village, farmer Naresh Patel acknowledged, "The training sessions on natural pest management and organic farming methods ensured the cultivation of a range of cash crops like ginger, chilli, coriander, bottle gourd and many more which is fetching very good returns."

Jharsuguda district Assistant Director of Horticulture Manoranjan Nanda, who has been closely associated with this project, remarked, "Jeevika Samriddhi is positively impacting a large number of



farming households by introducing them to advanced agricultural practices as well as to the best practices in land and water management. I'm hopeful that the third phase would transform the agricultural landscape in Jharsuguda."

Notably, the ongoing Phase III of Vedanta Aluminium's ambitious "Jeevika Samriddhi Project" introduces innovative and sustainable solutions to tackle the challenges of rural agriculture. From pond restoration and solar pumps ensuring reliable irrigation to modern micro-irrigation methods optimising water usage, the project familiarizes farmers on using advanced techniques like the "System of Rice Intensification (SRI)" and the "WADI" model to revitalise barren lands, boosting crop yields sustainably.

The farmers, who are part of the "Jeevika Samriddhi Project", are engaged in cultivation round the year due to improved irrigation facilities which has reduced dependency on rains.

In its third phase, installation of solar irrigation system in existing bore wells has augmented the irrigation infrastructure for the farmers. The implementation of solar-powered irrigation facilities supports farmers in cultivating a

variety of hybrid vegetables, including leafy greens.

The SRI method of paddy cultivation and adoption of cash crops have increased the average crop productivity and has enhanced the monthly income of farmers, contributing to a 50% increment in monthly income for 77% of farmers associated with the project.

With a focus on organic farming, practices such as the setting up of vermin compost tanks and bio-manure to enhance soil fertility naturally, are elucidated in detail to the farmers.

Furthermore, the project supports agri-allied activities such as pisciculture, offering farmers additional avenues for income generation. By integrating fish farming with traditional agriculture, farmers can maximise land utilisation while tapping into new markets and revenue streams.

Moreover, comprehensive training from experts and exposure visits empower farmers with knowledge in climate-smart agriculture practices and modern technological interventions. Together, these initiatives not only enhance agricultural productivity but also promote environmental sustainability and economic resilience within rural communities.

Mukhya Mantri Janajati Mission: A game changer for tribal livelihood

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Ujedi Pangi (32), wife of Hari Pangi of Upper Barabandha village under Kotia gram panchayat in Pottangi block has taken the lead in having strawberry cultivation over 3 acres of land under the guidance of ITDA, Koraput under Mukhya Mantri Janajati Jeevika Mission (MMJIM) under ST,SC Development Minorities and Backward Classes Welfare Department. Ujedi and other farmers are very happy to see the lovely red exotic fruits on the plants creating a very encouraging scene on the mulching bed. Here as one acre has been cultivated by the SHG consisting 10 members, Ujedi expects Rs. 1.50 lakh as minimum share per member till May-end.

Sushila Kishan (24) from Badaposh village under Bonaigarh block in Sundargarh is now confident that her family will no longer "lead a life of difficulties". Her family could now be able to diversify their livelihood baskets and earn an additional income of 30,000/- just within 3-4 months' of time.

For Sabita Sabara (48) the harvest of 42 quintals of tomatoes in just three months was a wonderful achievement. From the remote Rengam vil-



lage under Siriguda Gram Panchayat of Gudari Block and Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) Gunupur, Sabita is a star performer from among 120 members of "Rengam Janajati Jeevika Parishad."

Baruna Dehury (38), a marginal farmer in Khuntakata village of Banspal block under ITDA Keonjhar has proved his expertise with a bumper cauliflower production and a profit of Rs 50,000 through his harvest and has discovered a better option for livelihood under MMJIM.

Somanath Mundagadia (37) of Hataguda village under Parajamuthai gram panchayat in Semiliguda block of ITDA, Koraput was earlier dependent on the millet yields from his 2.50 acre land. But, he is now happy to get a return of around Rs 1.75 lakh of vegetable crops under MMJIM.

Surmuni Chatar (52) from Bangiriposi village under Jhadghosda gram panchayat of

Sukruli block and ITDA Karanjia's success story is based on the cluster plan prepared by the JJP. With the current mustard yield Surmuni's family is earning Rs 5,000 to 6,000/ in a month and hopes that it can go up to Rs 50,000 in the coming year.

MMJIM: A GAME CHANGER

The MMJIM Programme is funded by the Odisha Government and the State Budget has provisioned Rs 500 crores for it for three years starting the 2023-24 fiscal. Operating in 13 districts and 119 Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) blocks, it encompasses 22 ITDA areas and the initial phase runs from 2023-24 to 2025-26 financial years. In the first phase, the programme aims to directly benefit 1.5 lakh tribal households.

The programme, spearheaded by the ST,SC Development Minorities and Backward Classes Welfare Department, is implemented by



ITDAs with support of a State-level PMU by non-government organisation PRADAN and 16 other partner NGOs as facilitators with the ITDAs.

MMJIM is one of the Largest Livelihood promotion initiatives directly and specifically meant for the indigenous communities of Odisha.

MAJOR ACTIVITIES

The main activities of MMJIM include promotion and strengthening of Janajati Jeevika Parishad (JJP) as the community level grassroots institution and establishing the Livelihood production clusters, entry point activities to build the confidence of the community, development of farm clusters through critical input support and following regenerative agriculture and non-synthetic approach of crop production and creation of suitable irrigation infrastructures to enhance crop intensity.

MMJIM OUTCOMES
Commissioner-cum-Secre-

tary ST,SC Development Minorities and Backward Classes Welfare Department Roopa Roshan Sahoo said "MMJIM has resulted in significant increase in the farm income of the beneficiaries in its initial year. In the subsequent years, as per the plan, intervened crop area under cultivation will be doubled and hundred percent of the farm families will adopt a better package of practices due to project intervention."

After 3 years the scheme envisaged fifty percent increase in productivity of the crops taken under cluster development programme and fifty percent of the cluster areas have come under irrigation. While it has helped in fifty percent increase in area under cultivation in both winter and summer season including doubling of crop intensity, forty percent of wasteland/fallow lands/FRA lands of the clusters villages were brought under active cultivation through the activities of MMJIM.

On his Holy Disappearance Day ISKCON Guru Gour Govinda an eminent preacher

RADHAKANTA DAS

February 29, 2024 is ISKCON Guru, Baishnaba Acharya, preacher, philosopher, Sri Srimad Gour Gobinda Swami Maharaj's 29th Holy Disappearance Day. The day will be observed with much pomp and gaiety in the ISKCON centers all over the world, including in Bhubaneswar.

Gurudev was born on September 2, 1929 in Jagannathpur in Jagatsinghpur district. His mother's name was Pata Mahadei and father's name was Iswar Chandra Manik. His childhood name was Brajabandhu. He was very talented.

He analyzed the Gita, Bhagabata, Chaitanya Charitamruta at the age of eight and gave very nice lecture to the villagers in his village temple.

He started teachership for maintaining his family. Also he continued his study during his teachership career. He passed with distinction the Batchelor degree

during the year 1958 and post graduate degree in the year 1961. He married Basanti Debi, daughter of Kalyan Nandi of Patakura area in the year 1953 and started his family life.

He left family life, teachership and started Sanyas life. He took permission from the presiding deity of his uncle's house, Gopal Jew and left the house on April 10, 1974. He declared himself Gour Gopal instead of Brajabandhu. He started travelling from city to city all over India and inquired about his spiritual guru. At last, he arrived at Brundaban. He visited many temples and spiritual organisations at Brundaban. Finally, he met founder Acharya of ISKCON, Srila AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupad.

Srila Maharaj accepted him in his heart as his spiritual master or guru and obeyed his direction. Prabhupad directed him to translate his book 'Back to Godhead' in Hindi language. Prabhupad was satisfied with his translation and his



depth in Hindi literature. He directed him to move to Hyderabad and translate his writings.

As per his direction Gurudev proceeded to Mayapur. Prabhupad gave Harinam initiation and changed his name from Gour Gopal to "Gour Govinda". He directed him to stay at Nayapalli and construct a new temple there in the land donated by one Chhabi

Kanungo and continued his preaching programme there. Krishna Balamandir was inaugurated at Vrindaban during the year 1975. On the same tithi, Prabhupad declared him Gour Govinda Swami instead of Gour Govinda Das by giving him sannyas initiation.

His preaching programme in Krishna consciousness spread internationally. He travelled to the United States of America, England, USSR, Canada, many western countries, South Africa, Australia, Indonesia etc, besides important cities of India and created thousands and thousands of followers and devotees. He constructed the lotus temple in the premises of ISKCON, Bhubaneswar and installed the deity Radha Gopinath there and a new image to ISKCON, Bhubaneswar.

He took many miracle projects and started some amazing work during the year 1996. He started a Gosala and farm project at Atala, Jagannathpur which is 14km away

from ISKCON,

Bhubaneswar. He proposed to keep 108 cows there. He started a fassi tree project at Dasapalla forest in Nayagarh which is essentially meant for construction of chariot for Car Festival at Lord Jagannath, Puri and he also started Dandabhanga

project at Puri district. He organised Hare Krishna Utsav for 3 days in the Exhibition

Ground, Bhubaneswar where international devotees and intellectuals of ISKCON

participated. He also modernised the Allarnath temple at Brahmagiri of Puri district.

The GBC conference was underway in Mayapur in West Bengal, Calcutta during the month of February 1996. Maharaj was replying to all questions one after another with due patience. He passed away there.

Hare Krishna

(The writer is State PRO, ISKCON, Bhubaneswar Mob- 9132090199 /8847875959)

Dharmasala Cong leader Debendra joins BJP



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Jajpur district Dharmasala Assembly constituency's young leader Debendra Kumar Panda joined the BJP in a function held at the BJP headquarters here on Tuesday. BJP State president Manmohan Samal inducted him to the party officially.

Debendra is the nephew of late Kangali Charan Panda, who was a tall Congress leader of the Dharmasala constituency and was the party MLA twice from there in the 1980 and 1985 elections.

Debendra started his political ca-

reer as the Students' Union president of local Upendranath Sarada College and then worked under the leadership of Kangali Panda to strengthen the Congress organisation and manage elections.

He joined the BJP being sidelined by the Congress and attracted by the BJP's ideology and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. His induction to the BJP is expected to strengthen the BJP in the Dharmasala constituency and weaken the Congress. He is also aspiring for the BJP's Assembly ticket for the constituency in the 2024 elections.



OPINION 6
THE US PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION: TRUMP REDUX

WORLD 8
NO IMMINENT DEAL DESPITE
BIDEN'S GAZA CEASEFIRE SIGNAL

MONEY 10
BENGALURU TAX PAYERS ARE
GIVING US BUOYANCY: FM

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Congress Faces Himachal Freeze

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

A worried Congress hurried on Wednesday to save its Government in Himachal Pradesh amid dramatic developments, including a resignation announcement by high-profile Minister Vikramaditya Singh and the suspension of 15 BJP MLAs by the Speaker. The party engaged in a damage control exercise to prevent the possible loss of a State ruled by the party just weeks ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge despatched three observers — Bhupesh Baghel, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, and D K Shivakumar — to Shimla, indicating that the party could take some “tough steps”. The crisis was triggered by Tuesday’s cross-voting by six Congress MLAs in the Rajya Sabha election for the lone seat from Himachal Pradesh. The party has now sought the disqualification of these MLAs from the Assembly, and the matter was heard by Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania who reserved his order. The suspended BJP MLAs, including the Leader of the Opposition Jai Ram Thakur, initially refused to leave the House, apparently to stall the Assembly from passing Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh



Himachal Pradesh Governor Shiv Pratap Shukla during a meeting with Leader of Opposition in the State Assembly Jai Ram Thakur and BJP MLAs, at Raj Bhavan, in Shimla, on Wednesday

PTI

Sukhu’s Budget through voice vote. The BJP demanded voting on the Budget, believing it would reveal that the Congress had lost its majority in the State Assembly. The House later passed the Finance Bill by voice vote with no BJP member present. The Speaker then adjourned the Session sine die. Chief Minister Sukhu dismissed speculation that he was resigning, stating, “Neither the high command, nor anyone else has asked me for resignation,” Sukhu said. Congress leader Abhishek Manu Singhvi was defeated by BJP’s Harsh Mahajan on

Tuesday through a draw of lots, after the two candidates bagged 34 votes each. The result meant that the Congress, which had come into power in the State just 14 months ago, winning 40 seats in the Assembly, had failed to reach the halfway mark. The BJP won 25 seats in the House of 68 in 2022. There are three Independent MLAs, who were believed to be with the ruling Congress until the cross-voting crisis erupted. Early morning, Leader of Opposition Jai Ram Thakur led a delegation to Raj Bhavan to meet Governor Shiv Pratap Shukla to ensure that the

Finance Bill was passed only through a division. Late in the evening, the Congress observers began their interaction with party MLAs. Congress general secretary Jai Ram Ramesh said Kharge had asked the observers and AICC in-charge for the State Rajeev Shukla to speak to all MLAs, including those who are disgruntled, and submit a comprehensive report to him soon. “The Congress will not hesitate to take tough steps as the party is our priority and will not let the people’s mandate be betrayed in

Himachal Pradesh,” Ramesh said at the AICC Press conference in the national Capital. Earlier in the morning, Himachal Pradesh Public Works Minister Vikramaditya Singh announced he was quitting the council of ministers and would submit his resignation to the chief minister and the Governor. It was not immediately clear whether he had done so. Singh, whose mother is Himachal Congress president Pratibha Singh, said, “There have been attempts to humiliate and undermine me from some quarters, and despite reservations, I supported the Government.” He is the son of Virbhadra Singh, a former Chief Minister who died in 2021. The family has in the past hinted that Virbhadra Singh’s legacy has not been honored by the party. Pratibha Singh has also expressed discontent with the manner in which Sukhu has run the State. Vikramaditya Singh said the 2022 Congress campaign was run in his father’s name. “There was no poster, or hoarding or banner which did not carry his picture,” he said. But after the victory, when the matter of putting up his statue came up, the Government failed to decide the location. “It is not a political but an emotional thing for a son,” he said.

BJP in Election Mode, Selects 100 Candidates

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Wednesday brainstormed over the party’s probable candidates in several States for the Lok Sabha elections, a day before its Central Election Committee is expected to meet to finalise the names for the first list of about 100 party nominees. The list will have names of candidates from seats in States like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Sources said Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP national president JP Nadda held separate meetings with party leaders from several States, including Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand among others. Similar meetings with leaders from Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana have been held so far. While the lists of names in 2019 were released only after the Election Commission had announced the election schedule, it is going to be different this time as the BJP looks to follow the template seen during the latest round of Assembly polls in five States when it named its candidates, especially in the seats the party had lost five years earlier, before the announcement of dates. The first list, party sources



said, is expected to be 100 candidates which include the names of heavyweights like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Shah, Union Ministers Rajnath Singh, Smriti Irani, Nirmala Sitharaman, S Jaishankar and Bollywood super star Akshay Kumar about whom grapevine in the party has it that he may be fielded from the prestigious New Delhi Parliamentary constituency. Other candidates from the spheres of sports and education sector are also doing the rounds and the party is completely tight lipped to reveal names being discussed as of now. Party sources also said to keep the NDA constituents in good humour

and a few minority candidates could also be fielded. Modi is the MP from Varanasi, a constituency he has won twice and is likely to contest for third consecutive time. He was elected with a huge margin of 3.37 lakh votes in 2014 and had increased it to 4.8 lakh in 2019. Amit Shah had contested the 2019 election from Gandhinagar, a seat that had been held by BJP veteran LK Advani until then. The first list for the 2019 elections had also included Modi and Shah, who was then the party’s national president and had made his Lok Sabha poll debut from Gandhinagar.



NEWS BREAK

CBI summons Akhilesh

NEW DELHI: The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has summoned Samajwadi Party president and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Akhilesh Yadav as a “witness” to record his statement on Thursday in illegal mining cases registered five years ago. The cases pertain to the issuance of mining leases in alleged violation of e-tendering process.

