

OPINION 6

A TUMULTUOUS PATH AHEAD FOR PAK GOVT

WORLD 8

FARMERS CONVERGE ON EU'S HQ IN FRESH SHOW OF FORCE

MONEY 10

GOVERNMENT EXPEDITES INSPECTION OF CRISIS HIT BYJU'S

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Hindus to pray at Gyanvapi

PTI ■ PRAYAGRAJ

Hindu prayers will continue in the southern cellar of the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, the Allahabad High Court said on Monday while dismissing a plea that had challenged the district court's order to this effect. Justice Rohit Ranjan Agarwal rejected two appeals filed by the mosque management committee challenging the Varanasi district judge's January 17 order that appointed the district magistrate as the receiver of the "Vyas Tehkhana" or southern cellar of the mosque and January 31 order by which he allowed 'puja' to be performed there. The High Court said worship will continue in the "Vyas Tehkhana" of the mosque adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple. Mohammad Yasin, joint secretary of Anjuman Intezamia Masajid, the committee that manages the affairs of the Gyanvapi, said their lawyers are studying the judgement and they might approach the Supreme Court against the order. Dismissing the appeals, Justice Agarwal said, "After going through the entire records of the case and considering the arguments of the parties concerned, the court did not find any ground to interfere in the judgment passed by the district judge on



January 17, appointing the Varanasi district magistrate as the receiver of the property, as well as the order dated January 31 by which the district court permitted puja in the tehkhana." Going through the argument made by the Muslim side that the January 31 order was passed without any application, the High Court said, "In the instant case, by order dated January 17 the composite prayer made in application was allowed, but only relief (a) was incorporated appointing receiver. Relief (b) allowing worship was added on January 31, 2024 after it was brought to the notice of the court and order stood modified/ amended in terms of Sections 151/152 CPC." "I find that the challenge made to the order dated January 31 on the plea of res judicata is totally unfounded as the relief prayed by the plaintiff was granted on January 17, 2024 but part of it

was not incorporated in the order which was subsequently modified/ amended," Justice Agarwal said. In its 54-page judgment, the court also noted, "Lastly, an attempt has been made to malign the image and impute motive to the order passed by the Court below on January 31, 2024 on the ground that the officer concerned had passed the order on the last working day." Justice Agrawal said puja at that place has already been started and is going on thus there is no occasion to stop the same. The High Court judge had reserved his verdict in the matter on February 15 after hearing the counsel for the parties. The mosque committee had moved the High Court on February 2, hours after the Supreme Court refused to hear its plea against the district court order and asked it to approach the High Court.

A survey conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) on the court's order had suggested that the Gyanvapi mosque was constructed during Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's rule over the remains of a Hindu temple. The district court ruled on January 31 that a Hindu priest can perform prayers before the idols in the southern cellar of the mosque. The prayers are now being conducted by a Hindu priest nominated by the Kashi Vishwanath temple trust and the petitioner, who has claimed that his grandfather offered puja in the cellar till December 1993. The district court had directed the local administration to make arrangements within seven days for prayers in the cellar. This would have involved "proper arrangements" with metal barricades at the complex. The January 31 order of the district court was delivered on the plea of Shailendra Kumar Pathak, who had claimed that his maternal grandfather, priest Somnath Vyas, offered prayers in the cellar till December 1993. He had said the puja was stopped during the tenure of then Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav after the Babri masjid in Ayodhya was demolished on December 6, 1992. **Continued on Page 2**

Court Raps Bengal On Sandeshkhali

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The Calcutta High Court on Monday reprimanded the State Government for having failed to arrest Trinamool Congress strongman Sheikh Shahjahan, the alleged mastermind of all land grabs and sexual assault cases of Sandeshkhali. The stern judicial rap came a day after TMC general secretary Abhishek Banerjee told the media that Shahjahan could not be arrested because of an adverse judicial order. Two Bengal Ministers Partha Bhowmick and Sujit Bose who were sent by the Government to a peace mission to Sandeshkhali too offered a similar logic to the restive villagers. Expressing dismay at the police inaction through scores of FIRs had been lodged against the Sandeshkhali offenders, the Division Bench of Chief Justice TS Sivagnanam said "it is surprising to note that incidents in the area were reported to State police four years ago and that it has taken four years for the cases to mature into 42 chargesheets." To a question the State earlier told the court that 43 FIRs and 42 chargesheets had been filed in a number of incidents



of crime committed by the accused persons. The State said as many as 3 FIRs had been lodged against Shahjahan in the past one week whereas 150 complaints of land-grab, sexual assaults and attacks had been filed against the goons many of whom were TMC leaders. While passing its order the court emphasised that a misleading impression was being conveyed among the people that there was an interim stay on Shahjahan's arrest. The court said that the stay is not on his arrest but on the impugned order of a single Bench directing the formation of a Special Investigation Team comprising State Police and Enforcement Directorate officials to investigate a

separate case related to an attack on the ED officials during a January 5 raid in connection with the ration scam. The court clarified that there was a stay on the formation of the SIT but none on Shahjahan's arrest. "Therefore he should be arrested," the Bench said. Mamata Banerjee had earlier said the police were ready to arrest all the accused, including Shahjahan but "their hands are tied as there is a court order impeding such actions". While the issue was raised by the amicus curiae in the court on Monday the judges immediately reprimanded the Government for misinterpreting the order and failing to arrest the prime accused. Shahjahan's name hit the

national headlines for the first time on January 5 when his goons attacked and injured a team of ED and CAPF officials who raided his house in connection with the Rs 10,000 crore ration scam, that has landed former Food Minister Jyotipriya Mallick in jail. After a month his name again surfaced when hundreds of villagers, mostly women attacked the houses of various TMC leaders and gheraoed the local police station demanding the arrest of Shahjahan, Shibu Hajra, Uttam Sardar, Ajit Maity and others. While the latter have been arrested Shahjahan the main election manager of the TMC in a large part of North 24 Parganas is still at large. Meanwhile, soon after the court order pressure mounted on Shahjahan — who was at large for the past 53 days — with TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh saying the police would soon arrest the don of Sandeshkhali. "Now that the court has made things clear the police will try to arrest Shahjahan in seven days' time," he said even as the BJP and the Left said the confidence in his voice emanated from the fact that the TMC strongman was already in the protection of the police.



EC will boost voter turnout

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

As the voters' apathy has become a major concern for the poll body during the elections, the Election Commission (EC) has roped post offices and banks to reach out voters as part of its efforts to increase voting percentage ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, a first of its kind initiative so far. The EC has often expressed concern over urban and youth apathy with many registered voters not turning up at the polling stations to cast ballot in the previous elections. This

was visible in the recent Assembly polls held in the past few years. The EC on Monday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with two prominent organisations — the Indian Banks' Association (IBA) and the Department of Posts (DoP) — to amplify its voter outreach and awareness efforts ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. **Continued on Page 2**

PM Modi to keep youth dreams real

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Lauding the infrastructure achievements of his last two consecutive terms, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed confidence on Monday that his third term of Government will begin in June. However, the scale and speed at which new projects have begun in both BJP-led NDA Governments have left everyone baffled. Addressing the launch of several railway projects, including the world's largest ever railway station development project worth ₹41,000 crore, Modi emphasised that a developed India will fulfill the dreams of its



youth, who have the maximum right to shape the country's future. "The Indian Railways is undergoing a transformation and will benefit those studying in schools and colleges, as well as those below 35 years of age," he said, highlighting his initiative to revamp over 550 railway stations across 27 States and 300 districts. **Continued on Page 2**

Lakhpati Didi heads to Delhi

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

On International Women's Day, a traders' body will host a "Virat Lakhpati Didi Women Entrepreneur Summit" on March 8 in the national Capital. The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) plans to invite nearly 25,000 Lakhpati Didis from across the country to the summit, jointly organised with the Association of Direct Selling Entities of India (ADSEI) and the Federation of Direct Selling Association (FDSA) at the Indira Gandhi stadium. CAIT secretary general Praveen Khandelwal said the summit aims to recognise Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision and initiatives like self-reliant India, women empowerment, digital India, skill India, startup India, and Make in India, which have significantly boosted entrepreneurship and self-reliance in India. **Continued on Page 2**

Pankaj leaves India Udhas

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Veteran ghazal singer Pankaj Udhas — whose ghazals dwelt upon love, shrab and intoxication and who had mesmerised people across the country through his iconic songs like "Chitthi Aayee Hain", "Ek Taraf Uska Ghar", "Thodi Thodi Piya Karo" and "Chandi Jaisa Rang hai tera, sone jaise bal" — died here on Monday, after prolonged illness. Udhas, who was diagnosed with cancer a few months ago and had isolated himself since then, breathed his last at Breach Candy Hospital in south Mumbai at 11 am. He was 72. "With a very heavy heart, we are saddened to inform you of the sad demise of Padmashri Pankaj Udhas on February 26 due to a prolonged illness," Udhas' family said in a statement issued here. Udhas' daughter Nayaab also shared the news of her father's demise on social media. The ghazal maestro's funeral will be held on Tuesday. Known for his inimitable songs in Hindi films and



MAY 17, 1951 – FEB 26, 2024

Indian pop, Udhas began his career ghazal album Aahat in 1980. He recorded many albums like Mukarrar (1981), Tarannum (1982), Mehfil (1983) Pankaj Udhas Live at Royal Albert Hall (1984), Nayaab (1985) and Aafreen (1986). Pankaj Udhas shot to fame with his memorable song "Chitthi aayi hai aayi hai chitthi aayi hai... Bade dino ke baad ... Ham bevatano ko yaad" in film Naam (1986). After that he became a sought-after singer. He sang in many films, brought out

several music albums and performed at several music concerts across the world. In 2006, Udhas was awarded Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in the country. Mourning the demise of the ghazal maestro "whose singing conveyed a range of emotions and whose Ghazals spoke directly to the soul", Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "He was a beacon of Indian music, whose melodies transcended generations. "I recall my various interactions with him over the years. His departure leaves a void in the music world that can never be filled. Condolences to his family and admirers. Om Shanti". Born on May 17, 1951 at Jetpur in Gujarat, Udhas, whose both brothers Nirmal Udhas and Manhar Udhas are also singers - began his musical journey at a young age. His father Keshubhai Udhas enrolled Pankaj to learn the tabla. But, he began learning Hindustani vocal classical music from Ghulam Qadir Khan. **Continued on Page 2**

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NIA chargesheets five accused in 2023 Rajouri attacks case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Monday charge-sheeted five accused, including three absconding Pakistan-based handlers of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) outfit, in the Rajouri attacks case of January 2023.

The case RC-01 & 02/2023/NIA/JMU, relates to a heinous terror attack on civilians at village Dhangri, District Rajouri on 1st January 2023, followed by an IED blast the next day. Seven people, including two children, were killed and several others severely injured in the attacks.

Three of chargesheeted individuals are LeT handlers, identified as Saifullah @ Sajid Jutt @ Ali @ Habibullah @ Numan @ Langda @ Noumi, Mohd Qasim, and Abu Qatal @ Qatal Sindhii. While Abu Qatal and Sajid Jutt are Pakistani nationals, Qasim had infiltrated to Pakistan sometime around 2002 and had joined the LeT terrorist ranks there. As per investigations, the trio



had orchestrated the recruitment and dispatch of LeT terrorists from Pakistan to target innocent civilians, particularly from the minority community in Jammu & Kashmir, as well as security personnel. The attacks were carried out under the direction of these Pakistan-based handlers. Saifullah @ Sajid Jutt is currently a highly placed LeT Commander and was responsible for engineering the overall conspiracy from Pakistan, along with the other two. Mohd Qasim is presently the right hand of highly placed LeT Commanders. Abu Qatal had come to India in 2002-03

and was active in the Poonch-Rajouri range, along with other terrorists. The other two charge-sheeted accused are Nisar Ahmed @ Haji Nisar and Mushtaq Hussain @ Chacha, both Overground workers (OGWs) of the LeT and are residents of Mohra, Gursai, Tehsil Mendhar, District Poonch. The duo were arrested during the investigations by the NIA. It was found during investigations that they had provided logistical support to the terrorists on the directions of Abu Qatal. Along with a juvenile, who was also apprehend-

ed for aiding and abetting the perpetrators, they had provided food, shelter, and other types of logistics support to the terrorists for approximately three months following the attack in Dhangri. They had also attempted to conceal evidence by destroying the mobile phone used for clandestine communication with the Pakistan-based LeT commanders.

Nisar had also received a consignment of arms, ammunition, and cash sent by the Pakistan-based handlers for the terrorists. Investigations have revealed that Nisar had come in contact with Abu Qatal during the latter's stay in India. He had remained in touch with Abu Qatal even after the latter's return to Pakistan.

In the chargesheet filed today, the two arrested adult accused and the Pak-based handlers have been charged under the UA(P) Act and various sections of IPC. The Final Report against the apprehended juvenile will be submitted to the Juvenile Justice Board, Rajouri in due course.

