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NEW DELHI, THURSDAY FEBRUARY 1, 2024; PAGES 12 & 3



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ED takes Hemant Soren into Custody

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI / RANCHI

The 72-hour-long drama between Jharkhand and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) came to an end late on Wednesday evening with the arrest of the "absconding" JMM leader Hemant Soren. Sources claimed JMM leader was "evasive" in his replies during his questioning and hence was taken into custody under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The sources said the agency put across 15 questions to Hemant during the second round of questioning in the case. He had to resign as Chief Minister, followed by the probable appointment of the senior-most MLA and State Transport Minister, Champai Soren, to step into his shoes and take up the reins of the JMM-Congress, RJD coalition government.

As of the filing of reports, JMM spokesperson Mahua Majhi said that Soren had been taken into custody by the ED. Cabinet Minister Banna Gupta shared with the media that Champai would take over as the new Chief Minister of Jharkhand. Speculation is rife that someone from Hemant's family, including wife Kalpana (who is not an MLA), could be named to lead the State.

Hemant Soren is the first sitting Chief Minister to be arrested in a corruption case.

Along with ED officials, Hemant went to Raj Bhawan to meet Jharkhand Governor CP Radhakrishnan and submitted his resignation from the post of chief minister. Sources suggest that Hemant wanted to be arrested in his home State to garner sympathy from the people during the Lok Sabha elections.

A delegation of the JMM-led coalition also met the Governor and submitted a list of support from 47 MLAs, claiming their backing to form the government. Later, Champai Soren said he has staked a claim to form a new government and have the support of 47 MLAs.

Champai has been a legislator from the Serikela Assembly constituency for more than three decades since 1991 and is known to be a loyalist of JMM supremo Shibu Soren. Earlier, legislators gathered at Hemant Soren's residence elected Champai as the leader of the JMM legislative party, with the party spokesperson Vinod Pandey saying that a consensus was reached on his name.

Amidst hectic political activities, JMM coalition MLAs gathered at the Chief Minister's residence earlier in the day to express their solidarity with their leader. They also signed a letter of support without any name, as speculation is rife that Hemant's wife will be handed

CHAMPAI SOREN CM DESIGNATE IN JHARKHAND



Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren gestures as he leaves from his residence for Raj Bhavan in Ranchi on Wednesday

PTI

over the reins. Soren's wife, Kalpana Soren, who is not an MLA, was also present at the meeting. By-elections cannot be held in the last year of any Assembly's term, so Kalpana Soren could not have been elected an MLA even if she was named the Chief Minister.

Reports were also circulating that Soren's family, including his sister-in-law and JMM

MLA Sita Soren (widow of Durga Soren), and Basant Soren, openly oppose any move to make his wife Kalpana the chief minister. Sita Soren represents the Jama constituency in the Assembly and told the media that she would like to ask why only Kalpana Soren, who is not even an MLA and has no political experience. Insiders say that when a

consensus could not be reached on Kalpana Soren as the next chief minister, the party decided to elect Champai Soren as the new chief minister. Party spokesperson Vinod Pandey said that a general consensus was reached on Champai Soren.

ED sources reported that the officers of the ED reached the CM's residence in Ranchi

around 1:20 pm to record his statement. The agency was not satisfied with the answers provided by the chief minister. Soren had skipped the 10th summons before his arrest in connection with an investigation into a "huge racket of illegal change of land ownership by the mafia" in Jharkhand.

Simultaneously, Soren also lodged an FIR against ED

personnel over searches conducted by the agency at his Delhi residence on Monday, officials said. Soren alleged that the ED conducted the search to "harass and malign him and his entire community," the officials said, quoting the FIR.

Ahead of the scheduled questioning, the ED wrote to the Jharkhand government, seeking extra security. Prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the CrPC, which were earlier effective from 9 am to 10 pm on Wednesday, have now been extended until further notice within a radius of 100 metres at key locations, including the CM House, Raj Bhavan, and the ED office at Doranda. As part of the restrictions, demonstrations, rallies, and meetings cannot be held in and around these areas. The three-member special team was led by finance secretary Prashant Kumar and included mines director Arva Rajkumar and special branch IG Prabhakar Kumar.

ED officials had reached the CM's residence in Ranchi around 1:20 pm to record his statement.

Meanwhile, eyewitnesses said three tourist buses entered Soren's house on Kanke Road around 5:30 pm amid hectic activities. Soon after that, Chief Secretary L Kiangte and DGP Ajay Kumar Singh met Soren's wife, Kalpana Soren. Earlier in the day, Soren lodged an FIR

against senior ED personnel at the SC/ST police station here over searches conducted by the agency at his Delhi residence, officials said.

The ED has, so far, arrested 14 people in the case, including the 2011-batch IAS officer Chhavi Ranjan, who served as the director of the State's social welfare department and deputy commissioner of Ranchi. Earlier, the ED had recorded his statement on January 20 under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

Hemant was taken into custody in connection with an alleged land scam, minutes after meeting the governor and handing in his resignation. Sources said he had discussed the matter with the officials, declaring that he would sign the arrest memo only after stepping down. The ED officials then took him to meet the Governor. A Chief Minister can be arrested under the anti-money laundering rules if he evades summons thrice.

Soren, after evading the Enforcement Directorate over the weekend, had agreed to be questioned by the Central agency this afternoon. His statement was recorded during the questioning. Soren, who had evaded seven summons for questioning in an alleged money laundering case linked to the Rs 600 crore land scam, was anticipating arrest for a while.

Introspect, none remembers disruptors, urges PM Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Wednesday that the country is reaching new heights of progress, and its journey of "all-inclusive and all-round" development will continue with the people's blessings. In his customary remarks to the media before the Budget Session, Modi greeted them with "Ram Ram" (an invocation of Lord Ram) and noted that there is a tradition of not presenting a full Budget before the polls.

"We will follow the same tradition and present a full-fledged budget before you after a new government is formed," he said, adding that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will, in her Budget to be tabled on Thursday, introduce measures showing a direction. Modi has frequently expressed confidence that his government will retain power in the elections.

Ahead of Parliament's last session before the Lok Sabha polls, the PM took aim at Opposition MPs for disrupting parliamentary proceedings, saying those habituated to creating a ruckus and disrobing



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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday hailed the Modi Government's big-ticket reforms in the last 10 years and mentioned that the centuries-old desire to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya has now become a reality, while apprehensions over the abrogation of Article 370 are a thing of the past.

In her first address to a joint sitting of the two Houses in the new Parliament building, during which she touched on varied issues ranging from insurgency to inflation, Murmu said a country can progress at a fast pace only when it defeats the challenges of the past and puts maximum energy into building the future.

Murmu arrived in a buggy at Parliament House to deliver her address to the joint sitting of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. She entered the House with the "sengol" being carried in front of her. She asserted that the armed forces were giving a befitting reply to terrorism and expansionism. Murmu also mentioned that India is now a prominent voice against terrorism in the world.



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

PTI

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

she said to thumping desks from the treasury benches. "In cultural history, there are some milestones that decide the future of centuries. In India's history also, there have been numerous such milestones. On January 22, the country witnessed one such milestone. After a centuries-long wait, Ram Lalla now resides in a grand temple in Ayodhya," she said. She said there were apprehensions over the removal of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir "but they have become history now."