Modi slams DMK, Congress for dynastic politics

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■
CHENNAI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday literally tore into allegations made by the DMK-led Tamil Nadu Government that the Central Government was not offering any welfare measures to the people in the State and was putting spokes on the Dravidian land’s progress. The DMK Government is blocking all welfare projects being introduced by the Central Government for Tamil Nadu. What the DMK and its alliance partners

including the Congress were doing is creating rift among the people, said the Prime Minister while addressing a mammoth rally organised by the BJP at Thoothukudi. “In the past we saw a Chief Minister struggling hard to coronate his son as Chief Minister. Now we are seeing the son working to anoint his son as the Chief Minister of the State,” said Modi without naming the late patriarch M Karunanidhi, his son and present Chief Minister M K Stalin and the latter’s son Udhayanidhi. “The DMK and the Congress have only one



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being felicitated during a public meeting in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, on Wednesday

PTI

agenda and that is to perpetrate dynastic politics,” said the Prime Minister. The DMK had committed a faux pas by putting pictures of Chinese rockets in the billboards erected across the venue to make the people know that the space center coming up at Kulasekharapattinam was a project initiated by the State. “They do not know that India has mastered the design and development of high power

launch vehicles which would be launched from the new space station,” lambasted the Prime Minister. Modi listed various development and infrastructure projects implemented by the Center for the welfare of Tamil Nadu. “Five years ago, only 21 lakh people had drinking water connection at their homes in Tamil Nadu. However, this count has increased to one crore now.



Largest ever offshore drug seized



Indian Navy personnel show 3300 kgs contraband (3089 kg charas, 158 kg Methamphetamine, 25 kg Morphine) seized from a vessel in a joint operation with Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB)

PTI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Indian security agencies have seized the largest-ever offshore consignment of drugs, weighing 3,300 kilos, and arrested five foreigners

from a dhow in the Arabian Sea off the Gujarat coast. The joint operation, codenamed ‘Sagarmanthan-1’, was carried out by the Navy, Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), and the Gujarat Police.

The boat reportedly sailed from an Iranian port. The value of the contraband was estimated to be between ₹1,300 crore and ₹2,000 crore in the international market. Union Home Minister Amit Shah hailed the operation as

a “historic success” and a testament to his Government’s “unwavering commitment to making our nation drug-free.” “Pursuing PM Modi’s vision of a drug-free Bharat, our agencies today achieved the grand success of making the biggest offshore seizure of drugs in the nation. In a joint operation carried out by the NCB, the Navy, and the Gujarat Police, a gigantic consignment of 3,132 kg of drugs was seized. This historic success is a testament to our Government’s unwavering commitment to making our nation drug-free. “On this occasion, I congratulate the NCB, the Navy, and the Gujarat Police,” he said.

Unwavering support for Rahul Gandhi in Wayanad

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

A vast majority in Wayanad, Kerala, wants Congress leader Rahul Gandhi to contest from the Lok Sabha constituency in the upcoming poll. In 2019, Rahul won from the constituency with an impressive margin of 4.32 lakh votes, polling 64.94 per cent of the total votes cast in the election. All his challengers were left humbled, losing their security deposits in a one-sided contest. Wayanad, situated atop the



Western Ghats, is a traditional Congress bastion, leaving no doubt about Rahul’s prospects in the upcoming election. Despite his commitments as the party’s top national leader, he has remained active in the

constituency. Interestingly, none of the voters with whom The Pioneer interacted could recall the names of the two candidates who had contested against Rahul in the 2019 polls. Even hardcore CPI (M) supporters want Rahul to run from Wayanad in this election. “The constituency gained international attention because of Rahul’s decision to contest from here. Although the constituency is yet to receive any major projects, it has faced discrimination under the CPI (M)-led Government in Kerala. Moreover, whenever there was an emergency, Rahul promptly attended to the constituency,” said Rajendran, a CPI (M) supporter.



India bears brunt of climate change wrath

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The year 2023 brought forth a concerning reality for India, as every State and Union Territory experienced extreme weather events at least once, disrupting life, livelihoods, and the economy as resources were diverted to tackle flooding or extreme heat, volatile conditions driven by climate change. These occurrences were not sporadic; rather, they persisted for approximately 318 out of 365 days, revealing

a disturbingly recurrent pattern of climatic disruptions. In what should be considered a climate change warning to India, the toll on human life was grave, with 3,287 recorded deaths attributed to these extreme weather events. Additionally, the devastation extended to the animal kingdom, with a staggering 1.24 lakh animal deaths reported. The agricultural sector, vital for the nation’s food security, bore a heavy brunt, with 2.21 million

hectares of crop area suffering damage, leading to significant economic losses. This widespread impact, detailed in the independent think tank Centre for Science and Environment’s “State of Environment 2024” report, underscores the severity of the challenges posed by climate change. The report said the climate-vulnerable country experienced extreme weather on 86 percent of days from January to September. State-wise, Himachal Pradesh emerged as the most heavily



File Photo

affected zone, enduring extreme weather conditions for 149 days, closely followed by Madhya Pradesh with 141 days. Kerala and Uttar Pradesh also faced prolonged periods of extreme weather, each recording 119 days of such events. The widespread nature of these occurrences is further underscored by the fact that eight States experienced over 100 days of extreme weather. The temperature increase was driven by human-caused

climate change and boosted by the natural El Niño weather phenomenon. The types of extreme weather varied, with heavy rains, floods, and landslides occurring on 208 days, while lightning and storms were prevalent for 202 days. Heatwaves persisted for 49 days, cold waves for 29 days, and cloudbursts were recorded on nine days, contributing to localised instances of intense precipitation.

FIRST COLUMN

BUILDING BRIDGES WITH EMPATHY




SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

It is incumbent upon us to ensure that every student receives vital lessons in empathy

After being constantly taunted for her height, skin colour and academic performance by her fellow students for months, a 12-year-old girl cut her wrists in an attempt to end her mental agony. Fortunately, she was saved. But a 16-year-old student of Class 10, who jumped off the top floor of the apartment building he was living in, did not survive. It was his letter to his mother in which he wrote that the school had killed him, that revealed the shocking details of bullying he was subjected to and the school's failure to stop it. While several steps have been taken to put an end to bullying, penal action can only be a temporary deterrent and not a long-term solution especially in the present milieu of hyped social media, freely available toxic content and, peer pressure.

If children are taught to engage empathetically, can it inculcate feelings of respect, dignity and compassion for all? Project Empathy, an endeavour to bring empathy education into school curricula, believes being empathetic can nurture emotionally and mentally strong human beings. When young students understand the importance of living in harmony with one another, the 'walls of division' between them transform into 'walls of friendship'. Contrary to popular belief, empathy can be taught. While 50% of our empathic capacities are genetically inherited, research shows that the rest can be learnt. This is the biggest reason why empathy must be taught at a young age. Over the last five years, Project Empathy led by educationist Vibha Lakhera, introduced this concept and developed activities and stories that acknowledge, recognize and identify emotions and broaden the discussion around emotional health and well-being of every student.



Empathy education helps to enrich the emotional vocabulary of students and build their emotional and mental resilience. Introduced in about six schools mainly army schools like the Army Rifles Public Schools in North India and Kashmir and Alok Bharati Public School in Delhi, the project has been able to reach out to over 1500 students. Importantly, teachers, who lay the foundation for their values, have been recognized as critical to the success of teaching empathy.

This resource book for teachers draws from the education system and best practices in schools in Denmark and Finland, two countries among the top three happiest countries in the world according to the United National Happiness Report. Put together by Lakhera and veteran development journalist Usha Rai, the interesting manual explains the neuroscience of empathy with the help of psychologists and brain scientists sans any jargon. The mirror neurons, which light up when a person feels an emotion like sadness or joy, respond in the same way when this person sees another person also demonstrating the same kind of feelings or actions. This empathic reaction helps to understand and share experiences.

The manual also explains the types of empathy-cognitive, emotional and compassionate while differentiating between sympathy and empathy. Stories centred on children and their emotions have been innovatively used to provide practical guidelines on how to diffuse tensions, reduce stress, and strengthen understanding of each other's differences. At present, empathy is not included in teacher training programmes. Only a handful of schools have taken the initiative to introduce the concept of empathy education. There is a need to encourage all students to consider different perspectives and viewpoints. Only by being empathetic, can they understand and acknowledge differences of opinion and resolve conflict situations.

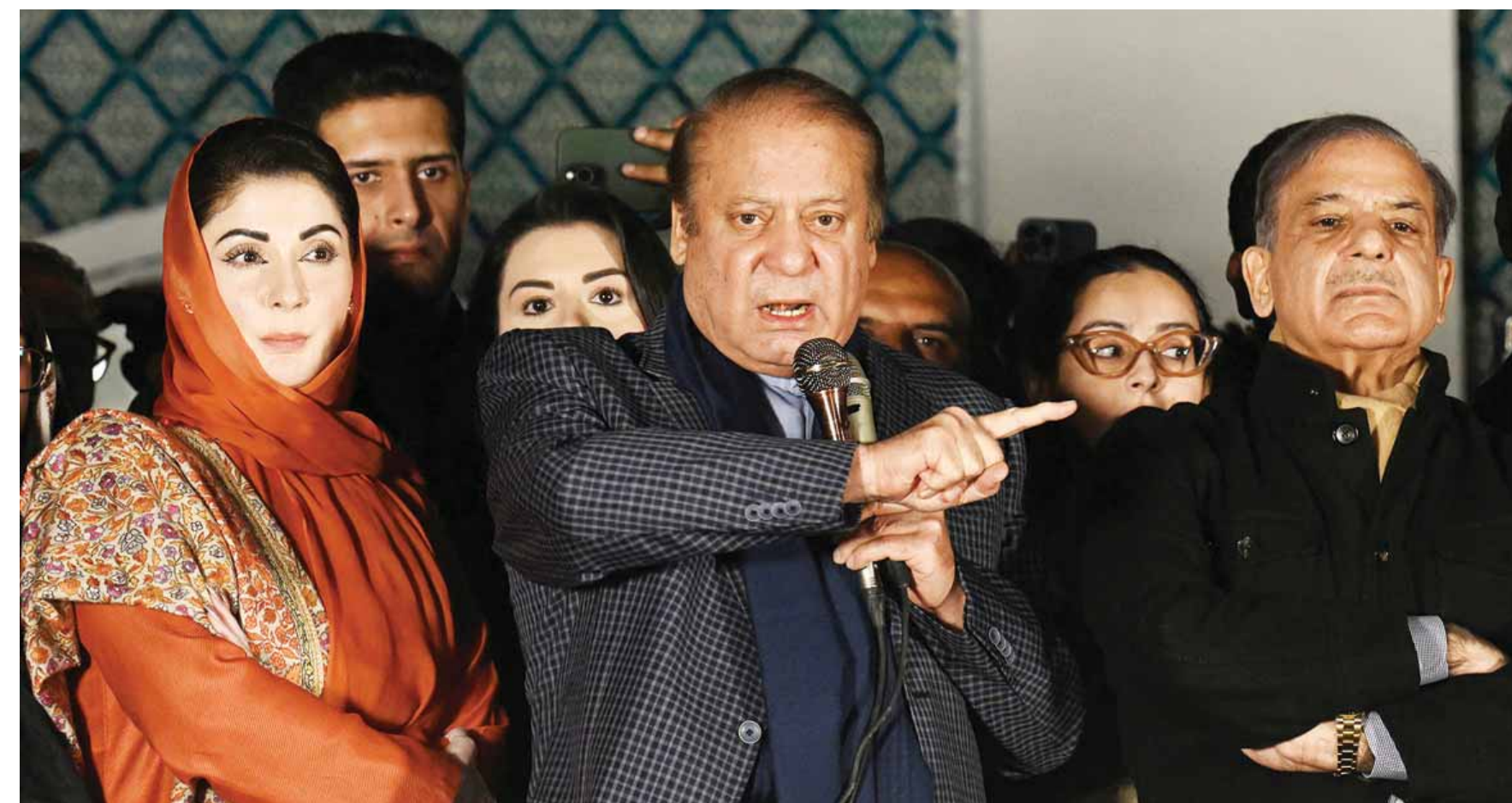
(Swapna Majumdar is a journalist writing on development and gender. The views are expressed are personal)

Nawaz Sharif's strategic move or military script?



KS TOMAR

Nawaz's decision to step aside from the race for premiership in Pakistan and nominate his brother Shehbaz instead has sparked intense debate



Alively and geo-political issue is being debated worldwide, especially in Pakistan which pertains to the 'mysterious' decision of three-time prime minister, Nawaz Sharif to Suo moto opt out of the race for premiership and subsequently nominate his younger brother, Shehbaz Sharif for the top slot though he was a favourite of powerful military, obviously current army chief, Asim Munir, who had scripted the entire episode to enthrone him.

Foreign policy experts say that it was on the analogy of former PM, Imran Khan who was saddled in the chair due to the open patronage of Ex-Army chief, Qamar Javed Bajwa but both fell apart owing to fighting for supremacy. It was a paradox and a typical case of a "servant" challenging the authority of the "Master" which may happen in this dispensation also but Nawaz as a "shadow PM" may not permit it as he has had the bitter experience of being ousted by the army from the post in 2018.

Analysts are convinced that owing to compelling circumstances, Ex PM, Nawaz played his cards well hence the choice fell on his brother which will also ensure the continuity of "Family Rule" in Pakistan. Yet, another addition will be Maryam Nawaz who is poised to become chief minister of the most important province of Punjab.

2nd, the army had meticulously planned to keep Imran Khan out of the political process hence more than 150 cases were registered against him by the previous regime and courts handed him the punishment in three cases which exceeded 24 years.

3rd, due to Imran's tirade against the army, Nawaz was brought to Pakistan last year from self-exile in London which preceded the Supreme Court's decision in 2018 to sentence him to ten -years imprisonment and a fine of \$10.6 million in a corruption case related to Panama papers of illegal properties abroad. He was disqualified and hence fled to London to fight his battle.

Nawaz's brother Shahbaz headed the government in Pakistan which ensured the adoption of a bill in parliament on June 25, 2023, which limited the lifetime disqualification of lawmakers to 5 years.

It was meant to pave the way for the return of his elder brother to resume his political activities in Pakistan.4th, Nawaz's critics allege that the stage was set for "mass scale rigging" to help him to become PM but the game plan went haywire as independents supported by Imran from jail won a majority of the seats and Nawaz's party PML-N could not get even simple majority which shattered the dream of Nawaz who was averse to heading a minority government.

5th, Nawaz nominated Shehbaz because he had experience in heading coalition governments and was a flexible politician who could take partners along .6th, Nawaz would have found it difficult in parliament as Imran's loyalists were ready with a lot of ammunition to put him on the mat on corruption whereas Shehbaz is better placed so far. Finally, Nawaz and the army chief are on the same page which may help the new government to appease the sentiments and fulfil the aspirations of the people who are facing the problem of survival.

It will be the most difficult task of the Shehbaz government to implement the harsh preconditions of IMF which had released USD 710 million second tranche of a USD 3 billion loan to the cash-strapped country to stabilize its debt-ridden economy. Shehbaz's previous government had successfully negotiated with the IMF to procure the "bailout Package" which needs to be clinched. The IMF had saved Pakistan from economic collapse as Pakistan's reserves stood at \$7.8 billion as of Nov. 18, 2023, barely enough to cover imports for a month.

The people are reeling under inflation which has touched to the level of 30% and prices of essential commodities are beyond the capacity of consumers. The floods had caused losses of billions and thousands of lives were lost hence the new PM will have to take care of rehabilitation tasks which are in disarray.

The floods had caused tremendous losses of USD 3.3. trillion in June-October,2022 besides killing 1839 people which must be uppermost in the priorities of the new government as victims are still craving relief and rehabilitation tasks which seem to be in disarray.

China has treaded cautiously and did not touch the sensitive issue of rigging whereas the United States and EU demanded an investigation into the allegations. China has come to the rescue of Pakistan several times but the cost has been beyond the imagination of this poor country. China's debt policy has entrapped Pakistan which has procured a heavy loan and the Chinese investment has risen \$65 billion in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by 2022. China has already acquired control of Gwadar Port on 16 May 2013 which may be retained instead of a lease guarantee in future.