TN, Karnataka, Kerala stare at draught as water reservoir storage declines

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI/CHENNAI

While the DMK led by Chief Minister M K Stalin of Tamil Nadu and the CPI(M) led Kerala Government are busy fighting BJP's "fascism and communalism", a monster in the form of draught and famine are getting ready to spread its tentacles over the two southern States. According to data released by the Central Water Commission, storage level in reservoirs in the southern region declined to 40 per cent of their capacity by the third week of February 2024. Reservoirs in northern region too showed a decline of 30 per cent in storage level during the same period. Day temperatures are crossing unprecedented level in the month of February, and this has caused concern among weathermen. "Well, temperature is on the higher level compared to past years. We do not expect any summer rain too in the coming weeks and hope there will not be any let up before the last

week of March," Dr S. Abhilash, director, RADAR Research Centre, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT), told The Pioneer. He said the raising mercury level is a matter of concern and scorching days are certain to hit the South. The CWC release says that reservoir level in southern States which depend on reservoirs for irrigation, has turned grim, particularly in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. Of the 42 reservoirs in the region, 28 have a level below 50 per cent of the capacity. While Kerala has just two per cent more than the storage capacity, storage level in Tamil Nadu is 24 per cent lower than normal level and Karnataka has 28 per cent lower than the normal level. Tamil Nadu, despite getting heavy rainfalls in the months of November and December that threw normal life out of gear, is all set to face severe water shortage, according to R V Giri, former president of Consortium of Indian Farmers' Association (CIFA), a farmer from Tamil Nadu's Virudhachalam.

Doctors endorse pillows stuffed with mustard seeds to prevent infant skull distortion

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

A time-tested tradition observed in Rajasthan and Nepal found validation in modern medicine as doctors at Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, have endorsed the use of easily available cost-effective mustard seed-stuffed pillows to prevent skull distortion (deformational plagiocephaly) in preterm infants. Deformational plagiocephaly (DP) is a cranial bone deformity, resulting from the application of unequal external pressure to the cranium after birth. Preterm infants may develop scaphocephaly characterized by bilateral head flattening and/or plagiocephaly characterized by asymmetrical flattening of one side of the skull. Thirty eight per cent of preterm infants have DP at term equivalent age. A systematic review has found positive associations between DP and developmental delay. Usually early prevention of DP by frequently changing the position of the infant's head, positioning devices, and bedding pillows is recommended to correct the size of the head.

However, said the doctors, pressure relief positioners (air mattresses, waterbeds, water pillows, therapeutic mattresses, and gel pillows) which have been used previously with some success in preventing DP are expensive and may not correct all types of plagiocephaly. In contrast, in traditional settings mustard seed pillows are used to position infants. Mustard seed pillows can mould to the shape of the infants' head and shoulder, equalizing pressure on the cranium and allowing symmetric positioning without restricting movement. Inspired by this traditional practice in Rajasthan and Nepal, the doctors conducted a trial in hospitalized preterm babies and compared the effectiveness of mustard seed pillows combined with standard nesting against isolated standard nesting in preventing DP. Measurement parameters included Cranial Index (CI), Cranial Vault Asymmetry Index (CVAI), Visual Assessment, Test of Infant Motor Performance (TIMP), and Infant Positioning Assessment Tool (IPAT).

BJP intensifies Lok Sabha candidate selection process

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP has intensified the Lok Sabha candidate selection process, with party's Delhi unit observers on Monday gathering the names of ticket probables on seven Parliamentary seats of the city, at the district level.

In the wake of the AAP and Congress alliance in Delhi, buzz is growing stronger that the BJP may not field all its sitting MPs in the Lok Sabha polls to be held in April-May. Further, in the run-up to the selection of candidates, the BJP has been conducting three surveys and doing a performance analysis of its 7 MPs in Delhi, said a top functionary of Delhi BJP.

"There are talks of at least half of the present MPs losing ticket this time. Buzz is also strong that all will be replaced, but it's too early to say anything because these matters are decided by the national leadership," he said. In 2019, the BJP repeated its sitting MPs on five of the seven



seats. Gautam Gambhir and Hans Raj Hans were fresh candidates in East Delhi and North West Delhi constituencies. All the BJP candidates won with huge margins in 2019 and polled more votes than that obtained by the candidates of the Congress and the AAP that fought the elections independently. "We never take any election lightly. But we are not bothered by the alliance between the AAP and the Congress in Delhi and making our preparations with full dedication to win all the 7 seats third time in a row," said another senior Delhi BJP leader. The district level leaders, including president, general secretary, sitting councilors,

candidates of previous Assembly polls, state functionaries, district in-charges and co-in-charges took part in the feedback gathering exercise conducted by teams of two senior leaders sent from the state unit.

"Each local leader provided three names of probables. Roughly, five to seven names of probable candidates for the seven Lok Sabha seats. The observers have submitted their reports to Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva," said party leaders. The feedback exercise revealed that there was a lot of enthusiasm among the party leaders to contest the Lok Sabha polls, they said.

"Apart from sitting MPs, the names of many state office bearers were suggested by the leaders at the district level," they said. The process for selection of candidates from Delhi may be wrapped up in the next four to six weeks and the tickets could be declared around mid April, they added.

PM to declare names of Indian astronauts for Gaganyaan

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is flying down to Thiruvananthapuram on Tuesday morning to announce the names of the four Indian astronauts selected for the Gaganyaan Mission (the country's first ever manned space mission).

The Prime Minister will proceed to Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) from Thiruvananthapuram Airport and spend one hour at the hub of India's space research program.

An interactive session with the scientists and engineers engaged in the human flight mission is the main agenda of the Prime Minister's itinerary. The four astronauts selected for the manned mission are all from the Indian Air Force and have been designated as Test Pilots, according to sources in ISRO. They were selected after a series of grueling tests and underwent training in an astronaut training center in Russia before returning to India. Right now these desi astronauts are

getting advanced training in the specially built centers of ISRO and IAF.

Though India has sent a man to space (Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma) in early 1980s, it was in a spacecraft owned and operated by the then Soviet Union.

The Prime Minister will also dedicate to the nation a state-of-the-art Trisonic Wind Tunnel which is 160 meters long and has a width of 5.4 meters.

This is a system to aid aerodynamic design of rockets and re-entry spacecrafts by characterizing a scaled model by evaluating forces, moments, load distribution, unsteady pressures, acoustic levels etc. The tunnel can be used for testing various space vehicles in three flight regimes - below the speed of sound, at the speed of sound and above the speed of sound; hence the name trisonic wind tunnel. The tunnel can simulate flight conditions from 0.2 times the speed of sound (68 m/s) to 4 times the speed of sound (1360 m/s), according to a release by ISRO.

EC will boost voter...

From Page 1

Despite successfully managing and conducting elections by the commission over the years in fair and peaceful way along with a significant increase in participation of the electors, there is also a concern that around 30 crore electors (out of 91 crore), did not cast their votes in General Election to Lok Sabha 2019.

The voting percentage was 67.4 per cent, which the commission has taken as a challenge to improve upon. Notably, the Indian Banks' Association now has a strong network of 247 members across the country. Public sector banks are in lead with 90,000+ branches and 1.36 lakh ATMs followed by 42,000+ branches of private sector banks with 79,000+ ATMs. Regional rural banks contribute over 22,400 branches, while small finance and payment banks operate around 7,000 branches and more than 3,000 ATMs. Foreign banks maintain 840 branches and 1,158 ATMs, and local area banks have 81 branches. "The cumulative number of the branches are

over 1.63 lakh with more than 2.19 lakh ATMs and 1.55 lakh post offices across the country," the EC said in a statement.

The initiative, the poll panel said, is in continuation of its efforts to enhance electoral awareness in the country. As part of the MoU, IBA & DoP with its members and affiliated institutions/units will extend support in promoting voter education through their extensive network on a pro-bono basis, employing various interventions to empower citizens with knowledge about their electoral rights, processes, and steps for registration and voting. The members and affiliated institutions will now display voter education messages prominently on their websites, directing visitors to learn more about the electoral process. Voter education content will be disseminated through various promotional channels such as social media and customer outreach platforms of member institutions, ensuring widespread awareness among

stakeholders and the public, the EC said.

Voter education messages will also be displayed in the form of posters, flex and hoardings at office premises at major locations, reaching the customers at key touchpoints. All member institutions under the IBA and the DoP will establish 'voter awareness fora' to engage the employees and customers in discussions and initiatives related to voter education. The Department of Posts will affix a special cancellation stamp (bearing voter education messages) on the postal articles. The EC had recently signed an MoU with the Ministry of Education to formally integrate electoral literacy into the educational curriculum of the schools and colleges. The latest initiative has been taken based on insights and knowledge gained by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar from his past roles and experience working in the financial sector, particularly in the India banking sector and India Post Payments Banks, the officials pointed out.

Floating ₹150 crore tenders normal in March, says BMC

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Seeking to downplay reports in a section of the media that would be floating as many as 900 tenders worth Rs 150 crore in the next 10 days, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), saying that "it is normal expenditure in a financial year in the month of March".

Issuing a clarification on the news reports that sought to create "misunderstanding" among the people, Mumbai Municipal Commissioner I S Chahal said, "Most of these tenders pertain to ward level works of BMC. Since there are 25 wards in the BMC, it involves merely an expenditure of only Rs 6 crore per ward and

an average of Rs 16 lakh per tender. There are approximately 36 tenders per Ward, each with a population of nearly 5 to 7 lakhs".

"Most of these small tenders pertain to maintenance of civic amenities like storm water drainage, sewerage network, footpaths, repairs of pedestrian lanes, slum area toilets, repairs etc. which concerns the citizens of Mumbai living in these areas," Chahal said. "It is normal expenditure in a financial year in the month of March when the financial year ends. Sizeable budget expenditure takes place not only in BMC but all major departments under Government of Maharashtra every year," he said.

Former MLA among 12 booked in INLD Haryana chief murder case

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Police on Monday booked a former Haryana MLA and 11 other people in connection with the murder of the Indian National Lok Dal's state unit president Nafe Singh Rathee and a party worker in Bahadurgarh near Delhi. Rathee and party worker Jai Kishan were shot dead by assailants on Sunday. Three private gunmen hired by former MLA Rathee for security were also injured in the attack. In an FIR registered on Monday, police named former MLA Naresh Kaushik, Karambir Rathee, Ramesh Rathee, Satish Rathee, Gaurav Rathee, Rahul and Kamal. The FIR also mentions five

unnamed people. The case has been registered under various IPC sections, including that of murder.

Nafe Singh Rathee's family has refused to cremate his body until those behind the murder were arrested. The attack on the INLD Haryana unit chief came weeks before the Lok Sabha elections, drawing sharp reactions from opposition parties who alleged a breakdown in law and order in the BJP-ruled state.

Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar Sunday said that not a single culprit involved in this case will be spared. Police have been instructed to arrest the accused as soon as possible and take strictest action, he said.

Lakhpatri Didi heads to Delhi

From Page 1

The direct selling sector, with an annual turnover of nearly 50,000 crore and involving over 1.25 crore individuals, including around 50 lakh women, has provided not only self-employment opportunities but also indirect benefits and employment to millions.

Government data reveals that big States like Uttar Pradesh have 6.68 lakh Lakhpatri Didis, followed by 4.94 lakh in Gujarat, 2.64 lakh in Tamil Nadu, and 2.31 lakh in Kerala. In Madhya Pradesh, the number is 9.54 lakh, 8.99 lakh in Maharashtra, and 2.02 lakh in Rajasthan. Additionally, Ladakh has 51,723 Lakhpatri Didis, while J&K has 29,070 women in this category.

In the northeast, Assam leads with 4.65 lakh women, followed by Meghalaya (33,856), Mizoram (16,087), Manipur (12,499), and Nagaland (10,494). Ministry data indicates that around Rs 6.96 lakh crore of bank credit has been accessed by SHGs since 2013-14, with NPA's of SHGs decreasing from 9.58 per cent in 2014 to 1.8 per cent. Khandelwal also mentioned that Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defense Minister

Rajnath Singh, BJP national President JP Nadda, Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman have been invited to address the Lakhpatri Didi summit.

It is expected to showcase the profound impact of Modi's initiatives in economically empowering women and implementing nationwide campaigns to skill and empower women across all States in the country.

The Lakhpatri Didi scheme was rolled out after Modi, in his Independence Day speech last year, expressed his dream to make 2 crore Lakhpatri Didis in the country's villages. In the Budget speech, the Government enhanced the target to 3 crore. The target is a 3-year timeline under the scheme, which is being executed under Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihood Mission. It involves assisting women with training, enterprise financing, bank and credit linkages so that they can earn a sustainable annual income of Rs 1 lakh per annum in both the farm and non-farm sectors.

PM Modi to keep...

From Page 1

"Youngsters have the maximum say in deciding how Viksit Bharat (developed India) will shape up.... I wish to tell every youngster of the country that your dream is Modi's resolve. Your dream, your hard work, and Modi's resolve are the guarantee for Viksit Bharat," the PM said, addressing the gathering spread across 2,000 railway stations and function sites.

Modi laid the foundation for 554 Amrit Bharat stations, a government initiative to revamp key railway stations across the country, and inaugurated rail overbridges and underbridges.

The PM's outreach to youngsters comes against the backdrop of a surge in the number of first-time voters in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. Nearly 1.85 crore first-time voters, aged between 18-19, have registered for the polls likely to be held in April-May, as compared to 1.5 crore ahead of the 2019 general election. The total number of voters aged below 30 years is nearly 22 crore.

Modi lauded the youngsters who participated in various competitions across the country on the theme of "2047:

Viksit Bharat ki Railway". He emphasised that every paisa of taxpayers' money is being used for the welfare of commuters.