There is an environment of peace and security in Jammu & Kashmir, with vibrancy in markets instead of the "silence of shutdowns" witnessed in the past, the President said. Incidents of insurgency have gone down in the Northeast, she asserted. The government has also established strict laws against triple talaq, she said. She also mentioned that the Indian economy, which used to be among the "fragile five", is now moving in the right direction and at the right pace due to several reforms undertaken by the government in the last 10 years.

Continued on Page 2



Fog, rain disrupt travel in north India

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Parts of northern India remained shrouded in dense fog for the third consecutive day, with zero visibility in the morning hours, leading to disruptions and delays in road, rail, and flight services. The much-needed incessant rain, the first of the season, in the afternoon aggravated foggy conditions further in northern India, including Delhi and the NCR.

Due to almost zero visibility, traveller and daily commuters faced a harrowing time traveling from one place to another. As many as 250 flights were delayed at Indira

Gandhi International Airport, with at least three flights being diverted, as the disruption index went up to 3.0, according to the flight tracker information system. Massive chaos erupted at Delhi airport on Wednesday as passengers staged a protest and raised slogans against IndiGo airline after it cancelled a Deogarh-bound flight. The flight was scheduled to take off from Delhi airport's Terminal 2. Delhi received 8.5 mm of rainfall on Wednesday as the national Capital witnessed incessant rainfall accompanied by gusty winds with speeds of up to 30-40 kmph.

Continued on Page 2

Five new wetlands earn Ramsar tag, total rises to 80

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



Karaiveti bird sanctuary in Tamil Nadu

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

species. These wetlands serve as habitats for the globally endangered Black-chinned Nilgiri Laughing thrush, Nilgiri Blue Robin, and vulnerable Nilgiri Wood-pigeon. A total of 14 out of 26 endemic bird species of the Western Ghats are found in these wetlands.

The convention to protect wetlands was signed in Ramsar in 1971. Wetlands play a crucial role in flood control, providing water, food, and supporting biodiversity. The global Ramsar list currently includes over 2,500 sites identified by member countries for their ecological services and biodiversity value.

India giving befitting reply to expansionism, terrorism: President

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

aircraft engines in India. President Murmu also referred to the increasing role of women in the armed forces and said women are now operating fighter jets and commanding naval ships. "Today, my government is building modern infrastructure along the entire border. This work should have been done long ago on (a) priority basis. Be it terrorism or expansionism, our forces today are giving a befitting response," she said.

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

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



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

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

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

said. "There has been significant reduction in the incidents of separatism in the North East," she added. In her first address at the new Parliament building, Murmu also listed the government's initiative to strengthen 'Nari Shakti'.

"This year's Republic Day Parade was also dedicated to women empowerment. In this parade, the world once again witnessed the capability of our daughters," she said.

"My government has enlarged the role of daughters everywhere -- in water, land, sky and space," she said.

President Murmu said "for the first time, women cadets have been given admission in Sainik Schools and the National Defence Academy." She also said "Today, women are also fighter pilots and are also commanding naval ships for the first time."

The president said the tangible results of the Modi government's efforts to strengthen internal security are visible before everyone. She said naxal-affected areas have shrunk and there has been a steep decline in Naxal violence.

President Murmu said the central government has, for the first time, brought development to areas which had remained neglected for decades.

"The villages adjoining our borders were viewed as the last villages of the country. We recognised them as the first villages of the country. In order to develop these villages, Vibrant Village Programme has been started," she said.

The President said remote and faraway islands like Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep were also deprived of development but the government has developed modern facilities

on these islands too. "Roads, air connectivity and high speed internet facilities have been provided there. Just a few weeks ago, Lakshadweep was also connected with under-water optical fibre. This will benefit the local population as well as tourists," she said.

The President said under the 'Aspirational Districts Programme', the government has laid emphasis on the development of more than 100 districts of the country.

She said in the wake of its success, the government has also launched the Aspirational Blocks Programme.

President Murmu said building of airports at various places is also advantageous and now the Northeast is witnessing record tourist arrivals. Now there is heightened excitement about Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep islands, she said.

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

a fractured environment is historic. India's vision from 'women led development' to environmental issues has become the basis of the declaration," she said. The President said India's "efforts to secure permanent membership of the African Union in the G-20 have also been appreciated."

"During this conference, the development of India-Middle-east-Europe corridor was announced. This corridor will further strengthen India's mar-

itime capability," she said. President Murmu described the launch of the Global Biofuel Alliance as a big event as such steps are expanding India's role in solving global problems.

"Today, India responds strongly and takes initiatives for the humanity caught in crises. Wherever there is a crisis in the world today, India tries to respond promptly," she said.

The President said the government has instilled new confidence in Indians working across the world. "Wherever crisis occurred, we have evacuated every Indian safely through campaigns like Operation Ganga, Operation Kaveri, Vande Bharat," she said.

"My government has made continuous efforts to propagate the Indian traditions of Yoga, Pranayam and Ayurveda to the entire world," she said. "Last year, representatives of 135 countries did yoga together at the United Nations Headquarters. This is a record in itself," she added. "The World Health Organization's first Global Centre for Traditional Medicine is being established in India," President Murmu said.

Seminar on progress of national mission for mentoring organised

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



fessional and personal support to school teachers across the country and ensure their continuous professional development.

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

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

Through this seminar, NCTE aimed to foster a collaborative environment for sharing best practices and experiences, as well as to provide a platform for Mentors and Mentees to voice their challenges and suggestions for upgradation.

Prof. Yogesh Singh, Chairperson, NCTE graded the Year End Seminar as Chief Guest and addressed the dignitaries and stakeholders present there.

Later, he also launched the NMM Webpage in the presence of Ms. Kesang Y. Sherpa IRS, Member Secretary NCTE for the ongoing support and guidance for mentors and other stakeholders. The launch of NMM website is an important step towards enhancing the mentorship ecosystem in the country.

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

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

Addressing this issue is crucial to fostering a more supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable seeking help for their mental health concerns, said the study published in the International Journal of Mental Health Systems and Co-authored by Dr Alok Ranjan, Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts (SoLA), IIT Jodhpur and Dr. Jewel Crasta, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA.

"The study revealed that the self-reporting of mental illness was less than one per cent based on the 75th Round National Sample Survey, 2017-18. The survey completely relied on the self-reporting of the individuals," Ranjan said. The data was collected from 5,55,115 individuals from randomly selected 8,077 villages and 6,181 urban areas, including 283 outpatient and 374 hospitalisation cases due to mental disorders in India.

"Stigma in society acts as a significant barrier to reporting mental health issues. In today's society, the reluctance to report mental health issues persists due to the prevailing stigma. Individuals, fearing



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

The study also shed light on the significant out-of-pocket expenses incurred by individuals seeking mental health services, largely due to reliance on the private sector. There are also not enough mental health professionals in the public sector too to treat people who do seek help. This is especially true in rural parts of India.