Originally valued at \$46 billion, the value of China Pakistan Economic Corridor had been worth \$62 billion as of 2020. India and the US are opposed to BRI hence Nawaz will have to tread cautiously to keep China in check to save his country from the debt trap policy.

China will be looking for the security protection of its projects in Pakistan hence it may develop cordial relations with the Shehbaz government. Experts say that the United States wanted to see the back of Imran who had accused it of conspiring with the army to oust him from power. It has got history of having direct ties with army generals hence it may find it easy to deal with the new government. India can expect Nawaz to influence Shehbaz to take the initiative to start dialogue with India which has already created its space in the world arena and economic ties can help the beleaguered people of this poor country.

The new coalition government is bound to be weak hence delivery expectations on domestic and international fronts must be based on logical conclusions and limitations of new dispensation in Pakistan.

(The writer is a journalist and political analyst, views are personal)

A roadmap for comprehensive socio-economic inclusion

The interim Budget for 2024 emerges as a crucial instrument for steering the nation towards inclusive development

As is the case with multiple developing economies across the world, India is faced with wealth inequality, unemployment, existing and persisting gaps in healthcare infrastructure and delivery, and environmental concerns. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index based on data from 2021/22 finds that 16.4 % of India's population lives in poverty with 4.2% facing severe poverty.

The Regional Human Development Report 2024 by UNDP finds that the top 10% of the population controls 65% of the nation's total wealth, underlining stark wealth inequality. The consequences are multi-dimensional – it negatively impacts upward intergenerational mobility and lowers the rate of economic growth.

Lack of jobs has been an area of concern for the country for decades now. While the current unemployment rate for January 2024 is 6.8, unemployment amongst educated youth is concerning. The State of Working India 2023 by Azim Premji University reveals that over 42% of India's graduates under 25 were unemployed in 2021-22.



NAGHMA MULLA

Marked by a distinct urban-rural divide, gaps in healthcare services and infrastructure are a major obstacle for people in small towns and rural areas. A large part of India's population suffers from inaccessibility to quality healthcare – leading to delayed treatments and high out-of-pocket expenditure.

A United Nations report emphasises that approximately 75% of healthcare infrastructure, medical personnel, and other health resources are predominantly located in urban regions, home to merely 27% of the overall population. The impact of climate change and disasters on both people and the economy has been devastating. India experienced uninsured losses of \$32.94 billion from natural disasters between 2018 and 2022. The ramifications of human loss are even more grave and are evident in the 55.9 million displacements from 237 disasters mapped between 2018 – 2022. The interim budget addresses these issues in a big way.

It presents a comprehensive roadmap for national progress, meticulously designed to touch upon critical facets of development such as women empowerment, job creation, environmental conservation, and poverty alleviation. It aims to address the needs and aspirations of diverse social groups—'Garib' (the poor), 'Mahilayen' (women), 'Yuva' (youth), and 'Annadata' (farmers). This inclusion is notable as it envisages the significance of marginalised social groups in achieving a Viksit Bharat – a developed India by 2047 – marking a century of India's independence.

The budget prioritises support for the 'Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises' (MSME) sector with necessary finances, technologies, and training to enhance global competitiveness. The rooftop solarization policy is set to offer employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in technical and supply sectors.

Additionally, the establishment of a separate Department for Fisheries and the expansion of the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) underscore efforts to double production and exports in the fisheries sector, aiming to create 55 lakh new jobs and drive inclusive economic progress. A significant step is the focus on provisions for the inclusion of low-income groups and women. Initiatives like the disbursement of 30 crore Mudra Yojana loans to women entrepreneurs and financial support to 78 lakh street vendors under PM-SVANidhi emphasise the government's focus on enhancing work-force participation and providing earning avenues that drive upward mobility.

The SHG model of development has also proved to be successful – enabling nearly 10 million women to achieve annual incomes of over INR 1 lakh. Capitalising on this success, the goal has been expanded to elevate the target from 2 crore to 3 crore 'lakhpati didis', showcasing a commitment to women's economic empowerment. The budget made notable health sector announcements. The focus on preventive healthcare through the provision of cervical cancer vaccinations for young girls and the integration of various maternal and child health schemes indicate a push towards addressing the specific health needs of vulnerable groups.

The expansion of the Ayushman Bharat scheme to extend healthcare benefits to approximately 1.5 million ASHA workers and Anganwadi workers acknowledges the crucial contribution of these frontline health workers to primary healthcare services. Leverage existing hospital structures for the establishment of more medical colleges, addresses both – the healthcare professional shortage and the surging demand for medical education. This builds on the initiative from April 2023, when the government approved the establishment of 157 nursing colleges, allocating INR 1,570 crore, with the central government contributing INR 1,016 crore. The budget also provides a concrete pathway to achieving a net-zero economy by 2070. Key measures include funding for offshore wind energy, coal gasification projects to lessen reliance on fossil fuels, support for the electric vehicle ecosystem, and incentives for bio-mass collection. The budget also promotes bio-manufacturing for eco-friendly materials and climate resilience in the blue economy.

(The author is a prominent voice on social issues; views are personal)

Trump defeats Nikki in Michigan primary

Biden wins Democratic primary

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Voters handed decisive victories to US President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump in their respective parties' presidential primaries in Michigan on Tuesday, increasing the chances of a 2020 rematch between the two leaders in the race for the White House on Tuesday.

Trump easily defeated his main rival, Indian-American Nikki Haley, winning yet another early contest and additional delegates - bringing him one step closer to being able to formally secure the Republican Party's nomination in November.

When the last reports came in, Haley had received 26.5 per cent of the votes as against Trump's massive 68.2 per cent. US media outlets projected



that 77-year-old Trump would sweep the Michigan primary with more than 40 per cent of the votes against 52-year-old Haley. Trump's win further shuts the door on former South Carolina Governor Haley's hopes of building momentum ahead of next week's Super Tuesday contests, when more than one-third of the Republican Party's delegates are at stake.

Trump has previously won the Iowa caucuses, New Hampshire primary, caucuses in Nevada and the U.S. Virgin

Islands, and South Carolina primary. He needs 1,215 delegates to formally secure the nomination.

Trump reached the Michigan Republican Watch Party Tuesday night shortly after the race was called in his favour.

"I just want to thank everybody. This was a great day," he said, pointing to the state's autoworkers, saying Democrats "destroyed the autowork business," but vowed to "bring it all back into Michigan" if elected.

"I can tell you this

November cannot come fast enough," Trump said. "We have the worst president in history—the most incompetent and the most corrupt president, and we can't let this continue," Trump said, attacking his Democratic Party rival.

"So that day, November 5th, and January 20th is when we take over," Trump said, referring to Election Day and Inauguration Day. "We're going to make America great again, greater than ever before," Trump said, amidst applause from his supporters.

Trump has won 119 delegates while Haley has just 22. To receive the Republican Party's presidential nomination, one should get the backing of 1,215 delegates.

Meanwhile, Biden, 81, coasted to another victory in the state, marking his fourth primary victory in four tries. He has won 177 delegates from the four victories. Biden, who does not have any known rivals, has to win 1,968 delegates to get the Democratic Party's nomination.

Reacting to his victory, Biden said, "I want to thank

every Michigander who made their voice heard today. Exercising the right to vote and participating in our democracy is what makes America great.

"Four years ago, it was Michigan's diverse coalition that came together to reject Donald Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) extremism and sent me and Kamala to the White House," he said in a statement.

"For all of this progress, there is so much left to do. Donald Trump is threatening to drag us even further into the past as he pursues revenge and retribution," Biden said.

Meanwhile, the results in Michigan further solidified the positions of Trump and Biden as frontrunners in their respective parties.

Republicans will formally name their presidential candidate during a national convention in July. Democrats will have their convention in August.

However, a key feature of the Democratic primary in Michigan, which has a significant Muslim population, as

around 13.25 per cent of Biden's Democratic voters cast ballots for the "uncommitted" as part of their protest against the president for his handling of the Israel-Palestine war.

Strong opposition to Biden's support for Israel's war in Gaza against Hamas militants led some Democrats to call for voters to select "uncommitted" instead of casting a vote for the incumbent president.

Supporters of the effort for "uncommitted" ballots in Michigan said they were hoping for 10,000 such votes, a level that was easily surpassed. With nearly 99 per cent of the ballots counted, there were already more than one lakh "uncommitted" votes.

The movement picked up the support of Rep. Rashida Tlaib, who announced her public opposition to supporting Biden ahead of her home state's primary. "I was proud today to walk in and pull a Democratic ballot and vote uncommitted. We must protect our democracy. We must make sure that our government is about us, about the people," Tlaib said in a video.

Turkish drones kill three in Syria

Beirut(AP): Turkish drone strikes in northeastern Syria on Wednesday killed at least three members of a local Christian force and wounded others, including civilians, a Kurdish official and a Syrian opposition war monitor said. Also on Wednesday, in the southern Syrian city of Sweida, security forces opened fire at protesters angry over the country's worsening economy as they tried to break into the offices of President Bashar Assad's ruling Baath Party. A 52-year-old man was shot in the chest and later died of his wounds.

There was no immediate comment from Ankara on Wednesday's airstrikes. Turkey has been attacking Kurdish fighters in Syria for years but attacks on the fighters from the country's Christian minority have been rare.

The force that was targeted, the local Christian Syriac police known as Sutoro, works under the US-backed and Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration

of North and East Syria.

Siamand Ali of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces told The Associated Press that the Turkish drones initially hit three Sutoro vehicles near the northeastern town of Malikiyah. When a fourth vehicle, a pick-up truck, arrived at the scene to retrieve the casualties from the strike, it also came under attack, he said.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said three Sutoro police members were killed, as well as one civilian. The Observatory said the attack was the latest of 65 such strikes so far this year in northeastern Syria that have killed 18 people, mostly Kurdish fighters. Turkey often launches strikes against targets in Syria and Iraq it believes to be affiliated with the

Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK — a banned Kurdish separatist group that has waged an insurgency against Turkey since the 1980s.

Israel-Hamas war: No imminent deal despite Biden's Gaza ceasefire signal

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Israel and Hamas on Tuesday played down chances of an imminent breakthrough in talks for a cease-fire in Gaza, after US President Joe Biden said Israel has agreed to pause its offensive during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan if a deal is reached to release some hostages. The president's remarks came on the eve of the Michigan primary, where he faces pressure from the state's large Arab American population over his staunch support for Israel's offensive. Biden said he had been briefed on the status of talks by his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, but said his comments reflected his optimism for a deal, not that all the remaining hurdles had been overcome.

In the wake of Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, Israel's air, sea and ground campaign in Gaza has killed tens of thousands of people, obliterated large swaths of

the urban landscape and displaced 80% of the battered enclave's population.

Israel's seal on the territory, which allows in only a trickle of food and other aid, has sparked alarm that a famine could be imminent, according to the United Nations.

With UN truck deliveries of aid hampered by the lack of safe corridors, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and France conducted an airdrop of food, medical supplies and other aid into Gaza on Tuesday. At a beach in southern Gaza, boxes of supplies dropped from military aircraft drifted down on parachutes as thousands of Palestinians ran along the sand to retrieve them.

But alarm is growing over worsening hunger among Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians.

Two infants died from dehydration and malnutrition at Kamal Adwan Hospital in Gaza City, said the spokesman

for Gaza's Health Ministry, Ashraf al-Qidra. He warned that infant mortality threatens to surge.

Dehydration and malnutrition will kill thousands of children and pregnant women in the Gaza Strip," he said.

The UN Population Fund said the Al Helal Al Emirati maternity hospital in Gaza's southernmost town of Rafah reported that newborns were dying because mothers were unable to get prenatal or postnatal care. Premature births are also rising, forcing staff to put four or five newborns in a single incubator.

Most of them do not survive, it said, without giving figures on the numbers of deaths. Now the prospect of an invasion of Rafah has prompted global alarm over the fate of around 1.4 million civilians trapped there. Talks to pause the fighting have gained momentum recently and were underway Tuesday. Negotiators from the United States, Egypt

and Qatar have been working to broker a cease-fire that would see Hamas free some of the dozens of hostages it holds in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners, a six-week halt in fighting and an increase in aid deliveries to Gaza.

The start of Ramadan, which is expected to be around March 10, is seen as an unofficial deadline for a deal. The month is a time of heightened religious observance and dawn-to-dusk fasting for hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world. Israeli-Palestinian tensions have flared in the past during the holy month.

"Ramadan's coming up, and there has been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan as well, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out," Biden said in an appearance on NBC's "Late Night With Seth Meyers" that was recorded Monday.

Houthi rebels suspected in new rocket attack off Yemen coast

AP ■ DUBAI

A rocket exploded late Tuesday night off the side of a ship travelling through the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen, authorities said, the latest suspected attack to be carried out by Yemen's Houthi rebels. The attack comes as the Houthis continue a series of assaults at sea over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip and as the US and its allies launch airstrikes trying to stop them.

The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations centre, which oversees shipping in the Mideast, reported the attack happened about 110 kilometres off the coast of the Houthi-held port city of Hodeida. The rocket exploded several miles off the bow of the vessel, it said.

"The crew and vessel are reported to be safe and are proceeding to next port of call," the UKMTO said.

The private security firm Ambrey reported that the ves-

sel targeted appeared to be a Marshall Islands-flagged, Greek-owned bulk carrier in the area at the time. Another ship, a Panama-flagged, Emirati-owned chemical tanker was nearby as well, Ambrey said.

The Associated Press could not immediately identify the vessels involved.

The Houthis typically take several hours to claim their assaults and have not yet done so for the assault late Tuesday.

Meanwhile, the US military's Central Command said an American and an allied warship shot down five Houthi bomb-carrying drones in the Red Sea on Tuesday night.

The drones originated "from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen and (it was) determined they presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and to the US Navy and coalition ships in the region," Central Command said in a statement.

Since November, the rebels

have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea and surrounding waters over the Israel-Hamas war. Those vessels have included at least one with cargo for Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor, and an aid ship later bound for Houthi-controlled territory.

Despite over a month of US-led airstrikes, Houthi rebels remain capable of launching significant attacks. Last week, they severely damaged a ship in a crucial strait and downed an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars. The Houthis insist their attacks will continue until Israel stops its combat operations in the Gaza Strip, which have enraged the wider Arab world and seen the Houthis gain international recognition.

The Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite group, seized Yemen's capital in 2014 and have battled a Saudi-led coalition since 2015. Their Zaydi people ran a 1,000-year kingdom in Yemen up until 1962.

Wildfires scorch Texas Panhandle and briefly shut down nukes facility

AP ■ CANADIAN

A series of wildfires swept across the Texas Panhandle early Wednesday, prompting evacuations, cutting off power to thousands, and forcing the brief shutdown of a nuclear weapons facility as strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties as the main blaze, the Smokehouse Creek Fire, swelled into the second-largest wildfire in the state's history.

The main facility that disassembles America's nuclear arsenal paused operations Tuesday night but said it was open for normal work on Wednesday.

Authorities have not said what might have caused the blaze, which tore through sparsely populated counties set amid vast, high plains punctuated by cattle ranches and oil rigs. In Borger, a community of about



Wildland Team members depart to operate amid the spread of fire.

Agencies

13,000 in Hutchinson County, Adrianna Hill said she and her family were terrified as fire encircled the entire town until the winds shifted. "It was like a ring of fire around Borger, there was no way out... all four main roads were closed," Hill, 28, said. The flames came within about 1 mile (1.6 kilometers) of the home she shares with her husband and 20-month-old son. "What saved

our butts was that northern wind ... it blew it the opposite direction," Hill said. "We were scared, but every night I pray ... and that's all I can do." The weather forecast provided some hope for firefighters — cooler temperatures, less wind and possibly rain on Thursday. But for now, the situation was dire in some areas.