"The Government also provides a 50 per cent discount on every railway ticket," the PM said.

"Just as interest is earned on money deposited in banks, similarly, every paisa spent on infrastructure creates new sources of income and employment," he said, adding that the laying of new railway tracks creates multiple employment opportunities from labourers to engineers.

"Whatever India does today, it does it at an unprecedented speed and scale. We dream big and work tirelessly to realise those dreams. This resolve is visible in this Viksit Bharat Viksit Railway programme," the PM said, as he launched more than 2,000 rail infrastructure projects worth about Rs 41,000 crore. Taking a swipe at previous Governments, Modi said his dispensation stopped the loot of public money and every penny earned is used in expanding railway services.

"The Indian Railways used to be a victim of politics, but it is the main basis of the ease of travel now and a big source of

employment," he said. Modi cautioned people, saying the increase in the Budget due to the country's growing economy will not have an impact on the ground if revenue leaks due to scams.

The financial losses of the railways used to be a common refrain earlier, but the national transporter is a big force of transformation now, the PM said.

He said the upcoming Amrit Bharat stations will be symbols of both development and heritage. Modi said the Balasore station in Odisha has been designed on the theme of the Jagannath temple in Puri, Sikkim's Rangpur will carry the imprint of local architecture, Sangner in Rajasthan displays 16th-century hand-block printing and the station at Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu will depict Chola influence. The Ahmedabad station was inspired by the Modhera Sun temple, the Dwarka station by the Dwarkadheesh temple and IT City Gurugram will carry the information technology theme, he added.

"The Amrit Bharat stations will introduce the specialities of that city to the world," the prime minister said.

Pankaj leaves...

From Page 1

Apart from nuances of playing the tabla from the Sangeet Natya Academy at Rajkot, Udhas did a Bachelor of Science degree at Wilson College and St Xavier's college, Mumbai and started training in Indian classical vocal music under the tutelage of Navrang Nagpurkar, a singer from the Gwalior Gharana, in Mumbai. Udhas, whose Chandni Jaisa Rang hai tera, some jaise baal (Your colour is like silver, your hair is like gold) became raging hit, sang his first song in the film "Kamma" a solo composed by Usha Khanna and written by Naqsh Lyallpuri, the film was a flop but his rendition was very much appreciated.

Udhas, who learned Urdu to try to pursue a career as a ghazal singer and performed several concerts in the United States and Canada in the initial part of his career. It was "Chitthi Aayee Hain" (letter has arrived) in the film "Naam" that made him popular.

In 1990, Udhas was hugely appreciated for his melodious duet "Mahiya Teri Kasam" with Lata Mangeshkar. He later sang "Na Kajre Ki Dhar", from the film Mohra along with the singer Sadhana Sargam which also became a hit.

Apart from singing, Udhas made on-screen appearances in films such as Saajan, Yeh Dillagi, Naam and Phir Teri Kahaani Yaad Aayee. He later started a talent hunt television programme called Aadab Arz Hai on Sony TV. "Shocking (sad face emoji) Music legend & my Friend #PankajUdhas passes away. We extend our heartfelt condolences to his Family," singer Anup Jalota wrote on "X". "One of the most important parts of my childhood is lost today. Pankaj Udhas, I will miss you forever. My heart cries knowing that you are no more... Om Shanti," Sonu Nigam said.

Hindus to pray at Gyanvapi

From Page 1

During the hearing, the Muslim side had contested the petitioner's version. It had said no idols existed in the cellar

and hence, there was no question of prayers being offered there till 1993.

The Muslim side had also countered the petitioner's claim that the basement was under his

grandfather's control. The petitioner had claimed that his family had the control of the cellar even during the British rule.

The said temple is called by the masjid committee as Gyanvapi mosque, the petitioner had said. There is a "tekhana" (cellar) in the southern side of the subject building which is the

principal seat of hereditary 'pujari' (priest) of Vyas family, the petitioner said.

The suit was filed against the action of the State Government and district

administration restricting the plaintiff to enter the said temple and fundamental right granted under Article 25 of the Constitution being infringed.

CM skips ED summons again

Kejriwal says he will appear before agency if court says so

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has decided to not appear before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Monday for questioning in the money laundering case regarding the excise policy case saying he will appear before the agency if a court orders him to do so.



This was the seventh summons in the case issued by the probe agency against the Aam Aadmi Party national convener. The Aam Aadmi Party, of which Kejriwal is the convener, said that the agency should wait for the court order instead of summoning the minister repeatedly.

“Delhi Chief Minister and AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal will not go to ED today. The matter is in the court and the next hearing is on March 16. Instead of sending summons daily, the ED should wait for the court’s decision. We will not leave the INDIA alliance. Modi government should not create pressure like this,” AAP said in a statement. Taking a dig at Kejriwal, Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva has said that Kejriwal is avoiding appearing before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) by making a mockery of its summons.

Kejriwal, who on Monday visited Rajghat along with ministers and MLAs of the AAP to mark one year of the arrest of his former deputy Manish Sisodia in connection with the case, alleged that the summons was a tool to pressure him into leaving the INDIA block.

Sisodia, who held the education portfolio as well, was arrested on February 26, 2023, in connection with the Delhi excise policy case.

Atishi, Saurabh Bharadwaj and

Durgesh Pathak were among those who accompanied Kejriwal to Rajghat. Speaking to the media after his visit, Kejriwal said, “Last year on this day, the central government arrested the most capable education minister of our administration in connection with a false case. “He asserted that it was Sisodia who improved the quality of education in the national capital.

“Manish Sisodia improved the quality of education in the national capital and brought hope after 75 years. But a leader like him was framed in a false case. Cases against him would have been withdrawn, if he had joined the BJP,” Kejriwal claimed. “But Sisodia chose not to leave the path of truth,” he added.

In a post later on ‘X’, Kejriwal said Sisodia was an “inspiration” for AAP leaders. “Manish is an inspiration for the entire Aam Aadmi Party and for all other Indians who are fighting the corrupt. Today, we all went to Rajghat and offered flowers to Pujya Babu and prayed to give more courage to Manish in this fight against dictatorship and injustice,” Kejriwal wrote in Hindi.

He asserted the AAP would not break its alliance with the Congress, another constituent of the Indian National

Water supply will be available at low pressure, says DJB

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The water supply will be available at low pressure due to high level of pollutants being received in Yamuna river at Wazirabad pond, the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) said on Monday.



Issuing a notification on social media platform ‘X’, the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) said, “Due to high level of pollutants (Ammonia more than 2.5 ppm) being received in River Yamuna at Wazirabad pond, water supply will be available at low pressure till the situation improves. Residents are advised to store sufficient quantity of water in advance as per requirement. Water tanker will be available on request.”

Speaking about the deteriorating water quality in Karol Bagh, the RWA president of the area, Geeta Puri, claimed that even as the residents store water in buckets due to shortage in supply, mud gets accumulated in water buckets. “With shortage in water supply, we are advised to store water in buckets. But when we do that, we can see mud getting accumulated in the buckets. A thin layer of mud can be seen lying in the bottom of the bucket after a while,” Puri said. She further said that not just mud accumulation in buckets, but the water also smells like sewage time to time.

“It is not just about shortage in water supply, the water is muddy and it even smells like sewage water time to time. We made complaints several times but nobody paid heed to it,” the Karol Bagh RWA president said.

Expressing distress over shortage of water supply, Jangpura RWA president Monu Chadha claimed that despite registering multiple complaints with the concerned departments, no action has been taken by them.

“The problem of water supply has increased in the last two weeks. We reached out to the concerned departments and registered complaints but nothing has been done about it,” Chadha claimed.

North Delhi RWA president Ashok Bhasin claimed that the frequency of shortage in water supply went up in the last 15 days and that the supply comes for barely 30 minutes a day.

“There has been shortage in water supply and the quality of water also deteriorated. We get notification every other day that water supply will be affected and don’t know how long will this go on. The frequency of shortage in water supply went up in the last 15 days,” Bhasin said.

The ammonia levels at Wazirabad pond is more than 2.5ppm, whereas the maxi-

Man thrashed, bitten by dog for asking owner to keep pet on leash

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

An auto-rickshaw driver was thrashed by a man and bitten multiple times by his dog for allegedly asking the owner to keep the pet on a leash, police said on Monday. The incident took place in south Delhi’s Aya Nagar on February 15 when the 30-year-old victim, Bhrim Singh, was on his way to work. “I left home at around 12.30 pm and my neighbour Jivan Jyoti was on the street with his dog. As the canine was barking at me, I asked the owner to keep the dog on a leash,” read the FIR, registered at Fatehpur Beri police station.



This angered Jyoti who physically assaulted Singh while his dog bit him multiple times on one of his legs, face and a hand. Singh informed the police about the matter on February 16. “We have registered an FIR under sections 289 (negligent conduct with respect to animal), 323 (voluntarily causing hurt), and 341 (wrongful restraint) of the Indian Penal Code. We will question the dog owner,” a senior police officer said. There has been a string of dog attacks in Delhi since the turn of the year.

On Saturday, a two-year-old girl was allegedly mauled to death by a pack of stray dogs in the Dhoobi Ghat area of New Delhi’s Tughlaq Lane. In another incident on January 22, a two-year-old girl was allegedly attacked by a pet dog in north-east Delhi’s Vishwas Nagar. A day before that, a seven-year-old boy was injured in north-west Delhi’s Mahendra Park area after allegedly being attacked by a Pitbull.

In the Shahbad Dairy area, a seven-year-old girl was allegedly attacked by an American Bully when she was playing near her home. In another incident, a Pitbull allegedly snatched an 18-month-old child from her grandfather’s lap and mauled her in Burari’s Uttarakhand Colony.

NDMC officials told to solve problem of stray dogs

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday met with the family of a two-year-old girl who was mauled to death by a pack of stray dogs in the Dhoobi Ghat area of New Delhi’s Tughlaq Lane. Kejriwal said New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) officials have been directed to solve the problem of stray dogs immediately.

“A two-year-old girl was killed in an attack by some stray dogs in Dhoobi Ghat area of New Delhi Assembly constituency on Saturday... Today I met the family members of the deceased girl. Stray dogs roaming freely in residential areas is a very serious matter,” he said in a post in Hindi on ‘X’.

“NDMC officials have been instructed to solve this problem immediately. Safety of children and local people is very important,” Kejriwal added.

The incident occurred around 6 pm on Saturday. The child was sitting outside her home when four to five dogs attacked her, dragged her for several metres and mauled her. The child’s body was handed over to her family members after an autopsy and an investigation has begun, officials said. Police handed over the body to



the family after an autopsy. The officials have launched a probe into the tragic incident. The girl’s family claimed that some people feed the stray dogs near the locality and demanded strict action against them. Ravi, the victim’s uncle, said, “Around 6 pm, four to five stray dogs suddenly attacked our child, dragged her for 100-150 metres and mauled her. Ravi also claimed that this was not the first stray dog attack in the area and the same pack of attacked children playing outside their homes. Victim’s uncle also said that locals have repeatedly complained to the authorities concerned, but were ignored. A senior New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) official earlier said that a team of veterinarians visited the spot and found that the dogs in the area were vaccinated and sterilised. A police inquiry will make things clearer, the official added.

Tractor march by BKU disrupts traffic along city border with UP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NOIDA/GHAZIABAD/NEW DELHI

Traffic was affected at the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh borders on Monday due to the tractor march held by the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), that disrupted vehicular traffic on the Yamuna Expressway. Farmers have held a march on tractors via the Yamuna Expressway, Luharli toll plaza and Mahamaya flyover on Monday and organised a sit-in near the Yamuna Expressway as police prevented them to go towards the expressway, that led to a massive jams in Noida, Greater Noida and Ghaziabad. There was heavy traffic at the Chilla border from Delhi towards Noida due to the checking. The traffic was also heavy at the Delhi-Noida Expressway. The Delhi Police has intensified checking at the borders by putting up barricades.

BKU national spokesperson Rakesh Tikait alleged the Union government was ignoring the genuine demands of farmers and condemned the “atrocities” against farmers camping on the Punjab-Haryana border points to press the Centre for various demands, including a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) for crops. Tikait said that a program has been



chalked out to take out a “Tractor Chain.” A program to take out a “Tractor Chain” has been chalked out. Tractors will be parked on the highway that leads to Delhi, especially the divider highway. It was decided to register a different kind of protest so that the government would listen to us and not forget the farmers,” said farmer leader Rakesh Tikait.

Earlier in the morning, Gautam Buddh Nagar Police said intensive checking will be conducted by the Delhi Police as well as the district police by installing barriers at all the border points between the national capital and Noida. Traffic will be diverted in accordance with the situation, it said. The ongoing farmers’ protest has also affected the traffic movement at the Singhu and Tikri border points between Delhi

and Haryana. Apart from this, the traffic was also heavy at other places in the national capital. Due to the construction of flyover between Apsara border and Anand Vihar, the vehicular movement was affected near Anand Vihar flyover on both the carriageways. The commuters also complained about the traffic jams at Sardar Patel Marg and towards Gurgaon from the national capital.

At the Shambhu border, regarding the question of SKM’s tractor call on Delhi borders, farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said, “We are holding our protest on our borders. Other farmer leaders are also expressing their protest in different ways. We say that many farmers and farmer leaders also left their egos and came with us.”