Calling the observations as yet another wake up call, Dr Shweta Sharma, Clinical Psychologist and Joint Secretary of the Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists who is not related to the study said "Mental health has not been a significant focus in India, primarily because many issues are perceived to be resolved through psychotherapy, often dismissed as mere conversation. "The value of trained professionals is underestimated. Unclear policies and a lack of awareness among the general population about mental health treatment contribute to confusion regarding whom to consult, when to seek help, and the importance of mental health check-ups. This situation allows untrained practitioners to set

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

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

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

ICG to celebrate 48th Raising Day today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) is celebrating its 48th Raising Day on February 01. From a modest beginning with just 07 surface platforms in 1978, ICG has grown into a formidable force with 152 ships and 78 aircraft in its inventory and is likely to achieve targeted force levels of 200 surface platforms and 100 aircraft by 2030.

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



ronment, thereby ensuring round the clock safety and security. True to its motto "Vayam Rakshamah" meaning "We Protect", the service has to its credit, saving over 11,554 lives

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

After experiencing a drier-than-usual December and January, north India is expected to see normal to above-normal rainfall in February, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Wednesday.

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



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

India and parts of east-central India, the IMD said. "Below-normal cold wave days are expected over some parts of central India during February," it said.

The strong El Nino conditions -- abnormal warming of surface waters in the central Pacific Ocean -- are likely to weaken steadily and turn to ENSO neutral conditions by the end of the spring season. Most models indicate a transition to La Nina conditions, considered favourable for Indian southwest monsoon, around July-September, Mohapatra said.

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

Kerala Congress leader George joins BJP

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI The BJP, struggling to get a mooring in Kerala, got a shot in the arm as a veteran leader of the Kerala Congress (a party representing the interests of the Church) joined the Hindutva party in New Delhi on Wednesday.

George was the first Christian leader to sound the alarm bell against Love Jihad and Narcotics Jihad which was later taken up by the spiritual leaders of the Catholic community to which he belongs. He also merged the Janapaksham, a political outfit launched by him into the BJP.



forces had joined hands in the 2021 assembly polls to defeat George, in his eighth hustling in the electoral battle and he lost the poll by a wafer thin majority.

State like Kerala. George is joining the BJP at a time when the Marxists and Congress are blaming the BJP for the communal pogrom in Manipur.

CPI(M)-led LDF and the Congress-led UDF. "Both the forces are the same and the difference is only on their names. What they have been doing all these years was to cheat the people," he said.

force to reckon with in Kerala politics. "But I am not sure about the surge in votes cast during the election. George commands respect all over the State," said Paily.

there is a possibility of the BJP opening its account in Kerala," said Kevin Peter, president, CASA. Father Shaiju Kurian, a priest of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and 47 families belonging to the sect had joined the BJP in December 2023, the first of its kind development in the State.

Farmers income 'has almost doubled' since 2018: Yogi



General N Kalaiselvi and a large number of farmers from different states and districts of the country were present in the programme.

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday said the farmers income "has almost doubled" since 2018 and this "positive trend" extends beyond Uttar Pradesh. The chief minister said the farmers across the country are embracing agricultural diversification, aligning with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "visionary approach", consequently "doubling their income".

diversification, aligning with Prime Minister Modi's visionary approach, consequently doubling their income," he said. Highlighting the fertile land and abundant water resources in Uttar Pradesh, the chief minister outlined the state's pivotal role in agricultural production, contributing over 22 per cent of the country's food grains despite having 11 per cent cultivable land.

General N Kalaiselvi and a large number of farmers from different states and districts of the country were present in the programme. The chief minister also inaugurated an exhibition at the fair and inspected the stalls set up while interacting with the farmers.

PUBLIC NOTICE My Husband Late Sh. Harendra Singh Varma S/o Sh. Babu Singh Varma R/o Sector-C, Pocket-9, Flat No. 9271, Vasant Kunj, Delhi - 110070, Booked a Shop No. 11 (LM Tower) in project called SuperTech Eco-City situated at GH-03, Sector-137, Noida, After the death of My Husband and My Father in Law, I requested to M/s SuperTech Limited to transfer this Shop in the name of Mrs. Sadhna Verma W/o Late Sh. Harendra Singh Varma R/o Sector-C, Pocket-9, Flat No. 9271, Vasant Kunj, Delhi - 110070. If anybody has any objection, he/she may contact to M/s SuperTech Limited office at Plot No C-2, Sector 96, Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201303 within 15 days of the Published notice Ms Sadhna Verma

PUBLIC NOTICE My Father Late Sh. Harendra Singh Varma S/o Sh. Babu Singh Varma R/o Sector-C, Pocket-9, Flat No. 9271, Vasant Kunj, Delhi - 110070, Booked a Flat No: R-1405, in project called SuperTech Eco-City situated at GH-03, Sector-137, Noida, After his death I requested to M/s SuperTech Limited to transfer this flat in the name of Ms. Heena Varma D/o Late Sh. Harendra Singh Varma R/o Sector-C, Pocket-9, Flat No. 9271, Vasant Kunj, Delhi-110070 (Alone). If anybody has any objection, he/she may contact to M/s SuperTech Limited office at Plot No C-2, Sector 96, Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201303 within 15 days of the Published notice Ms. Heena Varma.

कार्यालय नगर पालिका परिषद, दमोह (म.प्र.) द्वितीय निविदा सूचना :- क्र./न.पा./2023/7232 दमोह दिनांक 30.01.2024 एतद् द्वारा सर्वसम्पन्न श्रेणी में पंजीकृत ठेकेदारों से ऑनलाईन निविदाये आमंत्रित की जाती है। निविदा का विस्तृत विवरण वेबसाइट www.mptenders.gov.in पर देखा जा सकता है।

PUBLIC NOTICE Countrywide Promoters Private Limited OT-14, Third Floor, Next Door, Parklands, Sector -76, Faridabad, Haryana-121004 Phone No.: 0120-4492-650 website: www.bptp.com

This Public Notice is being issued in compliance with Memo No. ZP-416-Vol.II/AD(GK)/2024/3294 dated 30.01.2024 issued by the District Town Planner (HQ) for the Director, Directorate of Town & Country Planning - Haryana, Chandigarh ("DTCP"). WHEREAS Countrywide Promoters Pvt.Ltd. has developed two residential towers i.e. Tower A and Tower B as a part of 16.331 Acres Group Housing Colony namely "Discovery Park" having License no. 44 of 2008 dated 07.03.2008 in Sector-80, Faridabad and the DTCP has issued in-principle approval/provisional Occupation Certificate vide above referred Memo No. ZP-416-Vol. II/AD(GK)/2024/3294 dated 30.01.2024.

Three Rohingya men get 10 years jail for human trafficking

PTI ■ NUH A court in Haryana's Nuh district has sentenced three Rohingya men to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment in a human trafficking case of 2021. Additional district and sessions judge Ajay K Verma pronounced the sentence on Tuesday. The court also imposed a fine of Rs 10,000 on each of the convicts.

Hafeez Ahmed and Mohammad Yunus — took the two women to Malab village in Nuh district and decided to sell them in Kashmir Valley for Rs 70,000 each, the police said. Acting on the information, a team of the Child Welfare Committee conducted raids at their place in Malab and rescued the women. Following medical examination, it was revealed that the two women were raped and tortured.