The Smokehouse Creek Fire in Hutchinson County burned

UK stepping up lawmakers' security as tensions flare over Israel-Hamas war

AP ■ LONDON

The British government said on Wednesday that it is stepping up security for lawmakers after politicians reported threats and intimidation connected to the Israel-Hamas war. The Home Office said a 31 million-pound (USD 40 million) fund will give every lawmaker a "dedicated named police contact" and provide money for those facing threats to pay for private security protection.

The government said some of the money will go more broadly to protecting Britain's "democratic processes from intimidation, disruption or subversion" ahead of a general election later this year. The fund includes money for extra police patrols in areas where tensions are high.

Divisions over the conflict in Gaza have convulsed British politics, with some lawmakers saying they fear for their safety after receiving threats over their positions on the war. Reports of both antisemitic and anti-Muslim abuse in Britain have soared since Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, which triggered Israel's invasion of Gaza.

A debate last week in the House of Commons on whether to call for a cease-fire descended into chaos amid allegations the speaker of the house had bent parliamentary rules in response to pressure from pro-Palestinian activists.

Conservative lawmaker Mike Freer has announced he is stepping down because of abuse and death threats linked to his support for Israel. Freer said an arson attack on his office in December was the "final straw". He said the money announced on Wednesday was only "dealing with the symptom" rather than "going to the root cause" of why people feel emboldened to attack politicians. "Security is welcome," Freer told Times Radio. "But frankly, unless you get to the root cause, then you're just going to have a ring of steel around MPs. And our whole style of democracy changes." British lawmakers have a tradition of meeting regularly with constituents in

their local communities, but security has been tightened after several attacks in the last decade. In 2016, Labour lawmaker Jo Cox was killed by a far-right extremist, and Conservative David Amess was murdered in 2021 by an attacker inspired by the Islamic State group.

In 2017 an Islamic State-inspired extremist killed four people with a vehicle on Westminster Bridge before stabbing a police officer to death at the gates of Parliament. Two years later, in 2019, a neo-Nazi pleaded guilty to plotting to kill a Labour lawmaker. Anti-war activists claimed the government was trying to stifle protest and lumping peaceful demonstrators in with violent extremists.

Home Secretary James Cleverly called on pro-Palestinian demonstrators to halt the mass protests that have drawn hundreds of thousands of people to central London almost weekly to call for a cease-fire in a conflict that has killed close to 30,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

Israel says Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and abducted roughly 250, in the October 7 attack. The protests have been overwhelmingly peaceful, though there have been dozens of arrests over signs and chants allegedly supporting Hamas, a banned organization in Britain. Jewish organisations and many lawmakers say the mass marches have created an intimidating atmosphere for Jewish Londoners — though members of the Jewish community have been among those on pro-cessa-fire marches. "I genuinely don't know what these regular protests are seeking to achieve," Cleverly told the Times of London.

"They have made their position clear, we recognise that there are many people in the UK that hold that position. We respect that, but the UK government's position is a disagreement with that for very practical, well thought-out reasons".

Prince Harry loses legal challenge over security level in UK

London (PTI): Prince Harry on Wednesday lost a legal challenge against the British government over the level of his security protection when he is in the UK, with a High Court judge in London ruling that the decision to remove police protection was not "unlawful or irrational".

The 39-year-old, younger son of King Charles III, who relocated with his family to the US after stepping back as a frontline royal, had argued that he was treated wrongly in the government's decision to change the level of his UK taxpayer-funded personal security. His lawyers told the court that it was "unlawful and unfair" to take such an approach to his protection while he is in his home country. However, Judge Sir Peter Lane ruled that the decision to remove police protection was not "unlawful or irrational". "Even if such procedural unfairness occurred, the court would in any event be prevented from granting the claimant [Prince Harry — the Duke of Sussex] relief," said Lane. "This is because, leaving aside any such unlawfulness, it is highly likely that the outcome for the claimant would not have been substantially different," he said. The bulk of the court proceedings were held in private because of the confidential nature of evidence over security measures. The case goes back to February 2020, following a decision by the Executive Committee for the Protection of Royalty and Public Figures (RAVEC) — delegated by the UK Home Office on security — to review the senior royal's security profile. The UK government had told the court the case should be dismissed because RAVEC was entitled to conclude that Prince Harry's protection should be "bespoke" and considered on a "case-by-case" basis given his lack of full-time royal duties in the country.

South Korean, US troops to begin major exercises next week

AP ■ SEOUL

South Korean and US troops will begin their expanded annual military drills next week in response to North Korea's evolving nuclear threats, the two countries said on Wednesday, a move that will likely enrage North Korea because it views its rivals' joint training as an invasion rehearsal.

In recent months, North Korea has inflamed animosities on the Korean Peninsula with fiery rhetoric and continued missile tests. While it's unlikely for North Korea to launch full-blown attacks against South Korea and the US, observers say the North could still stage limited provocations along the tense border

with South Korea.

On Wednesday, the South Korea and US militaries jointly announced that the allies will conduct the Freedom Shield exercise, a computer-simulated command post training, and a variety of separate field training, from March 4-14.

Col. Lee, Sung-Jun, a spokesperson for South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the allies' drills are designed to bolster their joint capabilities to prevent North Korea from using its nuclear weapons. He said the allies are to carry out 48 field exercises this spring, twice the number conducted last year, and that this year's drills would involve air assault-live-firing and bombing training.

"Our military is ready to punish North Korea immediately, strongly and to the end in the event of its provocation, and we'll further strengthen our firm readiness through the upcoming drills," Lee said. North Korea didn't immediately respond to the drills' announcement. North Korea has reacted to previous major South Korea-US military drills with its own missile tests. North Korea has sharply intensified its weapons testing activities since 2022 in part of its efforts to expand its nuclear and missile arsenals. This year, the North already conducted six rounds of missile tests — five of them reportedly involving cruise missiles — and other weapons launches. Experts say North Korea

believes a bigger weapons arsenal would allow it to pressure the US and South Korea more effectively to make concessions like sanctions relief when diplomacy resumes. They expect North Korea to ramp up its testing activities and other provocations this year as both the US and South Korea head into major elections. South Korea and the US have responded to the North's testing spree with expansions of their bilateral military drills and trilateral exercises involving Japan. US and South Korean officials have repeatedly warned that any nuclear attack by North Korea against them would spell the end of the North's government led by Kim Jong Un.

Bharti Enterprises chief Sunil Bharti Mittal knighted by King Charles III

PTI ■ LONDON

Bharti Enterprises Founder and Chairman Sunil Bharti Mittal on Wednesday became the first Indian citizen to be conferred an honorary Knighthood by Britain's King Charles III "for services to UK and India business relations". In a list of honorary British awards unveiled by the UK Cabinet Office, Mittal receives a KBE under the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire — one of the highest honours conferred by a British monarch.

The 66-year-old entrepreneur said in a statement that he was "deeply humbled" by the gracious recognition from King Charles.

"The UK and India have historical relations, which are

now entering a new era of increased cooperation and collaboration. I remain committed to working towards strengthening the economic and bilateral trade relationships between our two great nations," Mittal said. "I am thankful to the government of the UK, whose support and keen attention to the needs of business has been critical in making the country an attractive investment destination," he said. The KBE, conferred for a pre-eminent contribution in any field of activity, is awarded in an honorary capacity to foreign nationals. While the Knighthood conferred on UK nationals gives them the title of Sir or Dame, non-UK nationals awarded the honour add KBE (or DBE for women) after

their name.Previous Indian recipients of the Honorary KBE include Ratan Tata (2009), Ravi Shankar (2001) and Jamshed Irani (1997), conferred by the late Queen Elizabeth II. The investiture ceremony will be conducted by the British High Commissioner to India at a later date, when he will formally hand over the royal insignia to Mittal.The honour recognises Bharti Enterprises' work within the India-UK space, including with the UK government in the field of satellites. Sunil Bharti Mittal led the revival of OneWeb (now Eutelsat), leading a consortium with the UK government and other strategic investors to offer satellite broadband services globally, a company statement notes.

New Pak govt's first priority is to fix economy: Nawaz Sharif

AP ■ ISLAMABAD/LAHORE

Pakistan's former prime minister Nawaz Sharif on Wednesday said the priority of the upcoming government led by his party will be to "fix" the ailing economy as all the problems plaguing the cash-strapped nation were linked to the economic woes.

"The government will try to fix the economy which would in turn fix everything," Sharif, the supreme leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) told the media after arriving at the Parliament House for the first time since the February 8 elections.

Sharif, who surprisingly nominated his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif to be the prime minister of a coalition government, also said that he wishes every National Assembly, Senate and Prime Minister to complete their constitutional term.

No prime minister in coup-prone Pakistan has completed his/her five-year term. Sharif became prime minister thrice but was removed on all three occasions in mid-term.

Earlier, he was welcomed by prime minister candidate Shehbaz Sharif and other members of his party upon his arrival at the National Assembly for the PML-N's parliamentary meeting. The meeting, chaired by party supremo Nawaz Sharif, will mull over the PML-N's strategy about matters after the NA's inaugural session slated for tomorrow, Geo News reported. Pakistan has avoided potential default with the help of international donors and friendly countries but its economy is still under clouds. It is believed that another IMF program would be needed after the ongoing package.

The country's economy has been in a free fall mode for the last many years, bringing untold pressure on the poor masses in the form of unchecked inflation, making it almost impossible for a vast number of people to make both ends meet.

NAWAZ NOMINATES



SHEHBAZ FOR PM'S POST

The parliamentary party of the PML-N headed by three-time former Pakistan premier Nawaz Sharif on Wednesday formally nominated his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif for the post of prime minister to head a coalition government. The parliamentary members' meeting of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was held in Islamabad with party supremo Nawaz Sharif, 74, in the chair.

Shehbaz, 72, had led a coalition government for 16 months till August 2023 before the caretaker government took over following the announcement of general elections.

"Nawaz officially nominated his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif and party loyalist Sardar Ayaz Sadiq for the posts of prime minister and speaker of the National Assembly. The parliamentary party endorsed Shehbaz's name and also reposed its full confidence in the leadership of Nawaz," PML-N central deputy secretary Attaullah Tarar said in a statement after the meeting. The nomination of Shehbaz Sharif as the next prime minister by the elder brother, who himself was eyeing the plum post for a record fourth time, had surprised many within and outside the party. Outgoing National Assembly Speaker Raja Pervaiz Ashraf has called the National Assembly session on Thursday after President Dr Arif Alvi, known for his closeness to jailed former prime minister Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), refused to do so.

The President is of the

view that Parliament is not complete because the Election Com-m-ission of Pakistan (ECP) is yet to clear the air over the allocation of reserved seats to the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), following the PTI-SIC 'merger' for this very purpose.

Khan's PTI-backed independents have emerged as the largest number of winners followed by PML-N and PPP. However, Khan has alleged that the February 8 elections were the most controversial and rigged polls in the country's history.

He has accused the PML-N-Pakistan Peoples Party post-poll alliance, which also has four other parties, as "mandate thieves" set to form the government in the Centre.

The PML-N has the full backing of the military establishment to form the government both in the Centre and Punjab province.

As per the Constitution, a party must win 133 out of 265 contested seats in the 266-member National Assembly to form a government. Independent candidates - a majority backed by 71-year-old Khan's PTI party - won 93 National Assembly seats. The PML-N won 75 seats while the PPP came third with 54 seats. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) has 17 seats.

As part of the PML-N-PPP alliance deal, it was decided that Nawaz Sharif's daughter Maryam Nawaz would be the chief minister of Punjab province.

Maryam, the political heir of Nawaz, took oath on Monday and became the first woman chief minister of any province in the country.

'Pakistan Prez may face legal consequences'

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan President Dr Arif Alvi's refusal to summon the newly-elected National Assembly for its first session may lead to "legal consequences", senior leaders of the PML-N and PPP have warned. On Monday, Alvi rejected a move from the caretaker parliamentary affairs ministry to summon the first session of the newly elected National Assembly on February 29.

Alvi, known for his closeness to jailed former prime minister Imran Khan, has maintained that all reserved seats be allocated before the summoning of the session in which newly-elected members of the National Assembly will take oath.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on Tuesday rejected the objections raised by Alvi, stating that constitutionally, the first National Assembly session should take place within 21 days after the elections, and the president could summon the session before the expiry of the deadline, the Dawn newspaper reported. Under Article 91 of the Constitution, the mandated date for the first session of the National Assembly is February 29.

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari on Tuesday warned that several cases will be made against Alvi for "abrogating the Constitution", the report said.

Bilawal said that two cases would be filed against Alvi. The first would be for dissolving the National Assembly when a no-confidence motion was moved against the then-prime minister Imran Khan in 2022, and the second would be for abrogating the Constitution by not convening the National Assembly session. He, however, asserted that his party had no plans to impeach the president, the report said.

'Navalny's funeral on Friday'

AP ■ MOSCOW

The funeral of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died earlier this month in a remote Arctic penal colony, will take place on Friday in Moscow after several locations declined to host the service, his spokesperson said. His funeral will be held at a church in Moscow's southeast Maryino district on Friday afternoon, Kira Yarmysh said on ednesday. The burial is to be at a nearby cemetery. Navalny died in mid-February in one of Russia's harshest penal facilities. Russian authorities said the cause of his death at age 47 is still unknown, and the results of any investigation are likely to be questioned abroad. Many Western leaders have already said they hold Russian President Vladimir Putin responsible for his death. Yarmysh spoke of the difficulties his team encountered in trying to find a site for a "farewell event" for Navalny. Writing on X, formerly known as Twitter, she said most venues said they were fully booked, with some "refusing when we



Yulia Navalnaya, widow of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny addresses the European Union's parliament on Wednesday.

or whether police will arrest those who have come to say goodbye to my husband," she said.

At some points appearing tearful amid applause from lawmakers but largely resolute, Navalnaya said her husband's death "showed everyone that Putin is capable of anything, and that you cannot negotiate with him".

She appealed to the European Parliament to be "innovative" in its approach to the Russian president and those close to him. "You cannot hurt Putin with another resolution or another set of sanctions," she said, urging lawmakers instead to "apply the methods of fighting organised crime, not political competition". She asked the parliament to investigate "financial machinations" and "mafia associates" in their countries and "discreet lawyers and financiers who are helping Putin and his friends to hide money". In introducing Navalnaya, the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, paid tribute to Navalny.

Wickremesinghe stresses reconciliation issues under 13th Amendemnt

PTI ■ COLOMBO

President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Wednesday said the fate of the missing persons and the ongoing land disputes were posing a major political challenge for the reconciliation of the Tamil minority under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Agreements have been reached to release more land and provide a pathway forward, the President said.

India has been pressing Sri Lanka to implement the 13th Amendment (13A), which was brought in after the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement of 1987 and provides for the devolution of power to the Tamil community. "The primary concern at present revolves around the fate of the missing persons. To address this issue, we've presented and successfully passed

a bill in Parliament to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)," Wickremesinghe told a reconciliation seminar here as he outlined the steps taken so far.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had run a military campaign for a separate Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern provinces of the island nation for nearly 30 years before its collapse in 2009 after the Sri Lankan Army killed its supreme leader V Prabhakaran. Wickremesinghe also expressed his intent to tackle other related issues as he said, the TRC has received the pledges of assistance from South African President Cyril Ramaphosa with similar cooperation being extended by other nations as well.

Wickremesinghe further said the ongoing land disputes in the north were a major

political challenge for reconciliation.

"We aim to address these issues through inclusive dialogue, involving all concerned parties. Furthermore, I have instructed proceeding in accordance with the 1985 map," he said.

Additionally, the President said, he will be meeting with Tamil MPs in Parliament next week to discuss these matters further.

Following consultations with the security forces, agreements have been reached to "release more land, providing a pathway forward in our efforts." On devolution of power under the 13A, Wickremesinghe said, the granting of police powers to the provinces could be held back for future discussions.

In late 2022, Wickremesinghe initiated a

dialogue with Tamil parties on the full implementation of the 13A without the police powers to the provinces. However, the powerful Buddhist clergy opposition suggested putting it on hold.

To devolve powers to the provinces outlined in the current reserved list, it was imperative to reach an all-party consensus to gain a two-thirds majority, Wickremesinghe said. He also said discussions are underway regarding the implementation of the Provincial Board of Education. Proposals have been made to establish provincial professional training institutes in each province.