When asked about the talks with the government, Sarwan Singh Pandher said, “Invitations for talks with the government are never sent from our side. The invitation was sent by the government itself. We are hoping that the invitation will come soon and things will be resolved. I am saying that even today, restore normalcy, and create a good environment for talks. Someone ran away from talks, and now it is the government’s wish.”

Kejriwal Government has failed on all fronts: Bidhuri

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri on Monday exposed the claims of the Delhi Government that Delhi is getting world-class facilities in education, health and other sectors with figures and sought answers from the Government. Bidhuri said Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal could not answer on any issue.

While replying to the motion of thanks on the Lieutenant Governor’s address, Bidhuri said in the last nine years, the budget of the Delhi government has increased two and a half times but the results of Delhi have declined by 14 percent. Delhi Development Authority (DDA) allotted land to the government to build 13 schools but not a single school was built. Today, about 7,000 seats of EWS quota are lying vacant in government schools. The government gave loans to only two students for higher education but Rs 19.27 crore was spent on advertisements of this scheme. There is a huge shortage of teachers in schools and the Chief Minister did not ensure the availability of guest teachers even after making a promise, the BJP leader said.



Bidhuri said the condition of the health department is also the same. The date of 2025 is being given for ultrasound in the biggest hospital of Delhi government.

The High Court is asking that there are only 6 CT scan machines for 3 crore people and they too are often out of order. Fake test scams is happening in Mohalla clinics while 75 percent of doctors and 20 percent of paramedical posts are lying vacant in hospitals.

Bidhuri said in the LG address, the Kejriwal government has claimed many schemes of the Centre as its own, whereas this is wrong. The Central Government has given free ration to 72, 000 ration card holders, constructed Pragati

Maidan tunnel and provided 1,650 electric buses of Delhi. Therefore, this House should thank Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said.

The Leader of Opposition said the Kejriwal Government has failed to provide even clean water to the people of Delhi. No work was done on the plan to bring water from Renuka Dam, Kishau Dam and Lakhwar Vyas Dam. Meanwhile, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday said the Delhi governance model is showing direction to the entire country in terms of education, health and electricity. Kejriwal was highlighting the achievements of his government in Delhi in the three sectors during an address in the

Assembly. Before he began, the chief minister asked the members to salute senior Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Manish Sisodia, who was arrested the same day last year by the CBI in connection with the Delhi excise policy case.

“The AAP government has undertaken so much work in Delhi that was not done in the last 75 years. Today, the ‘Delhi model’ is showing direction to the entire country. I will talk about three sectors -- health, education and electricity,” he said. Kejriwal said almost four to five lakh students in Delhi have left private schools and sought admissions to government ones.

“If we can provide good education to poor children in Delhi, it can also be done in the country. Why are government schools being closed in different states? The country is moving towards privatisation of education, apart from Delhi. Only Rs 5 lakh crore is needed to provide education to 17 lakh students in the country,” he said. He also slammed the Ayushman Bharat health scheme insurance as the “biggest scam.” This came a day after Delhi Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena asked him to implement the Central scheme here.

Kejriwal apologises in SC for retweeting defamatory YouTube video

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday told the Supreme Court that he made a mistake by retweeting an allegedly defamatory video circulated by YouTuber Dhruv Rathee related to the BJP IT Cell.

A bench of Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Dipankar Datta, without issuing notice on a plea of Kejriwal challenging a Delhi High Court order which upheld summons issued to him as an accused in the criminal defamation case, asked the complainant whether he wanted to close the matter in view of the chief minister’s apology.

The bench also asked the trial court not to take up the

defamation case involving Kejriwal till March 11. Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for Kejriwal, said, “I can say this much that I made a mistake by retweeting.” He added that it is a case for retweeting on social media platform ‘X’ and the complaint filed was immediately followed by recording of pre-summoning evidence.

“Thereafter, the complaint was withdrawn. When it was refiled, after nine months of the retweeting, it was suppressed that the original complaint was withdrawn,” the senior lawyer said.

“Look, you are on a technical point, that may not be good enough,” Justice Khanna said and asked Singhvi to show the picture of what was retweeted.

After perusing the retweeted message, the bench said, “When it comes to the question of retweeting, there may be two ways of looking at it. First, it may be an endorsement, which may have consequences. The other is say you spot something on the platform and share it for information. Will all these not be a matter of evidence in the case.”

Singhvi said that the high court has taken a view. The bench said, “Whether it was endorsement or sharing of information, it will be a matter of evidence in the trial.”

Singhvi, while requesting for issuance of notice on the plea said, “I have no problem in admitting that it was a mistake, if these are the consequences. I can say this much that I made



a mistake by retweeting.”

The bench, then asked advocate Raghav Awasthi, appearing for complainant Vikas Sankrityayan, whether he was agreeable to close the case in view of the petitioner accepting it was a mistake. Awasthi replied that he needed instruction from his client and requested a week’s adjournment.

Singhvi added, “In view of the elections, they are expediting the trial and trying to prosecute him (Kejriwal) very fast. They are hotfooting it. We will request for adjournment of the case before the trial court.”

The bench said it is of the view that since the petitioner holds a position, he may not appear before the trial court. It then ordered a stay on the proceed-

ing before the trial court till March 11.

In its judgement on February 5, the high court said that reposting alleged libellous content would attract the defamation law.

It said a sense of responsibility has to be attached while retweeting content about which one does not have knowledge and added that retweeting defamatory content must invite penal, civil as well as tort action if the person retweeting it does not attach a disclaimer. The high court, while refusing to quash the trial court’s 2019 order summoning Kejriwal, had said when a public figure tweets a defamatory post, the ramifications extend far beyond a mere whisper in someone’s ears.

“In social media, where information travels at lightning speed and has the potential to reach a global audience, the act of retweeting transforms the communication into a form of public publication. The audience, in this context, is not restricted to those physically present or within immediate earshot but encompasses the vast and diverse online community.

“In the digital age, the boundaries of ‘publication’ have expanded and the implications of defamation are heightened due to the potential of widespread dissemination,” the high court had said.

It had said if the act of retweeting or reposting is allowed to be misused as it is still considered to be a vacant grey area of

law, it will encourage people with ill intentions to misuse this vacant field of law and conveniently take a plea that they had merely retweeted a content. The chief minister had said in the high court that the trial court failed to appreciate that his tweet was not intended or likely to harm the complainant Vikas Sankrityayan.

Kejriwal’s plea before the high court said the trial court erred in not providing any reasons for issuing the summons and the orders were ‘ex-facie’ devoid of judicial application of mind. Sankrityayan claimed the YouTube video titled ‘BJP IT Cell Part II’ was circulated by Rathee, who lives in Germany, “wherein a number of false and defamatory allegations were made”

Modi to visit three States

Two days tour to Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu from today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be on a two-day tour of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra from Tuesday and will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of multiple development projects worth more than Rs 24,000 crore. He will also release the 16th instalment of about Rs 21,000 crore to farmers under the 'PM-KISAN' scheme, an official statement said. Modi will visit Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) in Thiruvananthapuram and inaugurate three important space infrastructure projects worth about Rs 1,800 crore on Tuesday and review the progress of 'Gaganyaan', India's human spaceflight mission. The three projects include 'PSLV integration facility' at Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota, 'semi-cryogenics integrated engine and stage test facility' at ISRO propulsion complex in Mahendragiri, and 'Trisonic wind tunnel' at VSSC.



In Tamil Nadu, Modi will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of multiple infrastructure projects worth more than Rs 17,300 crore on Wednesday. The projects include laying the foundation stone of 'outer harbour container terminal' at V O Chidambaram port. He will also launch India's first indigenous green hydrogen fuel cell inland waterway vessel and address thousands of MSME entrepreneurs work-

ing in automotive sector in Madurai as well, the statement said. In Maharashtra, the prime minister will launch several infrastructure projects related to rail, road and irrigation worth more than Rs 4,900 crore. He will also release the second and third instalments of about Rs 3,800 crore under the 'Namoo Shetkari Mahasnanman Nidhi'. Among other programmes, he

will disburse Rs 825 crore of revolving fund to 5.5 lakh women self-help groups across Maharashtra and kick-start the distribution of one crore Ayushman cards across the state. He will launch the 'Modi Awaas Gharkul Yojana' for Other Backward Classes category beneficiaries in the state, and will transfer the first instalment of Rs 375 crore to 2.5 lakh beneficiaries. The scheme envisages the construction of 10 lakh houses. Following the transfer of the 16th instalment of 'PM-KISAN' fund, the total amount of money given to more than 11 crore farmers' families will reach over Rs 3 lakh crore, the statement said. The PSLV integration facility at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre will help in boosting the frequency of PSLV launches from six to 15 per year. This state-of-the-art facility can also cater to the launches of SSLV and other small launch vehicles designed by private space companies, it said.

Several Indians working as Russian support staff discharged on India demand: MEA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Several Indians, who worked as support staff to the Russian forces, were discharged following India's demand, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said here on Monday. It said India remains committed, as a matter of "top priority", to actively pursuing with the Russian authorities all the relevant cases of Indian nationals for an early discharge from the Russian army. According to media reports, several Indians have been working as security helpers in the Russian military and they were forced to even fight with Russian soldiers in certain areas along Russia's border with Ukraine. "We have seen some inaccurate reports in the media regarding Indians with the Russian army seeking help for discharge," the MEA said in a statement. "Each and every such case brought to the attention of the Indian embassy in Moscow



has been strongly taken up with the Russian authorities and those brought to the attention of the Ministry have been taken up with the Russian embassy in New Delhi," it said. The MEA added, "Several Indians have already been discharged as a result." Last week, MEA Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said New Delhi was in touch with Moscow for early discharge of Indians working as support staff to the Russian army and urged its nationals to stay away from the conflict zone in Ukraine. "We urge all Indian nationals to exercise due caution and

stay away from this conflict," he had said. This reaction came after reports indicated that dozens of Indians were allegedly duped into military service in Russia. The unsuspecting Indians were promised support jobs but were ultimately enlisted in the Russian army, receiving misleading translations of documents and undergoing military training against their initial understanding. The family of one of the men, Sufiyan from Hyderabad, along with All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) leader Asaduddin Owaisi, last week sought the

intervention of the Centre and the External Affairs ministry to secure the safe evacuation of the trapped Indian nationals and take stringent action against the fraudulent agents responsible. Imran, Sufiyan's brother, revealed the deceptive tactics employed by agents associated with Faisal Khan, who runs a YouTube channel named 'Baba Vlogs'. The unsuspecting men were allegedly promised support jobs but were ultimately enlisted in the Russian army. With nine Indian men reportedly within the Ukrainian borders, facing danger and injuries, the distressed families seek help from the Centre. Owaisi formally wrote to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, seeking intervention to bring back the affected Indians. "Sir @DrJaishankar kindly use your good offices to bring these men back home. Their lives are at risk & their families are justifiably worried," Owaisi said. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has entered its third year.

Amrit Bharat scheme world biggest railway station redevelopment programme: Vaishnaw

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Monday said Amrit Bharat Station Scheme (ABSS) is the world's biggest railway station redevelopment programme and any programme of this size has never been taken up in history. Briefing the media on ongoing work under the scheme, Vaishnaw praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi for laying the foundation stone for 553 stations and inaugurating a station which has been redeveloped under the scheme. Besides, Prime Minister Modi also inaugurated or laid the foundation stone for 1500 road-over-bridges (ROBs) and underpasses. The railway ministry



launched ABSS in 2023 under which stations are being identified and shortlisted for redevelopment for better passenger facilities and amenities. Till date, 1321 stations out of 7000 have been selected by the railways for redevelopment. Many of them are at

different stages of construction. The construction work will start here now after the prime minister laid the foundation stone of 553 stations. Vaishnaw said the prime minister's growth strategy is based on public investment. Because

of that, the investment as a percentage of GDP has gone beyond 30 per cent, he said. "The Capex in railways has reached up to 2 lakh 52 thousand crore which used to be a very small amount a decade ago," Vaishnaw said, adding that its benefits are visible on the ground. According to the minister, while the railways used to lay track at the speed of 4 km per day between 2004 to 2014, today it has gone up to 15 km per day. Similarly, 41,000 km of railway track has been electrified in these 10 years, the minister said. He added that the work which the current government has done in the past 10 years is equivalent to the work done in 60 years. Emphasising the progress of flyovers and underpasses,

Vaishnaw said from 2004 to 2014, total 4400 flyovers and underpasses were constructed. This comes to around 400 in one year. But today over 1000 flyovers and underpasses are being constructed every year, he said. "It is a complex work to build world class stations but the government undertook several reforms to implement these schemes. Also, massive work is going on at all stations irrespective of their sizes and places," Vaishnaw said. "Ten years ago, only bigger stations were given importance. But this government has treated big, middle and small size stations equally for development work," Vaishnaw said, showing the pictures of ongoing work of dozens of stations at various locations in the country.