Table with 3 columns: Name of the Borrower(s)/Guarantor(s), Demand Notice Date and Amount with NPA date, Property address. Contains multiple entries for various borrowers and their respective NPA details.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

On the brink

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

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



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

Though India has flexed its soft power and dissuaded its tourists from going to Maldives, that approach may not work with China's support to the Maldives. But the position of the Maldives has become a little untenable as it earns the major share of revenue from tourism; the recent decline in Indian tourist numbers has hit it hard. Holding the top spot just three weeks ago, Indian tourist arrivals have now slipped to the fifth position. India and the Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity. The relations have been close, cordial and multi-dimensional: India was among the first nations to recognise the Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with it. Now, India must adopt a nuanced and strategic approach to maintain influence in the Maldives and counterbalance China's expanding footprint. Strengthening diplomatic ties with our neighbour is paramount. Besides, India should bolster economic cooperation by offering viable alternatives to Chinese investments. Initiatives that promote sustainable development and address the Maldives' economic concerns can help strengthen economic ties. It goes without saying that India would have to back the pro-India Maldivian leaders; for example, the pro-India Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has recently claimed a landslide in Male's mayoral election. This is indeed a good sign for India and, if Muizzu is impeached, India could have the chance to re-establish its cordial relations with the Maldives that it has always had.



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

Road conditions hinder village development

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

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



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

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

Myanmar: India's strategic dilemma

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

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

India must act cautiously: Given Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu's honeymoon with China, India needs to evolve a realistic strategic blueprint in line with the 'Neighbourhood First' policy to save Myanmar from China's overtures to the junta through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), besides supporting border areas rebels by brokering peace between warring groups and army generals in this violence-plagued country. India took a cautious stand when the army, known as 'Tatmadaw', engineered a coup on February 1, 2021. India had diplomatically and indirectly supported the junta, refraining from openly supporting the democratic forces led by Aung San Suu Kyi, which has now put it in a dilemma. India faces the challenge of check-mating China, which is dangerous because it supports some ethnic groups. In this complex scenario, "OPERATION 1027" was undertaken in December 2023 by "The Three Brotherhood Alliance" comprising the Taang National Liberation Army, AA and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, which had shaken the junta. An offensive against the junta had dealt it a devastating blow, prompting China to support it. 'The Three Brotherhood Alliance' had captured key roads and military posts, hitting the cash-strapped junta's revenues and obstructing troop movements. Reports from the conflict zone suggested that the surprise attacks on the Shan state were followed by the AA opening a front against the army in its base in Rakhine state on the west coast. It was a coordinated attempt by insurgents to spill over to Kayah State



bordering Thailand to the east and the Sagaing region and Chin State, bordering India. It was in violation of a ceasefire in force between the armed groups and the junta over a year. The bold move threatens the military's control over crucial trade routes to China thereby hitting its interests. It was a welcome step for China when the army led by Min Aung Hlaing dethroned the elected government, but now the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, thereby challenging the junta. **The Brotherhood is Junta's biggest challenge:** The alliance has been successful in cutting off the junta from a stretch of land that handles about 40% of bilateral border trade with China; around \$1 billion of the trade comes from natural gas piped into China. The fighting erupted recently in Shan, Kachin and Chin states, which are situated in the country's north as well as in Rakhine state in the west. Three Brotherhood fighters have claimed they have overrun dozens of military posts across the region and seized major roads leading in and out besides forcing the surrender of over 100 soldiers of the Myanmar army, demoralizing the junta. The armed groups have taken the fight to the Tatmadaw in Kayah State in the country's east which is important to the Myanmar army.



KS TOMAR

India must rethink its strategy: India will need to rethink its old-fashioned position towards Myanmar before the fallout threatens its interests. India feels the US should seize the moment to enhance engagement with India in Myanmar and work to alleviate the humanitarian situation thereby supporting the anti-junta forces and establishing a federal democracy. India has tried to maintain equidistance between the military generals and pro-democracy political parties to ensure that the junta does not fall into China's lap. **Junta to hit back:** The army generals were not ready for the alliance's huge offensive, which set off a chain reaction, cornering the junta. Armed groups are reported to have taken control of fifty towns and villages and 100 posts. Army chief Hlaing has promised to undertake a counterattack on terrorists in the north, which might expose the junta's weakness. Armed rebellion by ethnic armed organizations has dealt a diplomatic blow to the army generals who have been exposed; China will be directly impacted. The Ukraine war had come as a blessing in disguise for the junta as the US and EU were preoccupied with it. The Hamas attack on Israel has further alienated Western powers from Myanmar but the attack by armed groups may change the entire scenario. The

National Unity Government (NUG) formed by opposition lawmakers in Burma is considered close to the West, which is feeling encouraged after the successful offensive by the armed groups. **China's double speak:** China has urged Myanmar to restore border stability even as the junta's conflict with armed groups intensifies. Myanmar has been asked by China to 'cooperate' with it to maintain stability on the common borders. China's official stand is intriguing; "As a friendly neighbour, China sincerely hopes that Myanmar will restore stability and development as soon as possible, and supports all parties in Myanmar to properly resolve differences within the constitutional and legal framework and achieve reconciliation through dialogue." A recent visit by Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong holds significance after armed groups stepped up an offensive, which put Chinese residents and infrastructure at risk. Some former diplomats are surprised over the 'Dual Policy' adopted by China, which has been actively supporting the militant groups. The United Wa State Army (UWSA) in Myanmar's north-eastern Shan state receives weapons and political sustenance from China. (The writer is a political analyst and an expert on South Asia, views are personal)



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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GANDHIAN PRINCIPLES

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

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur

SUICIDE IS NOT A SOLUTION

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

Rhino killing is a cause of concern



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

found on January 22. Poaching is the biggest threat to the one-horned rhinos. Local poachers, hand-in-glove with international smugglers, pose a big threat to the rhinos. The Assam government had set up a special task force to achieve zero poaching of rhinos in 2022. The task force, set up by the Assam government, and consisting of dedicated commandos, did a commendable job by ensuring nil poaching of the endangered animals in 2022. So, it can safely be assumed that there was a massive breach in security or that a few unscrupulous elements in the park were hand-in-gloves with the poachers that resulted in the latest rhino killing. The entire security apparatus including the CCTV cameras require an extensive examination and overhaul. At the same time, a methodical review of logistics, personnel and training would not be out of place.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

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

M Pradyu | Kannur

CRUX OF BUDGET FOR 2024-25

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

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

R Narayanan | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

THE DIVINE WISDOM OF BHAGAVAD GITA

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



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Let me start with verse # 3.8 of the Bhagavad-Gita, which is, "You should always do your duty. Because action is superior to inaction. Maintenance of the body will also not be possible through inaction. We all know what our duties are according to time, place and circumstances. We also know that neglecting our duties impacts our maintenance. For example, a student does not pay attention to his studies. What happens subsequently? He finds it hard to maintain himself. For whose benefit was this verse spoken?"

Let me take another verse, which is very famous. I am referring to verse #2.47, which goes like this, "You have a right only in action, not ever in predetermining fruits. You should not speculate about the fruit of action; your attachment to inaction also should not be there." For whose benefit was this verse spoken? Do we really have any other right except to do our duties? And we must not neglect to do them. As regards the results of our actions, the right to decide them has been kept by God with Himself. Can you imagine what will happen if all of us are free to decide the results? Complete chaos. And who will lose in such chaos? We will.