Additionally, plans are underway to appoint provincial-level committees to lead the modernisation of agriculture, establish a tourism board, and undertake related initiatives.

Small drone flies into Fukushima N-reactor

Tokyo (AP): A drone small enough to fit in one's hand flew inside one of the damaged reactors at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant on Wednesday in hopes it can examine some of the molten fuel debris in areas where earlier robots failed to reach. Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings also began releasing the fourth batch of the plant's treated and diluted radioactive wastewater into the sea on Wednesday. The government and TEPCO, the plant's operator, say the water is safe and the process is being monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, but the discharges have faced strong opposition by fishing groups and a Chinese ban on Japanese seafood.

A magnitude 9.0 quake and tsunami in March 2011 destroyed the plant's power supply and cooling systems, causing three reactors to melt down. The government and

TEPCO plan to remove the massive amount of fatally radioactive melted nuclear fuel that remains inside each reactor — a daunting decontamination process that's been delayed for years and mired by technical hurdles and a lack of data. To help on data, a fleet of four drones were set to fly one at a time into the hardest-hit No. 1 reactor's primary containment vessel.

TEPCO plans to probe a new area Thursday.

TEPCO has sent a number of probes — including a crawling robot and an underwater vehicle — inside each reactor but was hindered by debris, high radiation and the inability to navigate through the rubble, though they were able to gather some data. In 2015, the first robot to go inside got stuck on a grate.

Wednesday's drone flight comes after months of preparations that began in July at a nearby mock facility.

'Chinese research ship departs from Maldives'

PTI ■ MALE

A 4,500-tonne high-tech Chinese research vessel which made a port call here last week has left the shores of the Maldives, local media reports said on Wednesday. Officially, the Chinese vessel Xiang Yang Hong 3 was here to "make a port call, for the rotation of its personnel and replenishment." "Xiang Yang Hong 03 has returned to the boundary of the Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) after docking in Male on February 22. However, despite departing from the Male harbour, tracking sites have shown the vessel's last signal near Hulhumale' two days ago," news portal Adhathu.com said.

Hulhumale is less than 10 kms northeast of Male. The vessel had docked on February 23 in Thilafushi, about 7.5 kms to the west of Male.

"The vessel is expected to have turned off tracking systems, which it also did en route to Male' on January 22 when



it was in the Java Sea off the coast of Indonesia," it reported. The news portal also provided some details about the type of vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03. The 100-metre-long vessel was added to the fleet of China's State Oceanic Administration (SOA) in 2016. This is the only 4,500-tonne vessel currently in China. Since 2019, China has also been using the vessel to conduct 'distant water' and 'deep sea' surveys at China's Pilot Ocean Laboratory, it said.

The vessel can also be used for studies on salinity,

microbial genetic studies, underwater mineral exploration, and underwater life and environmental studies, it said. It has data buoys that can measure ocean currents, waves, and important environmental information. These buoys will provide real-time satellite information to the Chinese government, the report said.

On January 5, Sri Lanka, while denying entry to the Xiang Yang Hong 03, said it has declared a moratorium on foreign research ships entering its waters for a year

amid concerns from India over Chinese research vessels docking in its neighbourhood.

Incidentally, the Chinese vessel was present near the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka trilateral Dosti-16 exercise that took place in the ocean near Male between February 22 and 25. Earlier on January 23, the new China-friendly Maldives government said it had permitted the research vessel, equipped to carry research and surveys, to dock at Male port, saying the halt was for replenishment and that it would "not be conducting any research while in the Maldivian waters."

An American think-tank has alleged that a vast fleet of China's "scientific research" ships is collecting data from the oceans, including in the Indian Ocean Region, for military purposes, especially for submarine operations, a charge denied by Beijing, which said the Chinese vessels operations are in line with the UN Convention on Law of the Seas (UNCLOS).

Norway's King warded in hospital at Malaysia's resort island of Langkawi

Langkawi (Malaysia (AP): Europe's oldest monarch, King Harald V of Norway, remained hospitalised in Malaysia on Wednesday, in the country's northern resort island of Langkawi, after falling ill while on vacation.

Malaysian national news agency Bernama said the 87-year-old monarch was undergoing treatment at the Sultanah Mahliha Hospital in Langkawi. The report cited unnamed sources as saying he was staying at the hospital's Royal Suite.

Norwegian TV 2 said the king's condition is stable, citing the hospital. The hospital declined to comment when contacted by The Associated Press. Malaysia's health ministry told the media to wait for a possible statement.

The royal palace in Oslo said on Tuesday that the king was hospitalised with an infection but did not give further details. The palace said it may send a statement out later Wednesday.

Two days before his birthday last week, Norwegian news agency NTB said that the king would be undertaking a private trip abroad together with his wife Queen Sonja, without specifying the destination or dates.

The monarch, who has been seen using crutches in recent years, has been repeat-

edly ill over the past months, raising concern about the head of state's health. In January, the palace said he was on sick leave until February 2 because of a respiratory infection.

In December, he was admitted to a hospital with an infection and was treated with intravenous antibiotics. He also was hospitalised last August with a fever.

Still, Harald has repeatedly said he has no plans to abdicate, unlike his second cousin Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, who stunned Danes when she announced her step in a New Year's speech. Each time the king was reported ill, his 50-year-old son, Crown Prince Haakon, has taken over his duties in line with the protocol.

The palace in Oslo told NTB said there were no plans to alter a planned trip by Haakon and Crown Princess Mette-Marit on Wednesday and Thursday to southern Norway.

Ukraine President co-hosts summit in Albania

AP ■ TIRANA

Ukraine's president co-hosted a summit with Albania's government on Wednesday that is meant to encourage further support for Kyiv by southeastern European countries, as signs of fatigue grow two years after Russia's full-scale invasion.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrived before midnight Tuesday on the latest stop in an international tour that saw him in Saudi Arabia earlier Tuesday to push for a peace plan and the return of prisoners of war from Russia.

Zelenskyy on Wednesday called Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama "Ukraine's unwavering friend" in a message on X, formerly Twitter, adding the two would "discuss defence and political cooperation, support for the Peace Formula, and security agreements." "I will propose sup-



Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, right, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy laugh as they wait other officials for the summit of Southeastern European countries on peace in Tirana, Albania, Wednesday.

porting Ukraine's efforts to achieve just and lasting peace, as well as organising the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland," he said, referring to the summit.

Zelenskyy and Rama also signed a friendship and cooperation agreement "to strengthen our cooperation with Albania and Ukraine's position in the Balkans." Zelenskyy also awarded Rama with the "Yaroslav the Wise" medal for his contribution to Ukraine.

Zelenskyy is accompanied by Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. Rama wrote on Facebook that he was proud to welcome Zelenskyy for "a solidarity meeting and to further the commitment of our democracies against Russian aggression."

Securing further support is key to Ukraine's leader while his country faces battlefield challenges. Zelenskyy on Sunday announced that 31,000

Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in action since Russia's invasion — the first time that Kyiv had confirmed the number of its losses. Ukraine has urged Western leaders to increase the joint production of weapons and ammunition, improve Ukrainian air defences and put new pressure on Russia via expanded sanctions. The head of NATO has said the US-led military alliance has no plans to send troops to Ukraine, and Germany, Poland and other countries this week have said the same.

Eleven countries from southeastern Europe, including some of Ukraine's neighbours, attended the Albania summit, three of them with online messages, along with officials from the European Union and other international institutions.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Albania earlier this month.

But not all the countries are in full support for Ukraine in its war against Russia. Kremlin ally Serbia is the only European country that has refused to align with EU sanctions following Russia's invasion. It continues signing cooperation agreements with Moscow.

Albania, a NATO member since 2009 and a candidate for EU membership, has voiced its full support for Kyiv against Russia's invasion. It has provided military assistance in the form of ammunition and training of Ukrainian military. It was among the first countries offering shelter to Ukrainian refugees. It has joined international sanctions against Russian officials and institutions.

As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in the last two years, Albania joined the US in initiating resolutions against Russia's invasion.

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HARBOUR WORKS DIVISION NO.1
e-TENDER CALL NOTICE
e-TCN No. CE/HWD/ACCTS/22/162, dtd: 20.02.2024
Name of the work: Cleaning of debris from Roads, berms, backup space & disposal of dredged materials from Port area i.e. from Gate No.4 area to MPB junction to NO-1 to CQ, SQ and EQ area, connecting Road from T-Junction to New IOB in IOHP area and 3-B road (4 lane) leading from IOHP to Wagon Tippler (one year). Put to tender value: Rs.1,27,11,447.66 plus GST as applicable. Last date & time of submission of tender through online bidding is 18.03.2024 up to 11.15 Hrs. For details, please log on to the Website: <https://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app>.
Sd/- Executive Engineer, Harbour Works Division No.1, Paradiip Port Authority
PPA/PR/S/1/2023-2024 dtd: 27.02.2024

कार्यालय नगर निगम, ऋषिकेश
Haridwar Road Rishikesh, Distt-Dehradun, Pin-249201
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निविदा शुद्धि-पत्र

सर्व साधारण को सूचित किया जाता है कि नगर निगम ऋषिकेश क्षेत्रांतर्गत आई-एनएसबी0टी0 की पार्किंग हेतु इच्छुक एवं अनुमोदी कम्पनी / कर्मों से ई-निविदा दिनांक-16.02.2024 से 29.02.2024 सांय 3:00 बजे तक दोहरा निविदा प्रणाली (तकनीकी एवं वित्तीय) के अन्तर्गत नगर निगम ऋषिकेश के कार्यालय पत्रांक सं०- 3802 / कर0अनु० / 2023-24 दिनांक 15.02.2024 को ई-निविदा आमंत्रित की गई थी, जिसकी प्री-बिड पृच्छाएं यथोचित शुद्धियों/संशोधनों सहित निस्तारित कर दी गई है, जो निविदा पोर्टल www.uktenders.gov.in पर देखी जा सकती हैं। साथ ही उक्त निविदा की अन्तिम तिथि दिनांक-29.02.2024 से विस्तारित करते हुये दिनांक - 02.03.2024 अपराह्न 03 बजे तक की जाती है।
पत्रांक: 3937 / कर0अनु० / 2023-24
दिनांक : 28.02.2024

सहायक नगर आयुक्त
नगर निगम, ऋषिकेश

Semiconductor manufacturing in India next big space: MeitY Secy

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Domestic manufacturing of semiconductors is the next big space and many companies are expected to venture into this segment, a senior MeitY official said on Wednesday adding that a USD 2 billion digital economy is what India seriously needs. S Krishnan, Secretary of Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (MeitY), while speaking virtually at the India Digital Summit (IDS) 2024 said the digital economy is expected to grow at a faster pace in the next few years. “Semiconductors is the other big space. More companies are likely to come into the space...Our interest in semiconductors is open,” he said adding that in the next 5-10 years semiconductor manufacturing in the country is expected to come up in a big way. About 20 lakh people are employed in the electronics manufacturing sector in the country and the government would like these jobs to go up to about 45 lakh, he added. “We expect the digital



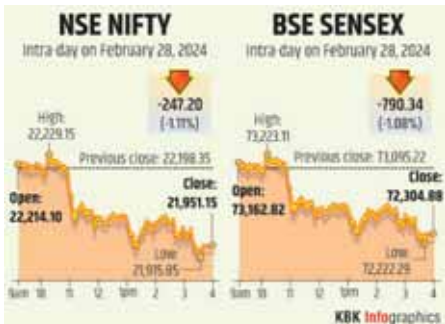
economy to really grow at an increasing pace in the next few years. A USD 2 billion digital economy is what India seriously needs,” Krishnan said. When asked about governance, hygiene and compliance with law for digital economies, Krishnan pointed out that regulators, much like the public, recognized the necessity of regulation. While balancing consumer protection and diverse requirements, regulations are thoroughly examined to ensure safeguarding of user information, he said. In the tech sphere, consistent collaboration among regulators was crucial, he added.

Similarly, maintaining ongoing dialogue with companies on various IT aspects is essential, Krishnan stated adding that the second key aspect involves formulating regulations to ensure compliance. On the proposed Digital India legislation, he said efforts were being made to enhance it with additional elements. The ministry is exploring ways to address a significant issue related to the idea and understanding of ideas, where different forms of control are in place, he said. Some of these controls occasionally generate issues, emphasizing the need for regulation, Krishnan said.

Markets tumble due to selling in Reliance, banks

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark Sensex tanked more than 1 per cent while Nifty declined below the 22,000 level on Wednesday due to selling in index heavyweight Reliance Industries and bank stocks amid weak global market trends. The 30-share BSE Sensex fell by 790.34 points or 1.08 per cent to settle at 72,304.88 with 26 of its constituents ending in the red and four in the green. During the day, it tanked 872.93 points or 1.19 per cent to a low of 72,222.29. The Nifty slumped 247.20 points or 1.11 per cent to settle at 21,951.15. As many as 46 Nifty shares closed with losses while four advanced. Among the Sensex firms, Power Grid fell the most by 4.43 per cent due to profit booking by investors. Reliance Industries dropped around 2 per cent, contributing 185.59 points to the slide. IndusInd Bank, Maruti, Wipro, Tata Steel, JSW Steel, Asian Paints, Mahindra & Mahindra and UltraTech Cement were the biggest laggards. Hindustan Unilever, Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services and Bharti Airtel were the gainers. “Indian markets were jittery mirroring weak global markets. Global investors are awaiting the key US economic data like personal consumption expenditure, in anticipation of good forecast there is a fear that Fed rate cut maybe delayed. Turmoil in China’s property sector further impacted the Asian market trend,” said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge declined by 1.94 per cent and midcap index went lower by 1.82 per cent. All the indices ended lower. Utilities fell by 2.82 per cent, oil & gas declined 2.19 per cent, realty tanked 2.12 per cent, telecommunication



dipped 1.92 per cent, services (1.89 per cent) and commodities (1.85 per cent). Shares of debt-laden Vodafone Idea plummeted around 14 per cent after the fundraising announcement by the company failed to lift investors' sentiment. Shares of One97 Communications Ltd, the owner of the Paytm brand, fell 5 per cent to hit a lower circuit limit. A total of 2,963 stocks declined while 881 advanced and 77 remained unchanged. In Asian markets, Seoul settled with gains while Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. European markets were trading mostly lower. The US markets ended mostly higher on Tuesday. The BSE benchmark climbed 305.09 points or 0.42 per cent to settle at 73,095.22 on Tuesday. The Nifty ended 76.30 points or 0.34 per cent up at 22,198.35. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.90 per cent to USD 82.90 a barrel. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,509.16 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.



Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman addresses during the 'Bhoomi Pujan' and foundation stone laying ceremony of residential complex 'Hongirana' for the Income Tax officers and staffers, in Bengaluru

Bengaluru tax payers are giving us buoyancy: FM

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday hailed Bengaluru tax payers for their contributions in building a strong and 'Viksit Bharat', and said the Department of Revenue is running its entire national faceless income tax assessment scheme from Karnataka's capital city. Speaking after laying the foundation stone for the upcoming complex 'HONGIRANA' for Income Tax officers and staff here, she said the tax payers of Bengaluru have been absolutely giving us the buoyancy, and thanked all individual and corporate taxpayers in this region for making sure for building a strong and 'Viksit Bharat'. “Your contribution is relentless. There has never been a dip. So thank you very much Bengaluru for keeping that momentum up”, she said. Sitharaman also emphasised the investments that the Central government is making in Bengaluru. She noted that the Government has brought about the entire faceless system for income tax assessment and ease of doing business to ensure that tax assessees are not harassed and do not have

the perception that discretion of the officer who they have to go and sit and talk to will make their tax payment difficult. She said the Department's entire central processing centre — the digital processing unit which governs the entire country — is located in Bengaluru, driving the income tax system for the whole nation. The faceless system was a big step forward in ease of doing business. “So money doesn't go away from Karnataka. It comes back as well and comes back not just like that...Yes it comes back for roads, it comes back for connectivity, it comes back for metro, it comes back for rail, it comes back for the suburban railway system, It comes back for Mangaluru port, it comes back for the 'Kalyana' Karnataka (region) and so on”, Sitharaman said. “But specifically, I want to highlight the fact that Department of Revenue's entire national faceless scheme runs from Bengaluru and you can imagine therefore, the scale of investment which would have happened for that...I am very happy and proud the manpower is also from Bengaluru and they run the whole system for the country,” the Rajya Sabha member from Karnataka said.