Nadda flags off video vans seeking people suggestion for manifesto

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

BJP president J P Nadda on Monday flagged off 'Viksit Bharat Modi ki guarantee' video vans, seeking people's suggestions from across the country for preparing the ruling party's manifesto for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. In his address, he said the vans will gather suggestions from the people for the party's "sankalp patra" (manifesto) and asserted that ensuring citizens' participation in the democratic process is the BJP's vision. These vans will highlight the work done by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his vision for making India a developed country, he added. "Through these video vans, BJP has decided to apprise the people of the



work done by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the progress of the country and the work being done in this 'Amrit Kaal' to make India a developed country," Nadda said. He said work for the preparation of the party's manifesto for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls is in progress. Nadda said these vans will travel through every Lok Sabha constituency and that the party expects to receive nearly one crore suggestions by

March 15 for incorporating them into its promises to the people. "The 'sankalp patra' will help the country take a big leap to become developed by 2047, he said. The BJP has expressed confidence for retaining power under Modi's leadership for a third straight term and has set a target of winning 370 seats in the elections, expected in April-May, to the 543-member Lok Sabha.

Congress steps up attack on Centre over Agnipath scheme

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Stepping up its attack on the Centre over the "Agnipath" military recruitment scheme, the Congress on Monday alleged that "gross injustice" was done to youngsters and asserted that it would revert to the old recruitment system if voted to power at the Centre. The Opposition party also demanded that appointment be given to the about two lakh youngsters who had cleared the recruitment process but were not given joining letters as the "Agnipath" scheme was launched in 2022. Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said with the spirit of patriotism and service in mind, lakhs of youngsters across the country work hard day and night. "Whether it is cold, hot or rainy, they wake up early in the morning and practise running. They think that they will join the Army, serve the country and also get employment. The BJP government crushed the dreams of lakhs of promising youth of the country by bringing Agniveer Yojana," she said in a post on X. "Lakhs of posts are vacant, crores of youth are unemployed -- this is Modi's guarantee," she added. Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters here, Congress general secretary Sachin Pilot said there was no demand for such a scheme. "In the long term, this scheme will not benefit anybody except saving some money for the government of India. We in the Congress party feel that we should go back to the old recruitment system," Pilot said. If some changes are to be introduced to modernise the armed forces, that is very much possible in the current setup, but to completely eradicate the old system is not right, he added. "It is closing avenues of employment. I think it has been done in an ad-hoc fashion, without much thought to the future



said on X: "We are with the military candidates, who are full of patriotism and bravery, in the fight for justice." Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said with the spirit of patriotism and service in mind, lakhs of youngsters across the country work hard day and night. "Whether it is cold, hot or rainy, they wake up early in the morning and practise running. They think that they will join the Army, serve the country and also get employment. The BJP government crushed the dreams of lakhs of promising youth of the country by bringing Agniveer Yojana," she said in a post on X. "Lakhs of posts are vacant, crores of youth are unemployed -- this is Modi's guarantee," she added. Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters here, Congress general secretary Sachin Pilot said there was no demand for such a scheme. "In the long term, this scheme will not benefit anybody except saving some money for the government of India. We in the Congress party feel that we should go back to the old recruitment system," Pilot said. If some changes are to be introduced to modernise the armed forces, that is very much possible in the current setup, but to completely eradicate the old system is not right, he added. "It is closing avenues of employment. I think it has been done in an ad-hoc fashion, without much thought to the future

prospects of how the Army would function. We in the Congress believe that the Agnipath programme is not a positive development and we will certainly go back to the old recruitment system when people vote us back," Pilot said, with party leaders Pawan Khera and Deepender Hooda by his side. Hooda said several military recruitment processes were completed during and before the outbreak of COVID-19 and only joining was left. But after the introduction of the "Agnipath" scheme, these youngsters selected by the government were not given joining letters. "These youngsters met (former Congress chief) Rahul Gandhi and shared their pain. Since then, Rahulji has been continuously raising his voice," he said. On whose demand did the Narendra Modi government bring the "Agnipath Yojana", Hooda asked. "Neither the Army nor the youngsters joining the Army had put forward the demand for the scheme," he said. "When we asked what will the Agniveers do after four years of service, BJP leader Kailash Vijayvargiya had said those youngsters will be given the job of a watchman in the BJP office. I want to tell the BJP that the youngsters of the country join the Army with a sense of patriotism and not with a sense of becoming a watchman outside the BJP office," Hooda said.

Aadhaar not mandatory for voting, EC tells TMC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission of India on Monday assured a delegation of Trinamool Congress that voters will not be stopped from practising their franchise if they don't have an Aadhaar card. The voters will be able to cast their ballot showing their voter id card or any of the other specified identity documents, it said. The assurance was given by the Election Commission after the TMC leaders raised concerns about several Aadhaar cards being deactivated in West Bengal. A TMC delegation comprising Rajya Sabha leader Sukhendu Sekhar Ray, Dola Sen and Saket Gokhale, and Lok Sabha



MPs Pratima Mondal and Sajda Ahmed, met the Chief Election Commissioner and raised the issue of alleged Aadhaar deactivations. Briefing reporters after the meeting, Ray said they raised their concerns over Aadhaar cards of "thousands of people" in West Bengal being deactivated or omitted without fol-

lowing the due process of law. "The Election Commission has assured that even if a person does not have the Aadhaar, they will be allowed to vote with other valid documents," he said. The TMC also raised the issue of creation of District Intelligence Committees to oversee expenditure.

"The ECI has decided to create District Intelligence Committees for financially sensitive areas. These committees will have both state and central agency members, including police, IT, Excise, GST, and ED officers among others. This is the first time such a committee is being formed for West Bengal," a memorandum submitted to the ECI by the TMC said. Ray said they were assured that the exercise is being undertaken in the whole country, and state agencies will also be part of the committee. The delegation during the meeting raised the matter of death of four children during BSF's drain expansion work in Uttar Dinajpur's Chopra of West Bengal and also urged the EC to ensure the central forces deployed in the state act with-

in their remit. "Soon after deployment of about 1,000 companies of Central Forces in West Bengal during the Assembly Elections of 2021 under the orders of the ECI, it appeared that in many places while conducting route marches some of the personnel of central forces started banging on the front doors of people's houses. The residents were threatened with dire consequences if there was any violence in the areas, etc," the TMC memorandum said. "In the circumstances, we urge upon you to ensure that the Central Forces behave, function and conduct themselves as per requirements of law - under the proper supervision of ECI and State government officials during the ensuing Lok Sabha elections," the TMC said.

India gets desi Garbhini GA2 for evaluation of foetal growth

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Specifically tailored to address the unique characteristics of foetal growth within the Indian population, India has finally got its locally made 'Garbhini-GA2', a groundbreaking Artificial Intelligence model. It is developed by researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-Madras) and Translational Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI), Faridabad. This innovative model represents a significant departure from conventional approaches that rely on formulas derived from Western populations, which often fail to accurately capture the intricacies of gestational age estimation in diverse genetic and demographic contexts. According to officials, the newly developed 'Garbhini-GA2' accurately estimates the age of a foetus for the Indian population, reducing error by

almost three times. Since accurate 'Gestational Age' (GA) is necessary for the appropriate care of pregnant women and for determining precise delivery dates, this GA model can improve the care delivered by obstetricians and neonatologists, thus reducing maternal and infant mortality rates in India. "GARBH-Ini is a flagship programme of DBT, and the development of these population-specific models for estimating gestational age is a commendable outcome. These models are being validated across the country," Rajesh Gokhale, Secretary, Department of Biotechnology (DBT). The research was undertaken by Himanshu Sinha, Associate Professor, Bhupat and Jyoti Mehta School of Biosciences, Department of Biotechnology, Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) Madras and Shinjini Bhatnagar, the Principal Investigator of GARBH-Ini programme and a distinguished professor at THSTI, an

institute under the Biotechnology Research and Innovation Council (BRIC), Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology. The findings are published in the international peer-reviewed journal Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia. "We are utilising advanced data science and AI/ML techniques to build tools to predict unfavourable birth outcomes. The first step towards this is to develop accurate GA models that perform significantly better than currently used models designed using Western populations," said Sinha, a coordinator at the Centre for Integrative Biology and Systems Medicine, IIT Madras. Bhatnagar said, "Improving the GA accuracy is a critical component of the broader goals of the GARBH-Ini study, which aims to reduce the adverse pregnancy outcomes. The mere application of sophisticated data science tools is not sufficient."

Asthma drug can also help fight food allergies in kids: Study

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Omalizumab, originally approved to treat diseases such as allergic asthma and chronic hives — a skin reaction that causes itchy welts — can also help children with food allergies. According to a new study led by scientists at the Stanford University and Johns Hopkins University, regular use of omalizumab can protect people from severe allergic responses, such as difficulty breathing, if they accidentally eat a small amount of a food they are allergic to. Omalizumab, which the US Food and Drug Administration originally approved to treat diseases such as allergic asthma and chronic hives, is an injected antibody that binds and deactivates all types of immunoglobulin E, or IgE, the allergy-causing molecule in the blood and on the body's immune cells.

Based on the new research, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, the FDA, last week, approved omalizumab for reducing risk of allergic reactions to foods. "Patients impacted by food allergies face a daily threat of life-threatening reactions due to accidental exposures. The study showed that omalizumab can be a layer of protection against small, accidental exposures," said lead author Robert Wood, Professor of paediatrics at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. For the study, the team included 177 children with at least three food allergies each, of whom 38 per cent were 1 to 5 years old, 37 per cent were 6 to 11 years old, and 24 per cent were 12 or older. Two-thirds of the children were randomly assigned to receive omalizumab injections, and one-third received an injected placebo; the injections took place over 16 weeks.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Clearing the air

The NGT's call for action on poor air quality across 53 cities reveals the problem's pervasiveness

It is official, and scary! The air quality in our part of the world is quite poor, in fact not even breathable, though we have learnt to live with it. Meanwhile, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has issued directives to 53 cities across the nation to identify the contributors to air pollution and outline measures taken to control it. It is killing us slowly but not much is being done about it. When a city becomes akin to a gas chamber with the Air Quality Index (AQI) hitting 'severely hazardous' levels, there's often a kneejerk response: Authorities resort to cosmetic measures but these do not attack the root of the problem. However, once the AQI returns to 'poor' levels, it is considered normal with no actionable need. The NGT move underscores the severity of the problem regarding air quality, signalling an urgent need for comprehensive action to safeguard public health and environment. Over decades, air pollution has emerged as a significant environmental and public health challenge. In India, rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, vehicular emissions and agricultural practices have contributed to worsening air quality. The consequences of prolonged exposure to such air are dire, leading to respiratory ailments, cardiovascular diseases and even early death. But we all have grown accustomed to going back to work without complaining about the air that is taking away our lives, hurting our eyes and choking our lungs. Addressing deteriorating air quality demands unwavering commitment, innovative solutions and collective responsibility.



The NGT's directive to 53 cities comes as a timely intervention to address the escalating crisis. By mandating these cities to identify the sources of pollution and articulate measures to combat it, the NGT aims to catalyse proactive efforts towards cleaner air and healthier living environments. Understanding the specific sources and their relative contributions is pivotal in formulating targeted strategies to curb pollution effectively. Equally significant is the delineation of steps taken by these cities to mitigate pollution. It involves a multi-pronged approach encompassing regulatory measures, technological interventions, public awareness campaigns and collaborative efforts among stakeholders. While the NGT's directive marks a crucial step forward in addressing air pollution, several challenges lie ahead: Implementation bottlenecks, enforcement gaps, resource constraints and lack of public awareness pose formidable obstacles. Furthermore, controlling air pollution requires concerted efforts at the local, regional and national levels, necessitating policy coherence, inter-sectoral coordination and community participation. Unfortunately, past experience tells us to be not too optimistic or enthused as not much is going to change on ground. If we really need a real solution, people will have to come forward to demand good air quality from the authorities. Changes do come in this country but only when people make a hue and cry for it. So either build a people's movement around it or, till then, just keep inhaling the toxic air.

While PML-N and PPP may be privately breathing a collective sigh of relief in the short term for having secured a 'selected' victory via the Pakistani Military, it is only a reprieve, as the road ahead will make them even more unpopular. For starters, the new Pakistani coalition of the (un)willing is not a matter of choice, but exigency and compulsion, as they will make odd bedfellows from day one - the conflict of interest and fiefdoms, is only natural. Secondly, they will be beholden and essentially tied to the 'red-lines' on various issues, as drawn by the assertive Generals, curbing any notions of independence by the civilian Government. This essentially means that the pre-

PICTALK



Members of the Ramnami religious movement arrive at the Sangam during the Magh Mela festival, in Prayagraj

A legal luminary's legacy of excellence and service

Fali Nariman's legacy transcends mere courtroom triumphs, embodying a dedication to mentoring and motivating fellow legal professionals

Achieving success is often viewed as a personal triumph, yet true greatness lies in serving others. Fali Nariman, one of India's most accomplished lawyers, transcended the confines of his profession by assuming the mantle of guiding the legal fraternity through his example and various interventions.