The third verse chosen by me is very telling, in which Lord Krishna promises, "People who worship Me with undivided attention, meditating on Me, for these regular practitioners of yoga, I help in getting what one does not have and provide security of what one has." This is wonderful. What more could we ask for? Therefore, do what the Lord instructs. How else to decide about who deserves such enormous mercy? Verse after verse the Lord is cajoling us to do what will fulfill all our desires, which are according to dharma. God couldn't be a party to anything against dharma. Could He?



The fourth verse in this connection is: "Where there is yogeshwara Shri Krishna and where there is Arjuna (meaning us), there will be opulence, victory, wealth and morality." (18.78) What are our desires generally? That we should succeed in our endeavours. We would if we were aiming for what is according to morality, i.e. dharma. The same is about wealth. Don't we need enough resources for our maintenance? Not only wealth, there will be 'saubhagya' (good fortune). Who benefits from all these? We do; God doesn't because He is complete in all respects. (3.22) The next verse is about gaining peace and a perfect destination. Lord Krishna instructs, "In all respects, take My shelter only. By My mercy, you will achieve supreme peace and the eternal abode." What is it that we lack after gaining material needs, comforts, etc.? It is peace, which is what God is promising. Not only that, God is also assuring eternal abode, which is free from the defects of this material world. How nice it will be to not be subjected to repeated birth and death? God is prepared to grant this also. As a matter of fact, God is always wanting to give. He has so much to give if we become deserving. Isn't that fair? How do we become deserving? Lord Krishna describes, "Develop My consciousness; become My devotee; make sacrifices for Me; and offer obeisance to Me." (18.65) One may feel that all these activities relate to God. No, far from it; they only purify our existence.

I will take up one more verse, which is, "Having My consciousness, you will cross all impediments by My grace." (18.58) This is quite an amazing offer from God. Aren't we all struggling with one problem or another throughout our lives? We do, but our ego comes in the way. We are not prepared to accept that somebody can be superior to us and to such an extent that we have to take His shelter and His alone. (18.66) We would rather suffer but won't do as instructed by God. Do we realise that our acts will benefit the world if we obey God's instructions? We will become better persons by following dharma.

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

Tread the WTO quagmire with caution



UTTAM GUPTA

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

In a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) - held on October 2, 2023, in Geneva, the European Union (EU) agreed to consider India's demand for a permanent solution to public stock-holding (PSH) program for food security. This is a significant change of stance since March 2023, when the EU along with the USA and Canada had challenged it.

The issue will be taken up for deliberation in the 13th ministerial conference (MC) of the WTO (World Trade Organization), scheduled from February 26-29, 2024 in Abu Dhabi. The MC is the highest decision-making body of the global trade watchdog (read: WTO) that includes 164 member countries.

While, the USA and EU countries want a comprehensive discussion on agriculture encompassing the value-chain, market access, and export restrictions besides the PSH program, India has categorically stated "it won't negotiate any other issue in the agriculture sector till a permanent solution on PSH is found".

It has also conveyed that support measures given to its poor farmers like input subsidies such as on electricity, irrigation, fertilizer and even direct transfers are non-negotiable.

Under the PSH program, government agencies like the Food Corporation of India (FCI) buy agri-produce such as wheat, rice/paddy, and coarse cereals from farmers at the minimum support price (MSP) and distribute it at a subsidized price of Rs 2/3/1 per kg respectively to meet the needs of India's poor and vulnerable population under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) that was enacted in 2013. From January 1, 2023, these staple foods are given to the beneficiaries 'free'; initially in force till December 31, 2023, this arrangement has been continued for five years till December 31, 2028.

The excess of MSP plus handling, storage and distribution cost over the realization from the sale (that is, Rs 2/3/1 per kg prior to January 1, 2023, and 'zero' thereafter) is paid as a subsidy from the Union Budget. This can be bifurcated into two components (a) subsidy to the farmer, which is the excess of MSP of, say, rice over its international price also known as External Reference Price (ERP) in WTO parlance and (b) subsidy to the food consumer, being the excess of ERP over the price paid which currently is 'nil'. The WTO is concerned with (a) branded as "product-specific" subsidies. It requires some explanation.

The international price/ERP of any commodity is based on global demand-supply forces and is determined in a competitive manner. All farmers irrespective of their country of location are expected to receive this price. In case, because of the intervention by the government of a member country say India, the farmers therein receive a price/MSP higher than this, they are presumed to have been subsidized to the extent of excess of MSP over ERP.

The WTO is also concerned with subsidies on agricultural inputs like fertilisers, seeds, irrigation, power, etc., referred to as "non-product specific" subsidies.

The developed countries argue that such subsidies distort international trade; hence these need to be curbed. Their argument found acceptance at the WTO.



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

Accordingly, under the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), the total of product and non-product-specific subsidies or aggregate measurement support (AMS) is capped at 10 per cent of the value of agricultural production for a developing country (for developed countries, this threshold is 5 per cent). If a member country gives AMS over 10 per cent, it is a violation.

The AoA came into force in 1995. For India, until 2005, MSP was less than ERP. Thereafter, MSP has been higher than ERP and, in the last decade, this gap widened. During 2018-19, in the case of rice, for instance, AMS was at 11 per cent, exceeding the 10 per cent cap. During 2019-20, it was even higher at 13.7 per cent.

For over a decade or so, India along with other developing countries has been making efforts at WTO to wriggle out of the situation. In the 9th Ministerial Conference (MC) held in Bali (2013), it secured sanction for a "peace clause". It said, "If a developing country gives AMS in excess of 10 per cent, no member will challenge this until 2017 when the WTO would look for a permanent solution."

In the General Council (GC) held in December 2014, this sanction was modified to say "The peace clause will stay till a permanent solution was found." However, the peace clause comes with several riders, such as the submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not "trade distorting." Besides, programs implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the 'peace clause'.

India has invoked the 'peace

clause' several times at the WTO for breaching the 10 per cent ceiling in case of subsidy on rice - the latest being for the marketing year 2020-21. However, developed countries have objected to such invocation. They want India to be more transparent about its PSH program and put in place safeguards to prevent 'illegitimate' exports. But, this can't go on ad infinitum.

The WTO should go for a permanent solution within a time-bound manner. In fact, the MC held in Bali (2013) had implicitly given a deadline of 2017 ".....no member will challenge this until 2017 when the WTO would look for a permanent solution." Unfortunately, the GC held in December 2014 deferred it indefinitely. India has done right by insisting on a deadline now. However, its stance for the 13th MC isn't the right way to go. India is trying to delink PSH from a comprehensive look at agriculture. It is attempting to delink things that are intertwined with each other.

The PSH program involves buying food from the farmers and distributing it to the beneficiaries. Here, we are talking about the entire supply chain involving procurement, handling, storage, distribution and so on. So, the issues of market access, and sale in the domestic and international markets can't be brushed aside.

India's PSH program is open-ended under which the government's agencies buy the highest possible quantities of wheat and rice from the farmers at ever-increasing MSP. Since these purchases are unrelated to the requirement under the NFSA (courtesy vote bank politics), sur-

plus stocks with agencies are inevitable which they dispose of by auctioning to private traders etc under the Open Market Sale Scheme (OMSS). Under OMSS all the bidders are compulsorily asked to give an undertaking that they won't export it.