Vodafone Idea shares tumble 14 per cent

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Shares of debt-laden Vodafone Idea Ltd on Wednesday plummeted 14 per cent after the company's fundraising announcement failed to lift investors' sentiment. The stock plunged 13.99 per cent to settle at Rs 13.65 on the BSE. During the day, it tanked 14.93 per cent to Rs 13.50. It fell 13.88 per cent to settle at Rs 13.65 on the NSE. During the day, it slumped 14.82 per cent to Rs 13.50 — its lower circuit limit. The company's market capitalisation (mcap) eroded by Rs 10,806.71 crore to Rs 66,447.95 crore. Struggling telecom firm Vodafone Idea on Tuesday said its board has approved raising up to Rs 20,000 crore in equity from promoters and other investors by June as it looks to shore up finances for the much-delayed 5G rollout and strengthening 4G services. The debt-laden firm, where the government also holds just over 33 per cent equity stake, plans to raise Rs 45,000 crore through a mix of equity and debt with hopes of matching services offered by rivals Jio and Bharti Airtel that could arrest subscriber churn. The fundraising, when it happens, will also arm Vodafone Idea with firepower to improve competitive positioning in the Indian telecom market, where it trails larger rivals Reliance Jio and Bharti Airtel, by a wide margin. Vodafone Idea has been fighting a desperate battle for survival -- it has a debt of Rs 2.1 lakh crore, is reporting quarterly losses, and is haemorrhaging subscribers month after month.

AI Express aims 40 per cent increase in flights

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Low cost carrier Air India Express plans to operate 40 per cent more flights in the next financial year as well as start services to Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, sources said on Wednesday. The Tata Group-owned airline — which is in the process of merging AirAsia India, now rebranded AIX Connect — is expanding its fleet and expects to complete the acquisition of 50 white tail Boeing 737 Max aircraft by December this year, the sources close to the development said. At least 13 of these 50 planes have already been inducted

into its fleet. Currently, it operates 350 flights daily and has a fleet of 69 planes. Generally, a white tail aircraft means that it was actually meant to be delivered to another carrier by the manufacturer. In this case, another source in the know said the planes that are being taken by Air India Express were originally for a foreign carrier, which decided not to go ahead with the order amid pandemic woes. Going forward, the sources said the airline will focus more on consolidating its operations on the domestic routes and will not be adding many



destinations locally. Services will be introduced in few international routes, including Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In the next fiscal, the carrier plans to operate 40 per cent more flights as the fleet will also be expanded, the sources

said. More number of flights and services to new destinations will be introduced during the upcoming summer and winter schedules. Summer schedule starts from late March to late October and winter schedule commences from late October to late

March. At present, the airline has around 1,300 pilots, including 400 from AirAsia India. About 400 pilots are under training, they added. Regarding the progress on merging AIX Connect with Air India Express, the sources said the merger is expected to be completed by the second quarter of the next financial year. Once the merger is fully complete then all the planes of AIX Connect will be under the air operator permit of Air India Express. Currently, three A320neo planes of AIX Connect are under Air India Express' air operator permit.

India super rich allocate 32 per cent of their wealth in housing properties

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's super rich have allocated 32 per cent of their wealth in residential properties in the country and overseas, Knight Frank said in a report on Wednesday. As per real estate consultant Knight Frank's The Wealth Report 2024, 32 per cent of India's Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals' (UHNWIs) wealth is allocated towards residential real estate asset class. Nearly 14 per cent of their residential portfolio is allocated outside India. UHNWIs are individuals with a net worth of USD 30 million and above. On an average, an Indian UHNWI owns 2.57 homes while a sizable 28 per cent have rented out their second homes during 2023, the report said. According to Knight Frank, about 12 per cent of the country's UHNWIs plan to buy a new home in 2024. A similar percentage of wealthy individuals in India purchased a new home last year. Globally, 22 per cent of the ultra-wealthy are expected to purchase a home in 2024. Knight Frank India Chairman and Managing Director Shishir Bajjal said, “The prime residential assets continue to be the



mainstream investment avenue for ultra-wealthy individuals in the country.” Separately, the report noted that Mumbai ranked 8th on Knight Frank's Prime International Residential Index (PIRI) index in 2023 as compared to the 37th rank in 2022, driven by 10 per cent year-on-year growth in terms of annual luxury residential price rise. This jump has marked a place for Mumbai in the top 10 leading luxury residential markets. Manila (26 per cent growth) leads the rankings while last year's frontrunner Dubai (16 per cent) slipped one spot. The Bahamas (15 per cent) comes in the third place with Algarve and Cape Town (both 12.3 per cent) completing the top five. Among other Indian cities, Delhi ranked 37th and show-

cased a rise of 4.2 per cent year-on-year in 2023 as compared to the 77th rank in 2022. Bengaluru stands at the 59th rank compared to 63rd in 2022 recording a 2.2 per cent year-on-year increase in 2023. “The outlook for 2024 remains bright as Mumbai with a 5.5 per cent prime price growth forecast, ranks second among the 25 cities globally. As we navigate the complexities of the global market, India's emergence as a prime destination for luxury real estate investment is undeniable,” Bajjal said. Of the 100 luxury residential markets tracked, 80 recorded positive to neutral annual price growth. Asia-Pacific (3.8 per cent) pipped the Americas (3.6 per cent) to the title of the strongest-performing world region, with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa trailing (2.6 per cent).

India retail sector to reach USD 2 trillion in next decade: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's retail sector is expected to grow at 9-10 per cent to reach USD 2 trillion in the next decade with the country's consumption story continuing to remain strong with steady growth, according to a report. Yet, organised retailers would need to sustain performance and continue to grow shares as the sector is going through key shifts impacting the pace and shape of growth, said the report by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Retailers Association of India (RAI).



While income growth remains steady, and consumers are optimistic about personal income outlook, consumers are increasingly looking to spend on “experiences” or save more through newer or nascent vehicles, it said. “The Indian retail sector will more than double in size to USD 2 trillion in the next decade —

across categories and formats — and the successful retailers are the ones who continue to challenge the perceived growth profitability trade-off,” BCG Managing Director and Senior Partner Abheek Singh said. The report said, “India retail (is) expected to grow at 9-10 per cent to reach USD 2 trillion in the next decade.” Historically, it added organised retail has outperformed underlying category growth but a slowdown was seen in 2023. The slowdown in growth was reflected across segments in the recent quarters, it noted.

Airtel switches to recycled PVC SIM cards

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Bharti Airtel, one of India's leading telecommunications service providers, in partnership with IDEMIA Secure Transactions, today announced that it has switched from virgin plastic to recycled PVC SIM cards. This is in line with the company's commitment to encouraging the adoption of circular business practices. IDEMIA Secure Transactions, a division of IDEMIA Group, is a leading provider of payment and connectivity solutions for financial institutions, mobile network operators and automotive manufacturers. An industry first in India, Airtel is the only telecommunications service provider to switch to recycled plastic SIM cards. With this migration, the generation of over 165 tonnes of virgin plastic will be limited which will further reduce the generation of over 690 tonnes of CO2 equivalent in one year. Pankaj Miglani, Director — Supply Chain, Bharti Airtel, said, “We are delighted to announce yet another first as we continue to lead the Indian telecom industry.

Tata firm Agratas to set up UK biggest EV battery factory

PTI ■ LONDON

Agratas, Tata Group's global battery business, on Wednesday confirmed that it will build Britain's biggest electric vehicle battery manufacturing facility in Somerset, south-west England. The so-called “giga-factory”, announced last year, will be built on the Gravity Smart Campus near Bridgwater in Somerset with a community-first approach, involving locals to learn more about and be a part of the project. The company said the 40 GWh factory is set to contribute almost half of the projected battery manufacturing capacity required for the UK automotive sector by the early 2030s. “Our multi-billion-pound investment will bring state-of-the-art technology to



Somerset, helping to supercharge Britain's transition to electric mobility whilst creating thousands of jobs in the process,” said Tom Flack, CEO of Agratas. “We care deeply about the communities we operate in, so it's imperative to us that we work with, and listen to, our new neighbours

as we build our factory in Somerset. That's why we'll be holding an event for local residents very soon, so we can share more about our plans and introduce our team to the community,” he said. Agratas said it will work closely with local and regional partners, including Somerset Council, Bridgwater and Taunton College, and the wider Gravity Smart Campus, to deliver bespoke education and training programmes in the region, creating local jobs for local people. The factory itself will create up to 4,000 new high-skilled green tech jobs in the area, with thousands more expected to be created in the UK supply chain. Residents living near the site of the future gigafactory campus are set to receive a leaflet through the post this week followed by regular updates on the site's progress. Preliminary works on the site are in progress, with piling to establish the factory's foundations set to start in the coming months. Construction will be completed in phases, with battery production set to begin in 2026.

Disney, Reliance to merge India media operations

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Walt Disney Co and Reliance Industries on Wednesday announced signing of binding pacts to merge their media operations in India to create a Rs 70,000 crore behemoth. Reliance and its affiliates will hold a 63.16 per cent stake in the combined entity that will house two streaming services and 120 television channels. Disney will hold the remaining 36.84 per cent stake, the companies said in a statement. Reliance has also agreed to invest at closing Rs 11,500 crore into the joint venture to give it muscles to fight rivals such as Japan's Sony and Netflix.

Disney+Hotstar has seen its paid subscriber base decline from around 55 million to about 40 million in the first quarter of this financial year because of Reliance's Jio Cinemas winning exclusive rights for live sports. The combined entity will have the largest OTT subscriber base and close to 120 channels in the country. Media ventures of Reliance are currently housed in Network 18, which owns TV18 news channels as well as a plethora of entertainment (under the 'Colors' brand) and sports channels. Besides, NW18 has stakes in moneycontrol.Com, bookmyshow and also publishes

magazines. It also owns the news channels CNBC/CNN. Reliance separately owns a movie production arm - JioStudios - and majority stakes in two listed cable distribution companies, Den and Hathway. Disney+Hotstar was launched in India in 2020, post the acquisition of the entertainment assets of 21st Century Fox at a valuation of USD 71.3 billion, thereby taking over the operations of Star India and Hotstar. It housed entertainment and cinema channels such as StarPlus and StarGold as well as sports channels like Star Sports. While Disney+Hotstar rapidly increased their subscriber base initially with the streaming

rights of cricket matches (IPL, World Cup), it lost the bid for the digital streaming rights in 2023-27 cycle, which was won by Reliance-backed Viacom18 for USD 720 billion, 12.92 per cent higher than what Star India had paid on an average per match value. Nita Ambani will head the joint venture while Uday Shankar will be the vice chairperson. “Reliance Industries Ltd (and its affiliate) Viacom 18 Media Pvt Ltd and The Walt Disney Company today announced the signing of binding definitive agreements to form a joint venture that will combine the businesses of Viacom18 and Star India,” the statement said.

Turmoil in Indian hockey

HI head Tirkey, secretary Bhola deny rift in joint statement

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey and secretary general Bhola Nath Singh on Wednesday denied outgoing CEO Elena Norman's assertion of a rift between them, saying that they are "united" and working in the best interest of the sport. Norman resigned on Tuesday and in an interview to PTI she alleged that there was factionalism in the body. The 49-year-old Australian suggested that Tirkey and Singh were at loggerheads and also complained of a difficult work environment. In a joint statement, Tirkey and Singh rejected Norman's claims.

"Recently there have been statements by outgoing officials published in the media, claiming that there are divisions within the organisation. This is not correct. We remain united in working together, and as always in the best interest of the sport," the two said. "Hockey India is an autonomous and professional body dedicated to the



development of Indian hockey. Our primary objective as an organisation has been and continues to remain the welfare and progress of the sport of hockey and our athletes." Norman's resignation was the second blow to HI in the last few days after the Indian women's hockey team coach Janneke Schopman resigned,

also complaining of a difficult work environment. Schopman had accused HI of giving step-motherly treatment to women's hockey. Tirkey and Singh said HI has always treated all teams and players equally and also claimed to have built an environment of equality in the organisation. "We have built our ethos

around equity and equal opportunities right from the grassroots levels across states as well as on a national level," their statement read. "In this spirit, our entire focus remains on growing our talent, ensuring all hosted events are conducted with utmost professionalism and our national teams are receiving the best support to

support their performance at the global stage." Norman began her tenure as the federation's first CEO back in 2011 with Narinder Batra as the head. After resigning, she stated that it was difficult for her to continue given the bickering inside HI. "There are two factions in Hockey India. There is

(President) Dilip Tirkey and I and there is (Secretary) Bholanath Singh, (Executive Director) Cdr. R K Srivastava and (Treasurer) Sekar J Manoharan," she said. "There are guys who want power and then there is (HI President) Dilip (Tirkey) who is a nice guy, only after betterment of Indian hockey," she explained. Tirkey and Singh said their focus is now on rebuilding the women's team, which failed to qualify for the Olympics, and helping the men's side that is due to compete in the quadrennial showpiece in Paris this year. "We will continue in this pursuit of excellence and rebuild the women's team with a fresh approach to providing the right infrastructure and training to enhance their performance," they stated. "In addition to this, we are cognisant of this being an Olympic year and are dedicated to aide the National Men's Team with the required support to stand on the podium yet again in the forthcoming Olympic Games in Paris this year."



Logan heads into 2nd F1 season stronger

AP ■ BAHRAIN

Even before Logan Sargeant finished his rookie Formula 1 season, a set of expectations were given to the American on what he needed to do to keep his ride at Williams. It still took until December for Williams to confirm Sargeant would get a second season. He was the last driver finalized for this year's 20-car grid. But he enters the new season - it starts this weekend in Bahrain - already ahead of schedule. "First and foremost, I've asked him to surprise the world in terms of his physical fitness, his approach and his performance," Williams team principal James Vowles said. "We've changed quite a bit with him across the winter period, his trainer is different, his training programs are completely different. You should see he's a much more confident person and he carries that well."

Sargeant delivered on Vowles' ask by adding a little more than 11 pounds to his frame during the offseason - muscle that should help the Floridian with car handling a year after he was consistently outperformed by teammate Alex Albon. Sargeant scored just one point all of last year and it didn't come until the U.S. Grand Prix, five races before the end of the season. Albon, meanwhile, scored 27 points across the season and was ranked 13th in the final driver standings. "I wasn't physically in the place I need to be and I've done everything I can to get on top of that. For example, I'm five kilos heavier than I was at the end of last year, and I feel much more healthy and much more ready to go," Sargeant said. "I feel like a different man, I feel like physically I am in the best shape I've ever been. And I believe in the condition I'm in now, and will continue to get to, will be simply just helping me feel more comfortable in the car and extract performance."

Sargeant is the first American to race in F1 since Alexander Rossi in 2015 and his underwhelming rookie season did little to build a fanbase in the lucrative United States market that hosted a series-high three races last year. But Williams last year had a car that was difficult to drive and both he and Albon were forced to adapt. Albon believes this year's FW46 will be easier for Sargeant to handle. "Logan will have that experience now into this year, I don't think it'll be so much of a learning curve for him," Albon said. "I personally believe that the car's going to be a bit easier to drive. Our car was very unique. I spent two years refining a very strange driving style, which for someone coming into the car for the first time, without any prior F1 experience, is difficult. "It was very easy to overdrive the car. I think naturally the car's going to go towards him as in a bit less on a knife edge and more usable," Albon continued. "So I think what you're going to see is a guy with a lot more experience and a car that should be more usable and that will in itself bring performance."