To those who had the privilege of working with him, Nariman's brilliance was palpable. His ability to swiftly grasp and dissect a legal brief, identifying the core issue while adding nuanced dimensions to it, was remarkable. His pursuit of perfection in mastering a brief was evident in every courtroom appearance, where he presented his arguments with understated confidence, catching opponents off guard and leaving judges with a sense of inevitability in his arguments. Regardless of the size or complexity of the case, Nariman's touch of perfection was always evident. Despite his decades-long tenure at the top of his pro-



As a true leader of the Bar, Nariman fearlessly pointed out flaws in the system. Whether it was acknowledging his misjudgment in the judge's case or advocating for amendments to raise the retirement age of High Court Judges, his approach was non-confrontational, making his message more palatable and effective. Nariman's greatness was not only evident in his grand gestures but also in his small acts of encouragement and empathy towards

younger lawyers. His praise for a job well done boosted the confidence of budding lawyers exponentially. In his autobiography, written with remarkable clarity and devoid of the typical legalese, he offered invaluable insights for navigating the legal profession, supplemented by lectures such as his master class on "Becoming a Lawyer" at the IJI in 2021. One of his greatest contributions to the profession is his son, Justice Rohinton Nariman, whose legal acumen and scholarly approach serve as a beacon for aspiring lawyers. Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "My life is my message." For every lawyer in India, Fali Nariman's life serves as a testament to simplicity, fairness in fees (often charging less than his younger peers), and prioritising principles over professional gains. His legacy will forever be the gold standard for legal professionals striving for excellence with integrity. (The author is a senior advocate practising in Delhi, views are personal)

A tumultuous path ahead for Pak Govt

The spectre of a 'selected' Government looms large as the discredited PML-N and PPP join hands, perpetuating the charade of democracy in Pakistan



BHOPINDER SINGH

Imran Khan led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) had witnessed a forced exodus of its leadership, disallowance of the party name/flag, and even the incarceration of Imran Khan himself, yet it defied pressures and manipulations to emerge as the single largest cobbler of affiliated 'independents'. Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto-led Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) may have had a free run and indirect support from the Pakistani 'establishment' (Military) in the National Elections, yet they fared dismally. However, the patent and shadowy project of 'selecting' (as opposed to 'electing') a Government in Pakistan is far from over - as the thoroughly discredited and poorly performing PML-N and PPP will eventually join hands yet again, to form the Government. The four Generals across the cantonment township of Rawalpindi have 'selected' (or rather 'denied') a force, and so it will be, and the charade of democracy continues in Pakistan. As if on cue, the Supreme Court has strongly disposed of a plea that had sought nullification of the General Elections results owing to what the petitioner (a court-martialed Brigadier, who may have had his axe with the Pakistani Military) called out as rigging, fraud and misconduct, therefore beseeching the courts to hold forces that be, accountable for undermining Pakistani democracy!

While PML-N and PPP may be privately breathing a collective sigh of relief in the short term for having secured a 'selected' victory via the Pakistani Military, it is only a reprieve, as the road ahead will make them even more unpopular. For starters, the new Pakistani coalition of the (un)willing is not a matter of choice, but exigency and compulsion, as they will make odd bedfellows from day one - the conflict of interest and fiefdoms, is only natural. Secondly, they will be beholden and essentially tied to the 'red-lines' on various issues, as drawn by the assertive Generals, curbing any notions of independence by the civilian Government. This essentially means that the pre-



ferred positions of the Pakistan Army on national matters will persist - while it will entail taking on the Pakistan-facing terror groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), harmonizing relations with the United States of America, downplaying sectarian tensions etc., it could conversely lead to reasserting tensions with the historical enemy across Line-of-Control or India, as a means to valourise and legitimise the role and relevance of the Pakistani Military, in the public imagination. The latter instinct is where the risk for Delhi emanates, as a deliberately calibrated escalation of tensions and ratcheting (enough to keep citizenry mesmerised but not enough to lead to military action) will re-dominate the Indo-Pak narrative. Adding to the woes of the incoming and unpopular coalition (beyond issues of seceded control to the Military, dealing with bloody terrorism and fractured relations with the neighbourhood and 'West') is the frightening news of 'unsustainable' debt levels, that will necessitate tightening fiscal means and reduced spending on social services. Already reeling under unprecedented inflation and empty coffers - the ability to offer any perceptible 'relief' to the beleaguered citizenry is



THE TOPICAL ARRANGEMENT FOR THE INCOMING GOVERNMENT WILL POSSIBLY BE THE MOST UNPOPULAR EVER, SURPASSING EVEN THE COUP D'ÉTAT-LED DISPENSATIONS OF GENERALS AYUB KHAN, ZIA-UL-HAQ AND PERVEZ MUSHARAF, WHO TOO WERE SEEN AS PREMATURE SAVIOURS BY THE CORRUPT POLITICIANS

non-existent, and instead, the situation will warrant more unpopular moves to tide over the crisis. All the while, if the incoming coalition succumbs to public pressure and collapses, the Military General would have insulated themselves from the blame, as they are ostensibly not running the 'Government' - for the Military, bringing back Imran Khan or any other form of alternative national Government is not off the menu as it would have no qualms to restitch alliances with forces that it had spurned earlier e.g., The Pakistan Military had bumped-off PML-N and 'selected' PTI in 2018, and brazenly done the exact reverse in 2024! A damaging report by an Islamabad based thinktank i.e., Tabdadlab, captures the severity of the Pakistani crisis as it notes in its report 'A raging fire: Pakistan's debt crisis' where it calculates Islamabad's debt and liabilities to be at a staggering \$271.2 billion! Despite scraping the bottom of the barrel for survival, it stares at an estimated \$49.5 billion in debt maturities, with 30% of the same being interests. Complying with the terms of the lenders (both past and future) will have its debilitating loss of face, national pride, and consequential social and political implications.

Imran Khan will not make it any easier for the incoming Government by excoriating all their moves, arousing jingoism, and playing the populist card - unless he is somehow bludgeoned into political irrelevance. Sadly, the latter is not unimaginable in the Pakistani narrative, as the Pakistani Military is known for taking unconventional steps. The topical arrangement for the incoming Government will possibly be the most unpopular ever, surpassing even the coup d'état led dispensations of Generals Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharaf, who too were seen as premature saviours by the corrupt politicians. Tolerance of dissent (be it political from the likes of PTI or social demands for easing livelihood) isn't expected to be generous, as those aren't viable options to pander to. The only positive outcome could be the de facto diminishment of the religious forces, as they have simply outlived their utility for the Pakistani Military, and are rebounding on the same, in a deadly manner. Nonetheless, an unforgiving prospect awaits the new Pakistani Government. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

COMMUNITY KITCHENS

Sir - In India, due to poverty, several people cannot afford a square meal a day. Many, including children and the elderly, go to bed on an empty stomach. Hence the concept of community kitchens assumes a lot of significance to feed the hungry. Community kitchens are cooking programmes where small groups of people meet to cook meals together. Groups may cook one meal or many meals at a time. Institutions that provide cheap or free meals are not mere populists. Community kitchen groups are for everyone, and can be run anywhere there is a kitchen like churches, schools, in the neighbourhood, community health services, workplaces, etc. It supports members of the community to connect and start new friendships. Incidentally, the world's largest free kitchen is in India at Punjab's Golden Temple which feeds 1,00,000 devotees a day. In India, women's self-help groups (SHG) community kitchens have helped in the distribution of food, and facemasks, and run food kitchens during COVID-19. It is learnt that these groups developed around 10,000 community kitchens throughout the country. They have also been bringing meals for sick and quarantined individuals.

MR Jayanthi | Mumbai

PUTIN'S INTOLERANCE OF DISSENT

Sir - Apropos, "Navalny's death marks Putin's path to unchecked power," The Pioneer, Feb 25. The death of Alexei Navalny in a remote prison in Russia's Arctic region is a chilling reminder of the status of dissent in the state Vladimir Putin has built. Navalny was the Kremlin's most prominent critic. The reason for his death is still unknown. Whatever the reason for his death, the Russian state cannot absolve itself of this tragedy. Russian authorities were hell-bent on destroying the political opposition that Navalny had built. In Russia's managed system, there are opposition parties that the Kremlin tolerates and there are dissidents who are treated as enemies of the state.

Farmers' protest is motivated



The farmer's protest and the various disturbing episodes occurring on the outskirts of the national capital are giving sleepless nights to citizens and have now turned into a crisis affecting the day-to-day lives of the commoners. With the main roads taken by the protesters and the internet interrupted the public has begun to experience the brunt of the agitation. Some years ago a march was taken by the farmers of Maharashtra

called the long march. The march never caused any issues for the common people. It was a march with a clear purpose. The long march of protestors on reaching Mumbai never caused any inconvenience to its citizens and did not put the heavy city traffic out of gear causing panic to the commuters and examinations as it was examination time. The long march finds a significant place in today's era where such marches and rallies backed by political parties and groups often end up in clashes, riots and bloodshed. The present agitation now sadly exposes that the so-called sympathisers, who are political by nature, in the name of supporting the peasants are only trying to be opportunists to make gains for their political and selfish motives. It is high time true peasants understand the motive of these elements and not be victims of their vile scheme.

M Pradyu Thalikavu | Kannur

NAVALNY FELL INTO THE SECOND CATEGORY

Navalny fell into the second category. Navalny was sentenced for decades and there was no scope for organised protests. Still, the fact that he had to die like this in prison suggests the extent of the state's fear of voices of dissent. The state does not want any voices of criticism or organised protests. It may have established order through fear as of now, but Russia's history suggests that this is not a sustainable model of governance.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Chennai

BADMINTON BRINGS GLORY

Sir - Indian badminton has always brought moments of glory and honour to the country, be it the magical charisma of Prakash Padukone in 1980, the genius of Pulela Gopichand in 2001, to the sheer dominance of Saina Nehwal and PV Sandhu in the Olympics by winning coveted medals to Rankireddy Satwik and Chirag Shetty achieving crowning glory with doubles gold in 2023. In February 2024, India achieved a historic milestone in badminton, triumphing over Thailand with a 3-2 score at the Badminton Asian

Team Championship in Malaysia. PV Sandhu, Gayatri Gopichand, Treesa Jolly, and the remarkable Anmol Kharab showcased resilience, marking India's first continental victory, ending a drought since 2018. Anmol Kharab's standout performance highlighted her potential as a rising star in Indian badminton. This magical win is awe-inspiring as odds were stacked against the Indian shuttlers, especially at a time when world-class players from China, Japan, Thailand etc graced the court. It is beyond doubt that such scintillating performances lift the level of the game to greater heights making Indian shuttlers a force to reckon with. A podium finish in this tournament also secured India a prominent place in the upcoming B.W.F. Thomas and Uber Cup Finals in 2024. It will also serve as a morale booster for India, as it appears to be a strong contender for the upcoming Paris Olympics.

Vijay Singh Adhikari | Nainital

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

A TRIBUTE TO MY MOTHER'S JOURNEY

Marked by compassion, it is a testament to the transformative power of goodness



RAVI VALLURI

Always be associated with people who are good at heart. This is what Swami Vivekananda was to say. Incidentally, my mother shared her birthday with Swami Vivekananda (12th January). Association and satsang were her strong points. She nurtured strong bonds with all religious faiths and spiritually inclined people. She wanted to pursue medicine but life did not take that trajectory. "Faith plus action becomes unstoppable," writes Jonathan Lockwood Hue. Thus, she upended the pyramid and became a qualified medical social worker.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar says, "Open your hands and the sky is in your hands." To combat and challenge the disease of tuberculosis she initiated several rehabilitation projects. She used to tell patients and their children that "Fear is only as deep as the mind allows." Thus, patients afflicted with TB, but not bedridden participated in the projects. This was what she called "Diversionary Therapy." The patient's mind was diverted from the disease and the recovery rate was rapid. In these endeavours, she extended tremendous support from eminent people ranging from politicians, academicians, and religious leaders. The mission was to only serve. Religious barriers did not pose any problems.

Thus, RBTB Hospital became the melting pot of people from various hues to forge hands and assist in the mammoth task of rehabilitation of the afflicted. The hospital became a unique template for the methods adopted by doctors, para-med staff, social workers, Government bodies and NGOs all to contribute to the rehabilitation of the patients. But she was distraught by jealous people posing roadblocks in her work beside my alcoholism.



It was traumatic for my mother and she became a patient of Paroxysmal Atrial Tachycardia (PAT). This is a type of arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat). Paroxysmal means that the episode of arrhythmia originates and terminates abruptly. Atrial implies the arrhythmia starts with atria or in the upper chambers of the heart. The tachycardia results in a significant increase in the heartbeat per minute. It abnormally increases the pace, like an athlete on a treadmill. PAT significantly increases the heartbeat of an adult from the normal 60 to 100 to 130 to 230 and among infants and children, it shoots up from 100 to 130 to 220 beats per minute. The disease is accompanied by severe sweating, dizziness, palpitations, angina, and acute breathlessness. Normally a patient suffers from such a condition owing to emotional upheavals, physical exhaustion, deep anxiety, and consumption of caffeine or alcohol. I saw my mother suffering from this condition on several occasions and being admitted to the ICU. It was a distressing and disturbing sight. While it is not a life-threatening affliction, it certainly disorients the psychology and attitudes of the patient.

She was administered medication but it worked only to an extent. The real succour came in the form of a pentagon-shaped talisman. That is through Siddha Healing, Pranic Healing, the 10-day Vipassana Course and the Part 1 and Part 2 Art of Living courses. This is the infinitesimal power and scientific power of breath. Breathing techniques, meditation, medication, and proper diet changed the trajectory of the life of the patient and brought back the mojo in her life.

"When you take the breath in, let it become your meditation that all the suffering of all the beings in the world is riding on that incoming breath and reaching your heart. Absorb all that suffering, pain, and misery in your heart, and see a miracle happen," said Osho.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living)

Kerala's education system in a disarray



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

The recent senate meeting at Kerala University offered a stark portrayal of the tumultuous state of affairs within the CPI(M)-led Govt's education sector



One step forward and four steps backward seem to be the driving force of the CPI(M)-led Government if what happened during Friday's senate meeting of the Kerala University is any indication. The meeting was convened by Mohanan Kunnummel, the temporary vice-chancellor of the university to elect a representative for the search committee formed to find out the new vice-chancellor for Kerala University.