One wonders whether a mere declaration by private traders acquiring such stocks would satisfy the developed countries. We have also seen instances of heavily subsidized food (now free) being smuggled to neighbouring countries. It won't come on record but it disturbs the global demand-supply equation.

India should put everything on the table and talk. It is widely recognized that the formula for the computation of AMS under the AoA suffers from several flaws. The ERP used for comparing with MSP (albeit current) dates back to 1986-88. This is bound to "artificially" inflate the subsidy. By using the current ERP, India's subsidy will automatically go below the 10 per cent threshold. Besides, AoA calculation doesn't exclude subsidies given to resource-poor farmers. These farmers mostly produce food for self-consumption meaning they don't have a surplus to sell. So, the question of subsidies to them distorting trade doesn't arise. Their exclusion will also reduce the AMS.

Meanwhile, the government should end the open-ended procurement and restrict purchase only to what is required for giving to the NFSA beneficiaries. It should also consider switching to 'giving subsidy in cash' using DBT mode.

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

Nitish's ninth move on Bihar's political chessboard

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

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



RAJESH KUMAR SINGH

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

the charismatic Lalu Yadav, whose legacy seems at odds with its preparedness for the future.

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



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

The repercussions of Bihar's political upheaval reverberate nationally, drawing reactions from prominent leaders

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

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

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

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

Blame game erupts between Maldives ruling, oppn parties

PTI ■ MALE

Hours after the Prosecutor General of Maldives was attacked by unidentified persons on Monday, a blame game has erupted between the ruling and the opposition parties that called the attack 'politically motivated,' according to local media and social media reports.

place in a democratic society and I call on the government to be swift in bringing the perpetrators to justice." Home Minister Ali Ihusan asked Solih to share information to back his claim that the violent attack on Prosecutor General Shameem was politically motivated.

ing this case as top priority and will bring perpetrators to justice," he said. Meanwhile, condemning the attack on Shameem, the MDP said in a statement: "The alleged close ties between top government officials and criminal groups operating in the Maldives, and because of the protection the government provides these criminal groups," the opposition party said.

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

EU aims to launch Red Sea naval mission within 3 weeks

AP ■ BRUSSELS

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



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

PUBLIC NOTICE

The general public is informed that the cars with the following car numbers which have completed their life Petrol Cars 15 Years Diesel Cars 10 Years. The MCD drive was confiscated by Pine View Technology Pvt Ltd and has not been claimed by anyone till now.

Table with columns for Car No., Make/Model, and Status. Lists various car numbers and their details.

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

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The US has announced a major overhaul of its annual lottery for the H-1B speciality occupation visas, popular among Indian IT professionals, to curtail the potential for fraud and improve and streamline the registration system.

curtail the potential for fraud while improving and streamlining our application processes," said USCIS Director Ur M Jaddou. "The improvements in these areas should make H-1B selections more equitable for petitioners and beneficiaries and will allow for the H-1B process to be fully electronic from registration, if applicable, until final decision and transmission of approved petitions to the Department of State," he said.

to start and complete the registration process. USCIS said this final rule contains provisions that will create a beneficiary-centric selection process for registrations by employers, codify start date flexibility for certain petitions subject to the congressionally mandated H-1B cap, and add more integrity measures related to the registration process.

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

it determines that the fee associated with the registration is declined, not reconciled, disputed, or otherwise invalid after submission, it said. In a statement, American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Director of Government Relations Sharvari Dalal-Dheini said the new H-1B registration process will revise how lottery registration is run and create a more equitable system.

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

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

10k Indian construction workers to reach Israel



PTI ■ JERUSALEM

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

are correct. When asked about the arrival of the first batch of workers, the source said, "We hope they'll come next week." The workers to arrive in Israel would be part of the private recruitment track, which was approved by the government in parallel with the bilateral (inter-governmental) track to enable rapid recruitment of workers into the construction industry.

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY e-TENDER CALL NOTICE No. EMWSD-II/Sweeping Machine/02/2023/ Date: 29.01.2024

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS CHANGE OF NAME I, Mudit Bhardwaj S/o Shri Satish Kumar Sharma R/o B-63, Manas Apartment, Mayur Vihar, Phase-1 Extension, Delhi-110091, have changed my name Mudit Bhardwaj for all future purposes

कार्यालय नगर निगम, हरिद्वार पत्रांक- 503 / सं/01 / 2023-24 पुनः ई-निविदा सूचना दिनांक- 31.01.2024 नगर निगम हरिद्वार द्वारा चक्रवर्त सड़क-2024 हेतु परामर्श सहायता एवं अन्य समस्त कार्य कर्म के माध्यम से कराये जाने हेतु www.uktenders.gov.in पर ई-निविदा आमंत्रित की जाती है जिसका विवरण निम्नानुसार है-

PUBLIC NOTICE To be known to all, SH. GULSHAN GANDHI S/o LATE SH. B.S. GANDHI & SMT. MEENU GANDHI W/O SH. GULSHAN GANDHI both R/o BG-7/35, PASCHIM VIHAR, NEW DELHI-110063

Table with columns S.No., Scheduled/Information, Date, Time. Lists dates and times for online publication, document download, bid submission, and offline submission.

THE PUNJAB STATE COOPERATIVE MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION LTD. SCO 153-155, SECTOR 34-A, CHANDIGARH-160022, EPABX No. 0172-5044182, 66 Notice Inviting Tender www.verka.coop

CORRIGENDUM ICICI Bank Branch Office: ICICI Bank Ltd, 3rd Floor, Plot No- 23, New Rohatk Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005

Office of The General Manager (Admin), Head Office Uttarakhand PEYJAL NIGAM, 11-MOHINI ROAD, DEHRADUN Off. Ph. : 2678078, 2672404 | Fax : 0135-2672337 E-mail : upsnvnm@gmail.com Letter No. 49 / Nivida / 27 Date: 31.01.2024

Table with columns S.No., Name of Scheme, Estimated Cost of Work (Rs. in Lakhs), Completion Period (in month). Lists construction schemes and their costs.

MOULIN COMMERCIAL LIMITED CIN: L74899DL1982PLC067811 Regd Office: 1, Anand Gram, Aya Nagar, Mehrauli, Gurgaon Road, New Delhi-110047

Table with columns S.No., Particulars, Quarter ended 31.12.2023, Nine months ended 31.12.2023, Quarter ended 31.12.2022. Financial statement details.

Notice under SARFAESI Act for Loan Account No. LBNPN0004952659, LBNOD0005332938, LBNPN0004952664 Name of the Borrower Rajeev Ahuja/ Rekha Rani/Versha Ranj property HOUSE NO 231 EWS, MEASURING 51.25 SQ YARD, SITUATED IN HOUSING BOARD COLONY PANIPAT WITHIN THE LIMIT OF M.C. ABADI KNOWN AS WEAVERS COLONY TEHSIL AND DISTRICT PANIPAT HARYANA and 13.2 dispatch date is May 09th, 2023.