Vowles agreed that this year's car should help both Albon and Sargeant as Williams tries to become competitive again. "We should have a car that is more suiting to both drivers," Vowles said. "I'm hoping that we've got rid of some of these really nasty effects from last year, but that will also make a platform for him where he should be able to grow much quicker than he did in 2023." Vowles has also tried to relieve some of the pressure on Sargeant by telling him to follow the same guidelines that helped him earn a second season with Williams. "What I've asked him to do is to approach the first few days of driving the car with caution again, the same way he did at the end of last year, build up into it and don't try and rush into success," Vowles said. "That's the confidence I placed in him. That's why he's back in the car. I need him now to not go back to his old ways of trying to extract too much from himself and from the car too quickly, but rather approach things progressively." Sargeant goes into this year much more confident after a season that he admitted took a physical toll on him. He needed the extra work as F1 prepares for a record 24 races this year. "The offseason has been such a good opportunity for me to take a step back and look at myself from mental, emotional and physical standpoint where I need to do improve, where I need to get better," Sargeant said. "I learned that I need to manage myself much better. I let myself get very drained throughout the season and I let that affect me off the track, which ultimately brings it onto the track."



Altmaier stuns Zverev

AP ■ ACAPULCO (MEXICO)

Daniel Altmaier pulled off a major upset, beating top seeded Alexander Zverev in a battle of German players to qualify for the second round of the Mexican Open. The 27-year-old Altmaier and world's 57th ranked player defeated his countryman for the first time in three tries in 2:26 hours and will play Miomir Kecmanovic next. Zverev, sixth in the ATP rankings, lost a seven-match winning streak against German players. His previous loss against one was in 2019, when he fell to Dustin Brow, in Stuttgart. Earlier, second-seeded Holger Rune eased past American Michael Mmoh 6-2, 6-3 and advanced to the second round.

Rune, ranked seventh in the ATP, needed 92 minutes to dispatch Mmoh, who made his way into the main draw through the qualification tournament. The 20-year-old Rune, from Denmark, reached the semifinals in Acapulco last year and now will meet Aleksandar Kovacevic, who took care of Jordan Thompson 6-3, 5-7, 6-4. Earlier, fifth-seeded Stefanos Tsitsipas defeated Roman Safiullin 6-3, 6-4 and moved on to the second round where he will face Flavio Cobolli.

The 25-year-old Greek reached the semifinals last week in Los Cabos, Mexico, and is trying to win his first career 500 tournament. Also Tuesday, Frances Tiafoe, seeded eighth, rallied to beat Max Purcell 4-6, 6-3, 6-0. He moved on to face Dominik Koepfer, who took care of Terence Atmane 6-4, 4-6, 6-0. Tiafoe is the highest-ranked American player in contention in the tournament after fourth-seeded Taylor Fritz and seventh-seeded Tommy Paul were knocked out on Monday. In another result, Casper Ruud outlasted Christopher Eubanks 6-4, 6-7 (5), 6-3 and moved on to the second round. Ruud is going to play against Dusan Lajovic, who beat local Rodrigo Pacheco 6-2, 6-2.

OLYMPICS

Anju says Parul among ones to watch out for

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Athletics Federation of India vice-president Anju Bobby George on Wednesday said Asian Games gold-winning steeplechase runner Parul Chaudhary is among the ones to watch out for at this year's Paris Olympics where she expecting more than one medal in javelin throw. So far, nine Indian track-and-field athletes have qualified for the Games in July-August with defending gold-medallist Neeraj Chopra and Kishore Jena making the cut in javelin throw. Chaudhary shot into limelight with a gold in the 5000m and a silver in 3000m



steeplechase events of the Hangzhou Asian Games last year. The 28-year-old is the first Indian to clock less than nine minutes in the 3000m women's steeplechase.

"A bunch of athletes are performing really well in the international arena from athletics. We are aiming for three (medals) in javelin," she told PTI Video on the

sidelines of Bharat Sports Science Conclave in New Delhi on Wednesday. "Then we have long jumpers, we have triple jumpers, steeplechase runner Parul Chaudhary is among the ones to watch out for but a lot cannot be predicted about the Olympics," she added. A legend in her own right, who won a trailblazing world championship bronze in long jump, George said she is mighty pleased with how technology has been incorporated to improve training of athletes. "A game-changer I can say, nothing was like this in our time, the changes that are happening in Indian sports, and sports science is playing a big role in

every athlete's career. "Every athlete is challenging his body, he needs recovery and treatment, and it was not there in India (in the past), but now we are aiming for the Olympics. We are talking about sports science, doping issues, recovery and training, so it is a game changer I can say," she said. The other Indian athletes to have qualified for the Paris Games so far are Avinash Sable (men's 3000m steeplechase), Akashdeep Singh, Vikas Singh and Paramjeet Singh Bisht (men's 20km walk), Priyanka Goswami (women's 20km walk), and Murali Sreesankar (men's long jump).

Vekic, Yastremska are among those advancing in Cymbiotika San Diego Open



AP ■ SAN DIEGO

Croatia's Donna Vekic and Ukraine's Dayana Yastremska were among those moving into the second round of the Cymbiotika San Diego Open. Vekic, a finalist here in 2022, beat local wildcard Katherine Hui, 7-5 6-2 in her WTA Tour singles

debut on Tuesday. A Santa Fe Christian School graduate now playing on the collegiate level at Stanford, Hui is the reigning US Open girls' singles titlist. A first-time major semifinalist last month at the Australian Open, Yastremska had to dig deep in outlasting American Caroline Dolehide, 6-4 5-7 6-1. The 23-year-old

was up a set and a break only to have her opponent force a decider. Yastremska overcame nine double faults in the two-hour, eight-minute matchup. German veteran Tatjana Maria, 36, advanced when eighth seed Leylah Fernandez retired with a left shoulder injury trailing 0-4 in the second set. It marks the third consecutive year the 21-year-old Canadian, a US Open finalist in 2021, has failed to reach the second round in San Diego. Czech Katerina Siniakova, a doubles titlist here last year with countrywoman Barbora Krejickova, beat Japanese qualifier Mai Hontama 6-3 6-1, in one hour and 13 minutes. Australian wild card Taylah Preston was a 6-4 4-6 6-1 winner over Poland's Magdalena Frech.

Liverpool injury list worsens

AP ■ LIVERPOOL (ENGLAND)

Liverpool's injury crisis keeps on getting worse. Ryan Gravenberch is the latest name to be added to an ever-lengthening list of players unavailable to the Premier League leader, while Wataru Endo is a doubt for Wednesday's FA Cup fifth round match against Southampton. Gravenberch sustained an ankle injury in the first half of Sunday's English League Cup final triumph against Chelsea and was taken off on a stretcher. Endo left Wembley Stadium on crutches and wearing a protective boot. "We need miracles with a few players," Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said Tuesday. "I don't want to rule them out

for too long. But it is touch and go with a lot of players who were not available for the final: Darwin (Nunez), Mo (Salah), Dom (Szoboszlai) - we have to see what they can do." Gravenberch has ligament damage that will keep him out for at least two games, Klopp said. Trent Alexander-Arnold, Thiago Alcantara and goalkeeper Alisson Becker are other key players Klopp has had to do without in recent weeks. Yet Liverpool remain in contention for a quadruple of trophies after Sunday's 1-0 win against Chelsea. The Merseyside club is one point ahead of Manchester City at the top of the table and still competing for the FA Cup and the Europa League.

Haaland scores five goals in Man City 6-2 rout

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Erling Haaland looks determined to make up for lost time. The Norway striker scored five goals to power Manchester City into the quarterfinals of the FA Cup in a 6-2 win against Luton on Tuesday. It was his eighth hat trick in a season-and-a-half with City and the second time he has scored five in a single game for the club. Perhaps more significantly, it was evidence that Haaland is fully back up to speed after recently returning from a foot injury that ruled him out for more than a month between December and January. "My fitness is getting back to its best finally," he said. "I feel good. It's an amazing feeling." Haaland had scored only

three goals in seven appearances since making his comeback on January 31. By his remarkable standards, that represented a relative drought, but he looked back to his devastating best at Kenilworth Road with a first-half hat trick and two more after the break. Four of those goals came from assists by Kevin De Bruyne, who has also missed large parts of the season through injury. "It's a pleasure playing with him," Haaland said. "I think we know what we both want from each other, we look at each other and it clicks well." Mateo Kovacic added a sixth for City, while Jordan Clark struck twice for Luton. Haaland was denied a possible double hat trick when he was replaced by Julian Alvarez in the 77th minute. It was the second



time City manager Pep Guardiola substituted the striker after scoring five goals, having taken him off during the 7-0 rout of RB Leipzig in the Champions League last year. Haaland now has 27 goals in all competitions for the

season after scoring 52 in his first year at the club. His performance and linkup play with De Bruyne will also fuel the belief City can emulate last season's treble of trophies when it won the Premier League title, FA Cup and Champions League.

"We're coming. Exciting times (are) ahead," Haaland said. The forward completed his hat trick after 40 minutes, having opened the scoring in the third and adding a second in the 18th. Clark pulled one back for Luton in the 45th and made it

3-2 with another seven minutes after halftime. But Haaland quickly extended City's lead with further goals in the 55th and 58th. Kovacic completed the scoring with a long range effort in the 72nd.

NEWCASTLE SURVIVES

Newcastle avoided a potential upset at Blackburn but needed penalties to overcome the second-division team. Goalkeeper Martin Dubravka pushed away Dominic Hyam's spot kick at the end of the shootout to secure a 4-3 win on penalties after the game had finished 1-1 through extra time. Anthony Gordon fired Newcastle ahead in the 71st at Ewood Park, but the lead only lasted eight minutes when Sammie Szmodics leveled for Blackburn. Saudi-backed Newcastle has

endured a troubled season in the league and currently sits 10th in the standings after a fourth-place finish last year. But victory over Blackburn means it is still in contention to win its first piece of major domestic silverware since the FA Cup in 1955.

LEICESTER ADVANCES

Abdul Fatawu fired Leicester to a 1-0 win over Premier League team Bournemouth with a stunning extra time goal. Substitute Fatawu struck in the 105th - curling a shot into the top corner from the edge of the area. Leicester won the Cup in 2021 but has slumped since then and was relegated to the second division last season. It is aiming to bounce straight back up and showed its credentials with the win at Bournemouth.

RAHUL STILL FEELING SORE WHILE BATTING IN NETS

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Senior India batter K L Rahul is unlikely to feature in the fifth and final Test against England in Dharamsala as he continues to feel sore in his right quadriceps. Rahul became unavailable after the series-opener in Hyderabad in January but as per BCCI, he was 90 per cent fit before the third Test in Rajkot earlier this month. Rahul has now travelled to London to get an expert

UNLIKELY FOR DHARAMSALA TEST

opinion on his injury and with the series in the bag, the Indian team management will not take the risk of playing him in the Dharamsala Test beginning March 7. He needs to be fully fit before the IPL where he will lead Lucknow Super Giants and is expected to bat in the middle order to bolster his chances of making the India squad for the T20 World Cup



in the USA and the Caribbean. "It is more to get an expert opinion (travel to London). He experiences a bit of pain (right quadriceps) while batting. It is to ensure that he recovers fully as he is a player that team needs long-term. "There is so much competition coming his way -- IPL, he could also be in the T20 World Cup mix.

Then we have some important Test series against New Zealand, and Australia later in the year. So, it is better to give him time to recover properly than rushing him," an IPL source told PTI. It is the same quadriceps injury that had sidelined Rahul for almost four months last year. Having got injured during the IPL, Rahul returned to action with the Asia Cup in September and made instant impact. In the more recent Test tour of South Africa,

Rahul was the only century maker from India in the drawn series. His absence from the final Test means Rajat Patidar will remain with the squad but the MP batter can't be sure of his place in the playing eleven, having aggregated only 63 runs in six innings. There is a possibility that Patidar will make away for Devdutt Padikkal in Dharamsala.

BUMRAH SET TO RETURN: India's premier pacer Jasprit Bumrah, who

was rested for the Ranchi Test, is expected to lead the attack at the HPCA Stadium. The series is sealed but every Test match offers crucial World Test Championship points and Bumrah can play a big part in the cooler

climes of Dharamsala. India are second in the standings with five wins, two losses and a draw. New Zealand lead the table with a winning percentage of 75 but they have only played four Tests.


Jaiswal rises to 12th in ICC Test rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

India's latest batting sensation Yashasvi Jaiswal advanced towards a top-10 spot in the ICC rankings for Test batters by climbing three spots to 12th while his compatriot Dhruv Jurel leapfrogged 31 places to 69th on Wednesday. Jaiswal, who started the series in 69th position, continues his ascent to the top after scores of 73 and 37 in the fourth match of India's ICC World Test Championship series against England in Ranchi. Player of the Match Jurel's scores of 90 and 39 has jumped a whopping 31 places while former England captain Joe Root is back in the top three. Root, a formerly top-ranked batter, struck an unbeaten 122 in the first innings in Ranchi to move up two places to third position. He also moved up three spots to fourth among all-rounders. Senior spinner Ravichandran Ashwin's five-wicket haul in the second innings has helped him narrow the gap with top-ranked Jasprit Bumrah to 21 rating points at 846 after the fast bowler was rested for the Ranchi Test. Wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav moved up 10 places to the 32nd spot and England's Shoaib Bashir,

who climbed 38 places to 80th, have also attained career bests. Opener Zak Crawley entered the top 20 for the first time after scores of 42 and 60, while a bunch of spinners have also prospered in the latest weekly update. The T20I Rankings see Australia batter Travis Head move into the top 20 for the first time after scores of 24,

45 and 33 in the series against New Zealand. Tim David's quickfire 31 off just 10 balls in the first match see him move up six places to 22nd and past the 600-point barrier for the first time in his career. The top six bowlers are unchanged, with Josh Hazlewood the only new one in the top 10 after finishing with figures of 4-1-12-1 in Auckland.



BHUBANESWAR DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
AKASH SHOYA BUILDING,
SACHIVALAYA MARG, BHUBANESWAR – 751001
PABX No.0674-2392801 / 0998 / 6437, FAX No.0674-2390633 / 085
Visit us at: <http://www.bda.gov.in/>

Invitation for Bids
Bid Identification No. **356** /EM/BDA/2023-24 Date: **28.02.2024**


The Engineer Member, B.D.A, Bhubaneswar on behalf of Bhubaneswar Development Authority, Bhubaneswar invites percentage rate bids in Double Cover system in ONLINE MODE only from the eligible bidders for IP Surveillance work as mentioned below:

- Total No. of electrical work : 01 (One) No.
- Amount put to tender : Rs.107.46 Lakh
- Class of Contractor : **Manufacturers /Authorized system Integrator having authorization from OEM.**
- Period of Completion : 30(Thirty) Days
- Cost of Bid Documents : Rs.10,000.00 + 18% GST= Rs.11,800.00
(Through online transfer by the last date & time for receipt of bids)
- Earnest Money Deposit (EMD) : 1% of estimated cost put to tender for each of the work.
(Through online transfer by the last date & time for receipt of bids)
- Availability of Tender : From **01.03.2024 to 5.00 PM of 15.03.2024** In <https://tendersodisha.gov.in>
- Date of opening of Tender : Dt. **15.03.2024 at 5.30 PM**
- Place of opening of Tender : O/o-Engineer Member, BDA, Bhubaneswar.

Further details can be seen from the website: <https://tendersodisha.gov.in> Any addendum/ corrigendum/ cancellation of tender can also be seen in the said website.

OIPR-130323/11/00842324

Engineer Member,
BDA, Bhubaneswar




PANCHAYAT SAMITI OFFICE JHARSUGUDA
I-644

Tender Call Notice
No- 663 Date- 26.2.2024

The Block Development Officer, Jharsuguda invites sealed tenders on percentage rate basis for 1(One) No of project. The sale of bid documents will be available in website of Jharsuguda www.jharsuguda.nic.in from dt-01.03.2024 to 15.03.2024 and receipt of the bid documents starts from dt-01.03.2024 to 15.03.2024 up to 5.00PM on all working days in the office of the Panchayat Samiti, Jharsuguda. The bid will be opened on dt-16.03.2024 at 3.30PM. Intending class "B" and "A" contractors may visit website of Jharsuguda www.jharsuguda.nic.in for details information.