Interestingly, all universities in the State have been functioning without full-time vice-chancellors for last year following the Supreme Court verdict that all the appointments of vice-chancellors made by the CPI(M)-led Government violated the laws of the land and the norms prescribed by the University Grants Commission.

The senate meeting of Friday was convened by the vice-chancellor and he was expected to preside over the session. But R Bindu, the minister for higher education, rushed to the stage and usurped the chair meant for Mohanan Kunnummel. When the latter reached the Senate Hall for the meeting, he found himself to be without a chair while the minister claimed that she, as pro-chancellor, would preside over the meeting. Though the vice-chancellor showed her the rule book that stated that the pro-chancellor had no role in the meeting as the Chancellor was very much present in the State, the minister (spouse of CPI-M polit bureau member A Vijayaraghavan) did not budge even an inch leaving



MILITANT TRADE UNIONS HAVE ALWAYS PLAYED HAVOC WITH THE PROGRESSIVE MEASURES ADOPTED BY THE CPI(M)-HEADED GOVERNMENTS IN THE PAST

Mohanan high and dry. "Minister Bindu turned out to be a right buffoon the party commissars were looking for in their bid to subvert the meeting. They did not want the meeting to take place and this lady played her role well. This will go down in history as the best comic interlude by a minister of higher education whose role is to elevate the standard of higher education to new heights," said R S Sasikumar, president, of Save University Forum, an apolitical outfit working to restore the quality of the State's higher education.

The subversion of Friday's senate meeting would lead to a delay in selecting the ideal candidate for the post of vice-chancellor. This comes at a time when universities outside the State are busy switching over to four-year bachelor's degree courses in tune with the National Education Policy. The delay has cost the State dear as most intelligent and efficient students are leaving Kerala for higher studies and they are unlikely to return.

K N Balagopalan, the State Finance Minister, in his budget speech 2024-2025 presented early this month proposed revolutionary changes in Kerala's higher education sector. On the anvil were red carpets for private universities and off-shore campuses of reputed foreign universities.

The CPI(M) leaders declared that the day would not be far off when Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and even the London School of Economics opened their branches in Kerala so that the students would benefit from world-class education here. But the minister and the party bosses made a U-Turn within two days and declared that they would not open the doors for private as well as foreign universities. "It was only a proposal and not a decision. If the stakeholders are not happy, we will drop the idea itself," Balagopalan told the media following outbursts by the leaders of the SFI, the students wing of the CPI(M).

In Kerala, the SFI leaders, who would not have passed the Plus Two examinations had they been born anywhere outside the State, decide the persons who should be appointed as vice chancellors of universities and as faculty members. This is not an exaggerated statement. Where else on earth you would come across student leaders who demand only persons of their choice be appointed as VCs and teaching faculty?

The manifesto of the SFI has promised the students that they would insist that all university examinations should be held only after 1 PM and there won't be any examinations during the pre-lunch hours. The charter that has

been submitted to the university has one more interesting demand: the staff council should have a student representative and the college authorities should not interact with the parents/guardians of students! The day is not far off when they will ask for the right to prepare question papers for the semester examination.

Militant trade unions have always played havoc with whatever progressive measures adopted by the CPI(M)-headed Governments in the past. Those days are over as it is nouveau riche like Elamaram Kareem who leads the trade union wing of the party. The children of trade union leaders are enrolled in high-end public schools in Ootti and Kodaikanal while offsprings of party workers continue toiling in Government schools.

Leaders of SFI are entangled in cases ranging from murder, attempted murder, sexual offences and above all mass copying and fake degree certificates. There were many instances of students who had failed in their bachelor's degree examinations passing out of postgraduate courses from colleges in the State. Did you hear the pangs of Goddess Saraswati?

(The writer is a special correspondent with the Pioneer, views are personal)

e-Courts Phase III sets the stage for digital revolution

It promises to usher in a new era of efficiency, accessibility and transparency within the Indian judiciary

In the contemporary digital landscape, where technology has become an integral part of our daily lives, the judicial system must adapt and utilise these advancements for the betterment of society. The e-Courts Mission Mode Project (MMP) in India has been leading this charge, and with Phase III now underway, we're witnessing a significant stride towards a more efficient, accessible, and transparent justice delivery system.

Under the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and guided by the Hon'ble Chief Justice of India Dr D.Y Chandrachud, the proposal for e-Courts Phase III was launched, aiming to revolutionise the Indian judiciary,



KULDEEP SINGH KUSHWAH

This phase places a strong emphasis on digitization, introducing various new features and technologies to enhance court operations and improve the overall judicial ecosystem.

Key objectives of Phase III include digitization and preservation of court records, totalling approximately 3100 crore documents, and the establishment of Paperless

Courts. By minimising reliance on physical documents and embracing digital alternatives, this initiative aims to streamline court processes, eliminate paperwork, and enhance case management efficiency. This transition to a paperless environment not only saves time and resources but also contributes significantly to environmental sustainability.

Moreover, emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) are set to play a pivotal role in Phase III. AI-powered systems can aid in legal research, case analysis, and decision-making, thereby alleviating the burden on judges and improving the speed and accuracy of judgments. Integrating AI into the justice

system will enhance the quality and consistency of legal outcomes, ensuring fair and impartial verdicts.

Phase III also focuses on expanding and fortifying the judicial infrastructure through technology. The substantial budget allocation of 7,210 crores by the Government of India underscores its commitment to building a robust and technologically advanced judiciary. This investment will facilitate the deployment of state-of-the-art hardware and software, cloud infrastructure, networking, and capacity-building initiatives for judicial personnel.

Additionally, Phase III envisions the facilitation of various new features, including digital initiatives such as



Digital and Paperless Courts, which aim to digitise court proceedings, and Online Courts, which aim to reduce physical presence in court through digitally enabled hearings. The scope of Virtual Courts will also extend beyond the adjudication of Traffic Violations.

Furthermore, emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence and its subsets such as Optical Character Recognition (OCR) will be utilised for analysing case pendency and forecasting future litigation. The benefits of digitization in e-Courts Phase III extend

beyond efficiency and accessibility to fostering transparency and accountability in the justice system. Live-streaming court proceedings using technology allows the public to witness the judicial process firsthand, thereby building trust, ensuring judicial accountability, and enabling citizens to actively participate in the administration of justice.

As Phase III of the eCourts MMP unfolds, we are poised to witness a transformative era in the Indian justice system. The digitization initiatives introduced in this phase will not only enhance efficiency, accessibility, and transparency but also ensure swift and equitable delivery of justice to all citizens. It marks a significant step towards

realising the vision of a citizen-centric justice delivery system where every individual, irrespective of their background, can access their constitutional rights and seek redressal efficiently and cost-effectively.

The digitization revolution in eCourts Phase III represents a milestone in the journey towards a modern, inclusive, and technologically advanced justice system. By embracing the potential of digital technologies, India is paving the way for a future where justice is truly accessible to all, reinforcing the principles of equality, fairness, and the rule of law.

(The writer is a chief system analyst at the High Court of Madhya Pradesh; views are personal)

Palestinian PM submits government's resignation

AP ■ JERUSALEM/BEIRUT

The Palestinian prime minister announced the resignation of his government on Monday, paving the way for a shake-up in the Palestinian Authority, which the US hopes will eventually take on a role in postwar Gaza. Many obstacles remain to making a revamped Palestinian Authority a reality. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose forces were driven from Gaza by Hamas in 2007, has made clear that he would like the PA to govern the enclave after the war. But it is deeply unpopular among Palestinians, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has roundly rejected the idea of putting the authority in charge of the territory.

Abbas must still decide whether he accepts the resignations of Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh's government. But the move signals a willingness by the Western-

backed Palestinian leadership to accept a shake-up that might usher in reforms sought by the United States, as international negotiations ramp up to bring about a cease-fire. The authority, created under interim Israeli-Palestinian peace deals in the early 1990s, administers parts of the West Bank but is beset by corruption.

The next stage and its challenges require new governmental and political arrangements that take into account the new reality in the Gaza Strip," Shtayyeh said at a Cabinet meeting. Netanyahu has vowed to destroy the military and governing capabilities of Hamas — which has ruled Gaza since 2007 and staged the October 7 attack on Israel that set off the current war. He has called for Israel to maintain open-ended security control in the territory after the conflict, with Palestinian officials in charge of civilian affairs.

The Palestinians have rejected such a limited role and



seek an independent state in the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza — areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war. Abbas is expected to choose Mohammad Mustafa, chairman of the Palestine Investment Fund, as the next prime minister. Mustafa is a US-educated economist who has held senior positions in the World Bank and served in senior posts in the Palestinian Authority. Palestinian officials

say he has a good, longstanding working relationship with American officials.

ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES IN LEBANON, KILL 2

The Israeli military said its air force on Monday struck targets of the militant Hezbollah group "deep inside Lebanon", where residents reported explosions near the northeastern city of Baalbek. At least two people were killed in the

strikes, a Hezbollah official said. The strikes are among the deepest into Lebanon since the Israel-Hamas war began more than four months ago. They come a day after Israel's Defence Minister Yoav Gallant vowed to step up attacks on Lebanon's Hezbollah even if a cease-fire is reached with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The strikes, which came shortly after Hezbollah said its air defence shot down an Israeli drone, are likely to increase tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border as talks for a cease-fire in Gaza are underway.

Lebanese security officials said Israel's air force carried out three airstrikes on the outskirts of the village of Budy, near Baalbek, targeting a convoy of trucks. Budy is a Hezbollah stronghold.

A Hezbollah official confirmed that three strikes hit near Baalbek. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to talk to reporters. He said the

strikes killed at least two people and that one hit a warehouse for food products that is part of Hezbollah's Sajjad Project that sells to people in its stronghold at prices lower than on the market.

The airstrikes near Baalbek occurred less than two hours after Hezbollah said its fighters on Monday shot down an Israeli Elbit Hermes 450 drone over its stronghold in a province in southern Lebanon. Another missile fired by Hezbollah toward the drone was intercepted by Israel, and landed near a synagogue in a town close to Nazareth in northern Israel. There were no injuries or damage.

The Israeli army said in a statement later in the day that its fighter jets struck sites used by Hezbollah in the eastern Bekaa Valley. It said they were in retaliation for Hezbollah's firing of a surface-to-air missile at the Israeli drone.

Hezbollah has been exchanging fire with Israeli

troops along the border since the Israel-Hamas broke on October 7. The strike on Baalbek, because of its location deep inside Lebanon, is the most significant one since the early January airstrike on Beirut that killed top Hamas official Saleh Arouri.

Hezbollah, which has been exchanging fire with Israel throughout the war in Gaza, has said it will halt its near-daily attacks on Israel if a cease-fire is reached in Gaza. Hezbollah is an ally of the Palestinian militant Hamas group.

However, Gallant, the Israeli defence minister, said on Sunday that anyone who thinks a temporary cease-fire for Gaza will also apply to the northern front is "mistaken".

Western diplomats have brought forward a series of proposals for a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah, most of which would hinge on Hezbollah moving its forces 7-10 kilometers (4-6 miles) away from the

Sunak forced to defend his party against Islamophobia claims

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was on Monday forced to defend the Conservatives against allegations of Islamophobia as the row over a Tory MP's remarks against London Mayor Sadiq Khan continued to dominate the headlines. The British Indian leader was asked during a BBC radio interview round in northern England if the Conservative Party had "Islamophobic tendencies" after MP Lee Anderson was suspended from the Tory party last week for stating that "Islamists" had "got control" of Pakistani-origin Khan, a member of the Opposition Labour Party, who branded the remarks "Islamophobic, racist and anti-Islam".

Sunak had been under mounting pressure to directly address the issue and condemn the remarks made by his former party colleague.



"No, of course it doesn't. I think it is incumbent on all of us, especially those elected to Parliament, not to inflame our debates in a way that is harmful to others," he said in response to the question about whether the Conservative Party has a problem of Islamophobia.

Asked to address the controversial remarks made by Lee Anderson, he added: "Lee's

comments weren't acceptable, they were wrong and that is why he has had the whip suspended. "Words matter, especially in the current environment where tensions are running high. I think it's incumbent on all of us to choose them carefully." The row followed scenes of chaos in Parliament last week over an Israel-Gaza conflict vote and came in response to an article in 'The Daily Telegraph' by former home secretary Suella Braverman, who wrote that "the Islamists, the extremists and the anti-Semites are in charge" of the country. "I don't actually believe that these Islamists have got control of our country, but what I do believe is that they've got control of Khan, they've got control of London. He's actually given our capital city away to his mates," Anderson told 'GB News' in response to a question.

Following his suspension from the Conservative Party, Anderson refused to apologise for his comments, saying instead: "Following a call with the chief whip, I understand the difficult position that I have put both he and the prime minister in with regards to my comments. "I fully accept that they had no option but to suspend the whip in these circumstances.