Table with columns S.No., Particulars, Quarter ended 31.12.2023, Nine months ended 31.12.2023, Quarter ended 31.12.2022. Financial statement details.

Import duty on mobile parts cut to 10 per cent

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

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



(ICEA) Chairman Pankaj Mohindroo said this is a critical policy intervention by the government towards making mobile manufacturing competitive in India. "Electronics have improved from the 9th position a few years ago to India's 5th largest export in 2024. Mobiles constitute over 52 per cent of electronics exports thanks to the Production-Linked Incentive Scheme. This is the first industry to leapfrog out of import substitution to export-led growth within the last 8 years," Mohindroo said. Nangia Andersen India Associate Director- Indirect

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

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

RBI bars Paytm from accepting deposits after February 29

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The RBI on Wednesday barred Paytm Payments Bank Ltd from accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, NCMC cards, etc. After February 29, 2024, other than any interest, cashbacks, or refunds which may be credited anytime," it said. The central bank further said withdrawal or utilisation of balances by its customers from their accounts including savings bank accounts, current accounts, prepaid instruments, FASTags, National Common Mobility Cards are to be permitted without any restrictions, up to their available balance. The RBI in March 2022 had directed PPBL to stop onboarding new customers with immediate effect.

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



4 members of Finance Commission appointed

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

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

India gold demand dips 3 per cent in 2023

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

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



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

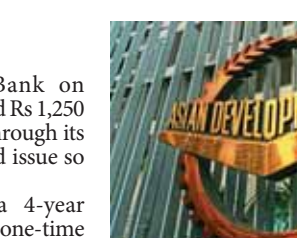
near-term elections spending impact and acceptance of elevated price levels, suggest the potential for a spurt in demand in the near future. However, any short-term impediments to higher demand could arise from another round of sharp price hikes and volatility triggered by global factors," he added.

The total jewellery demand in India dropped by 6 per cent to 562.3 tonnes in 2023, compared to 600.6 tonnes in the previous year, the report stated. Meanwhile, the total gold investment demand in the country grew by 7 per cent to 185.2 tonnes, compared to 173.6 tonnes in the previous year, the WGC report said. "Bar and coin investment in India rebounded, growing by 7 per cent to 185 tonnes year-on-year. The fourth quarter demand touched 67 tonnes, 64 per cent above the five-year quarterly average. "The correction in gold prices led to some robust investment responses in third and fourth quarters, supported by increased interest from physically backed gold ETF investors, setting total holdings

in Indian-listed products to a record 42 tonnes by year-end," Somasundaram said. He said that recycling was 20 per cent higher due to low and supportive higher prices but at 117 tonnes, could be considered the normative expected level. Total gold imported to India in 2023 was 780.7 tonnes, up by 20 per cent compared to 650.7 tonnes in 2022, according to the report. "Net gold imports surged by 20 per cent to 780.7 tonnes in 2023, primarily due to substantial inventory building by the trade. "In 2024, gold imports are likely to be higher than the demand. The various Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) India has inked with many countries are expected to boost gold imports further this year," noted Somasundaram.

ADB mobilises ₹1,250 crore through green bonds

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



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

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

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

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

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Hoteliers expect lenient tax

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

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

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

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



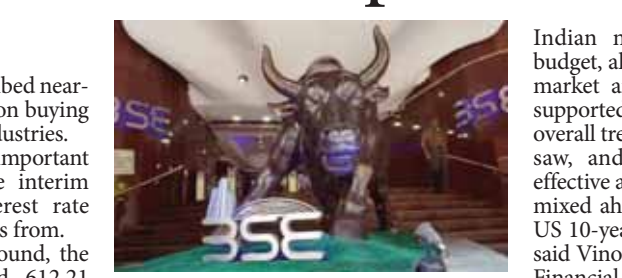
Mercedes-Benz sets eyes on smaller cities

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

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

Markets settle one per cent higher

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Benchmark equity indices climbed nearly 1 per cent on Wednesday on buying in HDFC Bank and Reliance Industries. Investors are eyeing the two important events lined up ahead — the interim budget and the US Fed interest rate decision — to derive further cues from. Recovering all the early lost ground, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 612.21 points or 0.86 per cent to settle at 71,752.11. During the day, it zoomed in 71,499 points or 1 per cent to 71,851.39. The Nifty climbed 203.60 points or 0.95 per cent to 21,725.70. Among the Sensex firms, Sun Pharma, Tata Motors, State Bank of India, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti, Bajaj Finserv, Power Grid and UltraTech Cement were the major gainers.



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

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

MANJU ADDS 10KM GOLD TO HER KITTY

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

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



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

Srikanth moves to second round of Thailand Masters

PTI ■ BANGKOK

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



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



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

PTI ■ PATTAYA (THAILAND)

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

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

Indian sailor Vishnu qualifies for successive Olympics

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

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

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



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

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

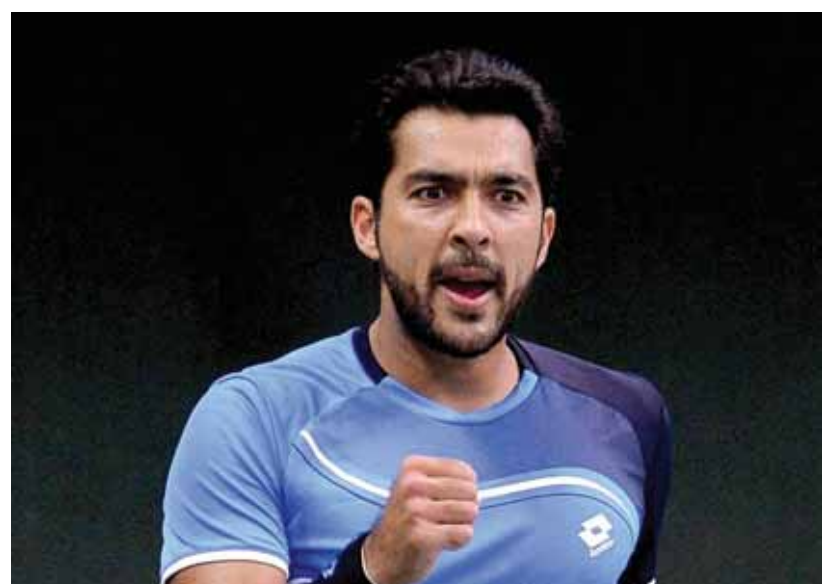
get a medal at Los Angeles 2028. "In reality top 15 will be my goal, but if I make top-10 and reach the medal race it will be very good. I know how difficult it is going to be. Let's see how it goes," he said. "For me, 2028 is the real chance where I can win an Olympic medal. I've age on my side and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

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

Davis Cup: Aisam drops hints of playing singles against India

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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



For the second consecutive day, persistent drizzle disrupted Pakistan Davis Cup team's practice session, while the Indians were also forced to stay indoors on Wednesday. On Tuesday also, when the Indian team was nearing the end of its three-hour session, heavens opened up, forcing an early closure of their session. Aisam said not getting to hit for two days in a row, indeed affects the preparations. "Definitely, these things affect the preparations. At the end of the day, these things are not in our control. We need to focus on things we can control and prepare in best way possible. I am sure Indian team's training has also been affected but it is what it is," said world number 154 Aisam, who was a top-10 player in doubles in 2011. "Hopefully, the weather will be good on Saturday and Sunday so we can have a wonderful tie, Insha-allah," he added. Pakistan captain Mohammed Abid remained optimistic and opted looking at the brighter side. "Well, the players are now well rested. The bodies are relaxed now," he said before leaving with Mohammed Shoib and Barkat Ullah for a gym session.