OIPR-19363/11/0008/2324

**Block Development Officer
Jharsuguda**



Government of Odisha
Office of the Chief Construction Engineer,
Rural Works Circle, Sambalpur.
E-mail id: sew@rclesbp@yahoo.com

Bid Identification No. Road tender Online RWCSBP-69/2023-24 No: 863 Dated: 26.02.24

The Chief Construction Engineer, Rural Works Circle, Sambalpur on behalf of Governor of Odisha invites online percentage rate Bid from experienced & eligible bidders for Transferred Road Improvement Programme (TRIP) for the year 2023-24.

- Name of work : Transferred Road Improvement Programme (TRIP) for the year 2023-24.
- No of works : 01 No details as per DTCN.
- Estimated cost : Approximately Rs. **979.73** lakhs
- Class of Contractor. : "A" and "Special"
- Cost of tender paper and mode of deposit. : Rs. 10,000/- per set, (to be deposited On-line) in favour of concerned Executive Engineer.
- Mode of submission of tender : Tender should be submitted only On line in website www.tendersorissa.gov.in. (<https://tendersodisha.gov.in>)
- EMD and mode of deposit : **1% of estimated cost of the work to be remitted online as mentioned in DTCN.**


8 Summary of key dates are provided below :

Procurement Officer	Bid Identification No.	Availability of Tender on-line for bidding		Last date & time for seeking clarification	Date & Time of opening of tender	
		From	To		Technical Bid	Financial Bid
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Chief Construction Engineer Rural Works Circle, Sambalpur	Road Tender Online RWCSBP-69/2023-24	04.03.2024 From 11.00 A. M.	18.03.2024 Up to 05.00 P.M.	15.03.2024 Up to 5.00 P.M.	19.03.2024 at 11.00 AM	Will be intimated later

*Further details can be seen from the e-procurement portal www.tendersorissa.gov.in. (<https://tendersodisha.gov.in>)
* Subsequent modification/ corrigendum/ Addendum if required shall appear in website only.
* The amount put to bid is exclusive of GST.
* Bidder should inspect the road before bidding and quote his rate accordingly.

OIPR-25091/11/0105/2324

**Chief Construction Engineer,
Rural Works Circle, Sambalpur**



GOVT. OF ODISHA
OFFICE OF THE ENGINEER-IN-CHIEF, WATER RESOURCES
ODISHA, BHUBANESWAR

'e' Procurement Notice No. CEMKS 23 OF 2023-24

- Name of the work : **Improvement to Mahanadi Right Embankment from Talapatapur to Kalmundi.**
- Amount put to Tender : Rs.12,22,58,350.00
- Bid Document Cost : Rs.10, 000.00 (online)
- E.M.D : Rs.12,22,600.00
- Class of Contractor : "A" Class & "Special" Class
- Period of Completion : 18 calendar months
- Other details are as follows.

Procurement Officer	Bid Identification No.	Availability of Tender On-line for bidding		Date of Opening of Technical Bid (Cover-I)
		From	To	
Chief Engineer & BM, Mahanadi Kathajodi System, Bhubaneswar	CEMKS KHD 02 of 2023-24	02.03.2024 10.00hrs	16.03.2024 17.00hrs	18.03.2024 11.00 hrs


8. e-mail id : celmbbsr@yahoo.co.in

Further detail conditions can be seen from the Govt. website www.tendersodisha.gov.in

The Corrigendum/ cancellation of Tender, if any, will be uploaded and can be seen from the above website only.

**Chief Engineer & Basih Manager
Mahanadi Kathajodi System
Bhubaneswar**

OIPR-32262/11/0030/2324



GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER
RURAL WORKS DIVISION: GUNUPUR
e-mail id: seer@gunupur@gmail.com

Lr.No. 1256, Dated. 27.02.2024

"e" Procurement Notice for Building Works
(Tender SERWGNP-Online-12/2023-24)

1	Name of the Work	1-Building Works	
		From	To
2	Total No. of Works	: 01 No. (Percentage rate tender)	
3	Estimated Cost	: AS mentioned in Col. 3 of TCN Annexure	
4	Class of Contractor	: AS mentioned in Col. 5 of TCN Annexure	
5	Period of completion	: AS mentioned in Col. 4 of TCN Annexure	
6	EMD	: AS mentioned in Col. 6 of TCN Annexure	
7	Paper cost	: AS mentioned in Col. 7 of TCN Annexure	
8	Other details:		

Procurement Officer	Bid Identification No.	Availability of Tender online for Bidding		Date & Time of opening of tender	
		From	To	3	5
Superintending Engineer, Rural Works Division, Gunupur	SERWGNP Online-12/ 2023-24	02.03.2024 at 10.00 A.M.	11.03.2024 up to 5.00 P.M.	12.03.2024 at 11.00 A.M	

9. The amount put to tender is exclusive of 18% GST. The intending bidder should offer their rates which shall be exclusive of GST applicable as per norms. GST as applicable on works contract shall be paid over the bill amount at the time of payment of bill.


Other details can be seen in the bidding documents, which is available in website www.tendersodisha.gov.in Any subsequent addendum or corrigendum will be made available in the above website.

OIPR-251701/0015/2324

**Superintending Engineer,
Rural Works Division,
Gunupur**

Diversion of balance forest land of 79.252 ha of forest land out of 189.552 ha of forest land in favour of M/s Balco Ltd., for Bauxite Mining in Panchapatmali (South Block), involving total lease area of 528.262 ha in Koraput Forest Division of Koraput District by Odisha)-reg.

428006/2024/SURVEY
I/62483/2024



Government of India
Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change
(Forest Conservation Division)

Indira Paryavaran Bhawan,
Aliganj, Jor Bag Road,
New Delhi - 110003

Dated: 11th January, 2024

To
The Addl. Chief Secretary (Forests),
Government of Odisha,
Bhubaneswar.

Sub: Proposal for the diversion of balance forest land of 79.252 ha of forest land out of 189.552 ha of forest land in favour of M/s NALCO Ltd., for Bauxite Mining in Panchapatmali (South Block), involving total lease area of 528.262 ha in Koraput Forest Division of Koraput District by (Odisha) – reg.

Sir,

I am directed to refer to the Government of Odisha's letter No. 10F (Cons) 178/2015/16666/F&E dated 19.09.2015 on the above subject seeking prior approval of the Central Government under Section 2 (1) (ii) of the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980. After careful examination of the proposal by the Forest Advisory Committee, constituted under Section-3 of the said Act, 'in-principle' approval to the proposal under the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980 was granted vide this Ministry's letter of even number dated 19.04.2018 subject to fulfillment of certain conditions prescribed therein. The State Government has furnished compliance report in respect of the conditions stipulated in the in-principle approval and has requested the Central Government to grant final approval.

In this connection, I am directed to say that on the basis of the compliance report furnished by the State Government vide letter No. 13763/9F(MG)-118/2018 dated 13.07.2022, letter No. 11103/9F(MG) – 521/2010 dated 09.06.2023 and letter No. 24733/9F (MG)-521/2010 dated 18.12.2023, final approval of Central Government under clause (ii) of subsection (1) of section 2 of the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980 is hereby granted for diversion of balance forest land of 79.252 ha of forest land out of 189.552 ha of forest land in favour of M/s NALCO Ltd., for bauxite mining in Panchapatmali (South Block), involving total lease area of 528.262 ha in Koraput Forest Division of Koraput District by (Odisha) subject to fulfillment of the following conditions:

- Legal status of the diverted forest land shall remain unchanged;
- The State Government shall ensure that compensatory afforestation over the non-forest land equal in extent to the forest land being diverted shall be raised within three years from the date of issue of Stage –II Clearance and maintained thereafter as per approved plan by the State Forest Department at the cost of the User Agency. At least 1000, (79.252 ha x 1000 = 79252 plants) saplings per ha shall be planted over admissible CA land. If this is not possible to plant these many seedlings in the identified NFL, the balance seedlings will be planted in degraded forest land as per the prescription of the Working Plan at the cost of the User Agency. In such cases CA cost will be revised and duly approved by the competent authority and deposited online in the CAF managed by the CAMPA;
- The KML files of diverted area, the CA areas, SMC works area and the WLMP area shall be uploaded on the e-Green watch portal with all requisite details prior to handing over forest land to user Agency;
- The land identified for the purpose of CA shall be clearly depicted on a Survey of India topo-sheet of 1:50,000 scale;
- The State Government has realized the NPV of the forest area diverted under this proposal from the User Agency as per the Judgment of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India dated 28.03.2008 & 09.05.2008 in IA No. 566 in WP (C) No. 202/1995 and guidelines issued by this Ministry in this regard. Additional NPV if becomes due as per final order of Hon'ble Supreme Court, shall be paid by the User Agency;
- The user agency shall pay the additional amount of NPV, if so determined, as per the final decision of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India;
- Compensatory levies, if any, realized in future under the extant project, shall be transferred/ deposited, through e-challan, in to the account of CAMPA

pertaining to the State concerned through e-portal (<https://parivesh.nic.in/>);

- The provisions of the Regional Management Plan, currently under preparation in the State Government shall be implemented by the State Forest Department from the cost realized from the user agency on pro rata basis. Differential amount is any becomes due shall be paid by the user agency into the account of CAMPA managed by the National Authority;
- Provisions provided in the various conditions stipulated in the approval dated 21.07.2011, including gap planting in the forest area located within the perimeter of 100 along the lease boundary, shall be implemented, if not implemented earlier, without any further delay and in any case not later than a period of 1 year. An implementation report on the commencement of the activity shall be submitted to the Regional Office of the Ministry;
- Following activities, as per approved plan / schemes, shall be undertaken in the lease area by the User Agency under the supervision of the State Forest Department:
 - Mitigative measures to minimize soil erosion and choking of stream shall be implemented within a period of three year with effect from the issue of 'final' clearance in accordance with the approved Plan in consultation with the State Forest Department;
 - Planting of adequate drought hardy plant species and sowing of seeds, in the appropriate area within the mining lease to arrest soil erosion in accordance with the approved scheme;
 - Construction of check dams, retention / toe walls to arrest sliding down of the excavated material along the contour in accordance with the approved scheme;
 - Stabilize the overburden dumps by appropriate grading/benching, in accordance with the approved scheme. so as to ensure that anoles of repose at any given place is less than 28°;
 - No damage shall be caused to the top-soil and the user agency will follow the top soil management plan;
- Safety Zone Management: Following activities, at project cost, shall be undertaken by the user agency for the management of safety zone as per relevant guidelines issued by the Ministry's guidelines:
 - User agency shall ensure demarcation of safety zone (7.5 meter strip all along the inner boundary of the mining lease area), and its fencing, protection and regeneration by erecting adequate number of 6 feet high RCC boundary pillars inscribed with DGPS coordinates with barbed wire fencing and deploying adequate number of watchers under the supervision of the State Forest Department;
 - Boundary of the safety zone of the mining lease, adjacent to habitation/roads, should be properly fenced by the user agency;
 - Safety zone shall be maintained as green belt around mining lease and to ensure dense canopy in the area, regeneration shall be taken up in this area by the user agency at project cost under the supervision of the State Forest Department;
 - Afforestation on degraded forest land to be selected elsewhere, measuring one and a half times the area under safety zone, shall also be done at the project cost under the supervisions of the State Forest Department. The degraded forest land (DFL) so selected will be informed to the MoEF & CC and afforestation will be done within three years from the date of Stage-II clearance and maintained thereafter in accordance with the approved Plan in consultation with the State Forest Department;
 - The State Government and the user agency shall ensure that safety zone is maintained as per the prescribed norms;
- The cost of felling of trees shall be deposited by the User Agency with the State Forest Department;
- Any tree felling shall be done only when it is unavoidable and that too under strict supervision of the State Forest Department;
- Trees should be felled in phased manner as per the requirement of mining operations as envisaged in the approved Mining Plan with prior permission of concerned DFO;
- The user agency shall explore the possibility of translocation of maximum number of trees identified to be felled and shall ensure that any tree felling shall be done only when it is unavoidable and that too under strict supervision of the State Forest Department;
- The User Agency shall comply with the Hon'ble Supreme Court order on re-grassing, and re-grass the mining area and any other areas which may have been disturbed due to mining to restore them to a condition which is fit for growth of fodder, flora, fauna, etc. in a timely manner;
- The State Govt. shall ensure that the activities proposed in the approved scheme for fencing, protection and regeneration of the safety zone area shall be implemented within a period of three year from the date of issue of 'final approval';
- The State Govt. shall ensure that User Agency shall implement the R&R Plan as per the R&R Policy of State Government in consonance with National R&R Policy, Government of India before the commencement of the project work and implementation. The said R&R Plan will be monitored by the State Government/Regional Office of MoEF&CC along with indicators for monitoring and expected observable milestones;

- The State Govt. shall ensure that the User agency in consultation with the State Forest Department shall create and maintain alternate habitat/ home for the avifauna, whose nesting trees are to be cleared in this project. Bird nests artificially made out of eco-friendly materials shall be used in the area, including forest area and human settlements, adjoining the forest area being diverted for the project;
- The boundary of the diverted forest land, mining lease and safety zone, as applicable, shall be demarcated on ground at the project cost, by erecting four feet high reinforced cement concrete pillars, each inscribed with its serial number, distance from pillar to pillar and GPS coordinates;
- State Government shall ensure that process for settlement of rights, in term of the Scheduled Tribes and Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, has been completed in accordance with the relevant guidelines issued by the Ministry in this regard;
- The User Agency shall undertake mining in a phased manner after taking due care for reclamation of the mined over area. The concurrent reclamation plan as per the approved mining plan shall be executed by the User Agency from the very first year, and an annual report on implementation thereof shall be submitted to the Nodal Officer, Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, in the concerned State Government and the concerned Regional Office of the Ministry. If it is found from the annual report that the activities indicated in the concurrent reclamation plan are not being executed by the User Agency, the Nodal Officer or the concern Addl. Principle Chief Conservator of Forests (Central) may direct that the mining activities shall remain suspended till such time, such reclamation activities area satisfactorily executed;
- Period of diversion of the said forest land under this approval shall be for a period co-terminus with the period of the mining lease proposed to be granted under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, as amended and the Rules framed there-under;
- The User Agency shall obtain the Environment Clearance as per the provisions of the Environmental (Protection) Act, 1986, if required;
- No labour camp shall be established on the forest land and the User Agency shall provide fuels preferably alternate fuels to the labourers and the staff working at the site so as to avoid any damage and pressure on the nearby forest areas;
- The layout plan of the mining plan/ proposal shall not be changed without the prior approval of the Central Government and the forest land shall not be used for any purpose other than that specified in the proposal;
- The forest land proposed to be diverted shall under no circumstances be transferred to any other agency, department or person without prior approval of the Central Government;
- No damage to the flora and fauna of the adjoining area shall be caused;
- The User Agency shall submit the annual self -compliance report in respect

Office and to this Ministry by the end of March every year regularly;

- Any other condition that the concerned Regional Office of this Ministry may stipulate with the approval of competent authority in the interest of conservation, protection and development of forests & wildlife;
- Violation of any of these conditions will amount to violation of Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and action will be taken as prescribed in para 1.16 of the Consolidated Guidelines and Clarifications issued under the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980 and the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, 2023 published by the Ministry on 29.12.2023; and
- The State Government and user agency shall ensure that besides, the conditions stipulated hereinabove, all conditions stipulated in the 'in-principle' approval dated 19.04.2018 for which undertakings have been obtained from the user agency and also the provisions of the all Acts, Rules, Regulations and Guidelines, relevant Hon'ble Court Order (s) and NGT Order (s) if any, pertaining to this project for the time being in force, as applicable to the project, are complied with.

Signed by
Charan Jeet Singh
Date: 11-01-2024 17:02:11
(Charan Jeet Singh)
Scientist 'D'

Yours faithfully,

Copy to:

- The PCOF (HoFF), Government of Odisha, Bhubaneswar.
- The Dy. Director General of Forests (Central), Regional Office, Bhubaneswar.
- The Nodal Officer (FCA), Government of Odisha, Bhubaneswar.
- User Agency
- Monitoring Cell of FC Division, MoEF&CC, New Delhi.