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

AP ■ TOKYO

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



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

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

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

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



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

AP ■ NYON (SWITZERLAND)

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

NATIONAL ROWING CHAMPIONSHIP: Manipur women dominate; Services, Army enter final

PTI ■ PUNE

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



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

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

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

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

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

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

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

Although Jaiswal played a knock of 80 in the first innings

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indian conditions up there with the hardest: Foakes

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Before, there was more of a

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

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

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

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



Test, which England won by 28 runs. He played through pain, bowling 26 overs in the first innings and 10 in the second despite bruising and swelling around the joint. He was seen limping during Wednesday's training session.

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

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

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



Ashwin retains No 1 spot, Bumrah moves to 4th in ICC Test rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

Senior India off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin maintained the top spot, while compatriot Jasprit Bumrah jumped to fourth in the latest ICC Test bowling rankings released on Wednesday.

Ashwin, who had grabbed a match haul of six wickets in India's 28-run loss in the opening Test against England, is on 853 rating points, while pacer Bumrah, who also claimed half a dozen wickets, rose a rung to fourth.

The third Indian in the top 10 in the bowling charts is left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja at number six.

Jadeja also enjoys a healthy buffer at the head of the Test all-rounder rankings.

However, Joe Root, who has moved up to fourth place, might challenge him soon if the England veteran maintains his good show with the ball.

While Root is primarily known for his batting skills, the 33-year-old showcased his handy spin by taking five wickets in the Hyderabad Test. He even opened the bowling for England in the second innings. This effort has seen Root rise to a new career-high rating on the list for Test all-rounders and seen the evergreen England star jump one place to fourth.

Root is behind Ashwin and Shakib-Al-Hasan while Axar Patel has dropped a spot to sixth.

Virat Kohli has moved to sixth and is the lone Indian among the top 10 batters while Ollie Pope, who stunned India with a magnificent 196 in the second innings, jumped a mammoth 20 places to 15th.

Pope's England teammate Ben Duckett also improved his ranking, gaining five places to 22nd after knocks of 35 and 47 against India.

Australia opener Usman Khawaja gained two places to eighth following a half-century in the opening innings of the second Test against the West Indies at the Gabba.

After their impressive performance against Australia, three West Indies quicks also improved their rankings.

Kemar Roach moved up two places to 17th, Alzarri Joseph climbed four spots to 33rd, and Shamar Joseph, who was the Player-of-the-Match at the Gabba, rose a significant 42 places to reach the 50th position in the rankings.

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

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'NO QUESTION OF RECOVERY': India slipped to fifth place on the World Test Championship (WTC) table following the loss in Hyderabad and the hosts would be desperate to bounce back here.

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

"There's no question of recovery. You keep learning every game that you play. Of course, we could have done better in batting, bowling and fielding. A lot of discussions and ideas are being shared, preparing well and hoping to do well in the next game."

He expressed confidence in the players' ability to bounce back and cited India's unbeaten record in Test series at home since 2012. "We keep talking

about our batters (not scoring enough), but India has been winning a lot of series at home. We haven't lost a series at home for 12-13 years.

"It means we are putting up more runs than the other teams. These are tough conditions to score runs, but I'm sure that the batters will find a way."

"Don't think players require too much coaching" At this level, Rathour said the players just need to act as per the situation. "Once you come to this level, I don't think you require too much coaching. It's about reading the situations and making smarter decisions.

"As long as they are asking the right questions and receiving the right answers, there is no chance of over-coaching," he concluded.

BCCI secretary Shah appointed ACC chairman for third consecutive term

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Cricket Board (BCCI) Secretary Jay Shah was on Wednesday appointed as the president of the Asian Cricket Council for a third consecutive term.

Shah's extension was proposed by the Sri Lanka Cricket president Shammi Silva for the second time and the nomination was unanimously backed by all the members of the ACC at its annual general meeting in Bali.

Shah initially assumed the role in January 2021, succeeding Bangladesh Cricket Board President Nazmul Hassan.

Under Shah's leadership, the ACC successfully organised the Asia Cup in T20 format in 2022 and in ODI format in 2023.

"I am grateful to the ACC Board for their continued trust. We must remain committed to ensuring the all-round development of the sport with a special focus on regions where it is still in its infancy. The ACC is committed to nurturing cricket across Asia," Shah said in a release.



"Under Shah's guidance, the ACC has been instrumental in unearthing and promoting new talent in cricketering powerhouses like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka," Silva said.

Pankaj Khimji, chairman of Oman Cricket and vice-president of the ACC, also extended congratulations on Shah's term.

"Today, stakeholders see value in investing in tournaments that the ACC conducts, and I credit him for this major transformation, which will further fuel the growth of the game in the region," Khimji stated.

Welcoming the reappointment, Hassan said cricket in Asia will continue to prosper under Shah's leadership, emphasising collaboration with the ACC in furthering this endeavor.

Afridi calls for all format captain

PTI ■ KARACHI

Former captain Shahid Afridi has urged the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) to follow the policy of having one skipper across formats to prevent in-fighting over captaincy.

Star batter Babar Azam had stepped down as skipper from all three formats after Pakistan failed to advance from the group stages at the ODI World Cup last year with PCB naming Shaheen Shah Afridi and Shan Masood as the T20 and Test skipper respectively.

"The PCB must have one captain for all formats and there is no need to have a vice-captain. This will give a clear



message to all players who is in charge," Afridi told reporters here.

Expressing support for team director Mohammad Hafeez, the 46-year-old said the the captain and team management should get at least three-year contracts.

"If you think Muhammad Hafeez is good then don't just judge him on one series give him proper time and the same should apply to the captain as well he should be there for three years."

Afridi added that players in The T20 squad should be given a long run ahead of the World Cup later this year.

"The World T20 Cup is going to be a very tough tournament this year with some very strong teams in the hunt for the title. I also don't think this is the time to make any changes in the format squad," he said.

'Bazball' comes naturally to us: Crawley

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

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

England upstaged India by 28 runs in the opening Test in Hyderabad despite conceding a 190-run first innings lead, showcasing a fighting attitude that stunned the pre-series favourites. England are yet to

lose a Test since pioneering 'Bazball' under their New Zealand coach Brendon McCullum.

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

"A lot of us play a bit better



under this regime," he added. In contrast, India were also battling a selection crisis in addition to finding answers to their poor performance in Hyderabad after all-rounder

Ravindra Jadeja and top-order batter KL Rahul were ruled out due to injuries.

The hosts are already without mainstay Virat Kohli, who has opted out of the first two Tests citing personal reasons.

Asked what it would mean for the English team, Crawley said his team is more focussed on its performance and planning.

"...We haven't spoken about that. It sounds cliched but we stick to our own lead up... We don't bother about what they are doing," Crawley said when asked if the absence of the duo is a boost for England.

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