Man critical after setting himself on fire outside Israeli embassy

Washington (AP): An active-duty member of the US Air Force was critically injured Sunday after setting himself ablaze outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC, while declaring that he "will no longer be complicit in genocide", a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

The man, whose name wasn't immediately released, walked up to the embassy shortly before 1 pm and began live-streaming on the video streaming platform Twitch, the person said. Law enforcement officials believe the man started a livestream, set his phone down and then doused himself in accelerant and ignited the flames. At one point, he said he "will no longer be complicit in genocide," the person said. The video was later removed from the platform, but law enforcement officials have obtained and reviewed a copy.

MAYORKAS IMPEACHMENT

Leaders likely to seek quick dismissal

AP ■ WASHINGTON

For the third time in five years, senators will be sworn in as jurors for an impeachment trial. But the chamber is expected to spend far less time on the charges against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas than the ones brought against former President Donald Trump — or maybe no time at all. The Republican-controlled House impeached Mayorkas by a single vote margin on February 13, recommending that Mayorkas be removed from office over his handling of the US-Mexico border. With two articles of impeachment, the House charge that Mayorkas has "willfully and systematically" refused to enforce existing immigration laws and breached the public trust by lying to Congress and saying the border was secure.

Democrats say the charges amount to a policy dispute, not the "high crimes and misdemeanors" laid out as a bar for impeachment in the Constitution.

The 214-213 vote, a narrowly successful second try after the House had rejected the effort a week earlier, was the first time in nearly 150 years a Cabinet secretary had been impeached. And while the Senate is now obligated to consider the charges, Senate leaders have shown little interest in spending much time on the matter. Two-thirds of the Senate would be needed to convict Mayorkas, and not a single Democrat has signalled support for the impeachment push. Still, there is a process that senators have to follow under the rules for impeachment, and all Democrats would likely have to stick together to dismiss the charges completely. A look at next steps and the Senate's options once the Mayorkas impeachment moves across the Capitol. Under impeachment rules, a group of

House managers — members who act as prosecutors and are appointed by the speaker — will deliver the impeachment charges by reading the articles on the Senate floor, usually after making a ceremonial walk across the Capitol with the articles in hand.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has not yet said when that will happen, but it could be as soon as this week, when the Senate returns to session after a two-week recess. Senators will later be sworn in as jurors, likely the next day. The Senate must then issue a summons to the official who is being tried to inform them of the charges and ask for a written answer. But Mayorkas would not have to appear in the Senate at any point.

After that, the rules generally allow the Senate to decide how to proceed. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., hasn't yet said what he will do, but he is expected to try and dismiss the trial in some manner, if he has the votes. Democrats control the Senate, 51-49. If Schumer can muster a simple majority, Democrats could dismiss the trial outright or move to table the two articles, ending the House's effort and allowing the Senate to move on to other business. Getting to 51 votes would require every single Democrat and the chamber's three Independents to vote to dismiss, or potentially fewer if any Republicans join them.

While several GOP senators have questioned the need for a trial, it's unclear whether any of them would go as far as to vote to dismiss the charges right at the start. Some Republicans are vocally opposed to that approach. In a letter last week, Utah Sen. Mike Lee said in a letter to Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell that Democrats should not be able to "shirk their Constitutional duty".

Ramaswamy top choice to be Trump's running mate

Washington (PTI): As Donald Trump looks set to secure a third presidential nomination from the Republican Party, a straw poll at a prominent gathering of conservative activists has shown that South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem and Indian-origin biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy were tied for the top choice to be the former US president's running mate, according to media reports.

The straw poll, at the Conservative Political Action Conference or CPAC, announced at the end of the four-day gathering outside Washington on Saturday said that Noem and Ramaswamy each garnered 15 per cent of the vote in the straw poll. The New York Times reported.

Tech entrepreneur Ramaswamy, 38, who was born in Cincinnati to Indian immigrant parents, ran for the Republican presidential nomination this year but dropped out of the race after finishing fourth in January's Iowa caucuses. He then withdrew from the race and backed Trump. Noem, 52, became the first woman governor of South Dakota when she was elected in 2018, endorsed by Trump. During the Covid pandemic, she rose to national prominence over her refusal to issue statewide mandates for vaccinations and wearing face masks.

It was the first time in years that a question about whom Republicans should pick for vice president had overshadowed one about the presidential nominee in the survey of attendees, the NYT report said.

It was also because Trump, 77, won the presidential poll as expected with a landslide over Nikki Haley, beating her 94 per cent to five per cent. The last time Trump was not the top choice for the White House among CPAC attendees was in 2016 when Texas Senator Ted Cruz finished first, the report said. Former Indian-origin Representative Tulsi Gabbard, who ran for president but has since left the party to become an independent, finished third with nine per cent of the votes followed by Representative Elise Stefanik of New York and Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina.

Seoul gives doctors four days to end walkouts

Seoul (AP): Junior doctors in South Korea have four days to end their walkouts, the government said on Monday, or they could face prosecution or have their medical licenses suspended. About 9,000 medical interns and residents have stayed off the job since early last week to protest a government plan to increase medical school admissions by about 65 per cent.

The walkouts have severely hurt the operations of their hospitals, with numerous cancellations of surgeries and other treatments.

Government officials say adding more doctors is necessary to deal with South Korea's rapidly aging population. The country's current doctor-to-patient ratio is among the lowest in the developed world.

The strikers say universities can't handle so many new students and argue the plan would not resolve a chronic shortage of doctors in some key but low-paying areas like pediatrics and emergency departments.

Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo said during a televised briefing Monday that the government won't seek any disciplinary action against striking doctors if they return to work by Thursday.

"We want them to return to work by the end of this month, February 29. If they return to the hospitals they had left by then, we won't hold them responsible" for any damages caused by their walkouts, Park said. "It's not too late. Please, return to patients immediately." But he said those who don't meet the deadline will be punished with a minimum three-month suspension of their medical licenses and face further legal steps such as investigations and possible indictments.

Under South Korea's medical law, the government can issue back-to-work orders to doctors and other medical personnel when it sees grave risks to public health.

Hungary's parl set to ratify Sweden's NATO accession in final step toward membership

AP ■ BUDAPEST

Hungary's parliament is to vote on Monday on ratifying Sweden's bid to join NATO, likely bringing an end to more than 18 months of delays that have frustrated the alliance as it seeks to expand in response to Russia's war in Ukraine. Hungary's government submitted the protocols for approving Sweden's entrance to NATO in 2022, but the matter has stalled in parliament since then over opposition by governing party lawmakers. Unanimous support among all NATO members is required to admit new countries, and Hungary is the only one of the alliance's 31 members that has not given its backing.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a right-wing nationalist who has forged close ties with Russia, has said that criticism of Hungary's democracy by Swedish politicians had

soured relations between the two countries and led to reluctance among lawmakers in his Fidesz party. But the vote on Monday is widely expected to approve Sweden's membership in NATO, removing the final hurdle after it first applied to join the alliance in May 2022.

Ulf Kristersson, Sweden's prime minister, met with Orban on Friday in Hungary's capital, where they appeared to reach a decisive reconciliation. Following their meeting, they announced the conclusion of a defence industry agreement which will include Hungary's purchase of four Swedish-made JAS 39 Gripen jets and the extension of a service contract for its existing Gripen fleet.

Orban said the additional fighter jets "will significantly increase our military capabilities and further strengthen our role abroad" and will improve Hungary's ability to participate in joint NATO operations.

"To be a member of NATO together with another country means we are ready to die for each other," Orban said. "A deal on defence and military capacities helps to reconstruct the trust between the two countries."

Monday's vote on Sweden's NATO accession is just one matter on a busy agenda for lawmakers in the Hungarian parliament.

A vote is also scheduled on accepting the resignation of President Katalin Novák, who stepped down earlier this month in a scandal over her decision to pardon a man convicted of covering up a string of child sexual abuses.

After accepting Novák's resignation, lawmakers are expected to confirm Tamas Sulyok, the president of Hungary's Constitutional Court, as the country's new president.

Some opposition parties

have said they will not participate in a vote to confirm a new president. But Sulyok was nominated by Orban's Fidesz party, which has a two-thirds majority in parliament and is expected to easily approve his presidency.

A presidential signature is required for approval of Sweden's NATO bid to take effect, but it was unclear when that final endorsement would take place.

Hungary's allies in NATO and the European Union have put increasing pressure on it in recent months to drop its opposition to Sweden's membership. Last weekend, a bipartisan group of US senators visited Hungary and announced it would submit a joint resolution to Congress condemning Hungary's alleged democratic backsliding and urging Orban's government to immediately lift its block on Sweden's transatlantic integration.

Farmers converge on EU's HQ in fresh show of force

AP ■ BRUSSELS

Concrete barriers and barbed wire surrounded the European Union's headquarters on Monday as farmers angry at red tape and competition from cheap imports drove their tractors into Brussels in a fresh show of force as the bloc's agriculture ministers met.

Police carrying riot gear patrolled near barricades set up at the main entry points to the European Council building, where the 27-nation bloc's agriculture ministers were gathering. Scores of tractors adorned with flags and banners were ranked in lines, snarling city traffic. Some lamented what they see as the slow death of working the land. "Agriculture. As a child you dream of it, as an adult you

die of it," said one.

Farmers dumped a trailer load of tyres a few hundred metres (yards) from the European Council building, and police brought in water cannons before the piles of



Police stand behind a barricade during a protest of farmers in the European Quarter outside a meeting of EU agriculture ministers in Brussels on Monday. AP/PTI

rubber were set alight.

At the start of the month, a similar demonstration turned violent as farmers torched hay bales and threw eggs and firecrackers at police near a summit of EU leaders.

Nikki Haley staying in race despite Trump's win in South Carolina

AP ■ TROY (MICHIGAN)

Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley says it's not "the end of our story" despite Donald Trump's easy primary victory in South Carolina, her home state where the onetime governor had long suggested her competitiveness with the former president would show. Defying calls from South Carolina Republicans to exit the race, Haley travelled Sunday to Michigan, which holds its primary on Tuesday, speaking to a hotel ballroom packed with hundreds of supporters. In the less than 24 hours following her Saturday night loss to Trump, Haley's campaign said that she had raised USD 1 million "from grassroots supporters alone," a bump they argued "demonstrates Haley's staying power



and her appeal to broad swaths of the American public." But with Sunday also came the end of support for Haley's campaign from Americans for Prosperity, the political arm of the powerful Koch network.

In a memo first reported by Politico and obtained by The Associated Press, AFP Action senior adviser Emily Seidel

wrote that, while the group "stands firm behind our endorsement" of Haley, it would "focus our resources where we can make the difference," redirecting spending toward US Senate and House campaigns and away from Haley's presidential bid.

"Given the challenges in the primary states ahead, we don't believe any outside group can make a material difference to widen her path to victory," Seidel wrote. AFP Action had endorsed Haley's campaign in November, promising to commit its nationwide coalition of activists — and virtually unlimited funds — to helping her defeat Trump, with door knockers fanning out across early-voting states and sending out dozens of mailers on her behalf. With his win Saturday in the first-in-the-South contest, Trump has now swept every primary or caucus on the GOP early-season calendar that awards delegates. His performances have left little maneuvering room for Haley, his former UN ambassador. "I have never seen the Republican Party so unified as it is right now," Trump said in a victory night celebration in Columbia.

Maryam takes oath as Pak's Punjab CM

PTI ■ LAHORE

Senior PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz, the daughter of three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, on Monday took oath as the first-ever woman chief minister of Pakistan's most populous and politically crucial Punjab province, a development described by her party as a "giant leap" for the country.



Maryam, the 50-year-old senior vice president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party, took oath as the Punjab chief minister at a ceremony at the Governor House in the presence of her father Nawaz Sharif and uncle Shehbaz Sharif.

She earlier won the chief ministerial elections amidst a walkout by lawmakers of former prime minister Imran Khan's party-backed Sunni Ittehad Council (sic).

"HISTORY MADE! Maryam Nawaz Sharif takes oath as Punjab's FIRST EVER female Chief Minister! A giant leap for Pakistan," her party said in a post on X. In her maiden speech at the provincial legislature earlier, Maryam thanked God, her father, Nawaz Sharif, uncle Shehbaz Sharif and the lawmakers who voted for her.

Maryam said that she was happy to sit in the seat where her father used to sit. "My father trained me how to run the office," Maryam, considered the political heir of Nawaz Sharif, said.

"Today, every woman of the province is proud to see a woman chief minister," she said and hoped that the tradition of female leadership would continue in the future as well.

The PML-N leader said she had seen hard times like imprisonment but was thankful to her opponents for making her strong.

"But I will not seek revenge," she said, indirectly referring to former Army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa and former chief justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar. Maryam received 220 votes and won the chief ministerial elections for the politically crucial Punjab province, home to 120 million people. She defeated Rana Aftab of the PTI-backed SIC, who received no votes as his party boycotted the election.

"The votes have been counted according to which Maryam has obtained 220 votes,

and SIC candidate Rana Aftab secured zero votes," said newly-elected Speaker Malik Ahmad Khan while presiding over the session.

To win the chief minister's election, a candidate needs to win the backing of the majority, which is 187 members in the House that currently has 327 seats, according to Geo News. The newly-elected chief minister, Maryam, enjoyed the support of the majority in the House. The PTI-backed SIC's 103 members have taken oath from its total 113 lawmakers in the Punjab Assembly. Maryam was backed by PML-N allies, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q), and the Itehad-i-Pakistan Party (IPP). The walk-out by at least 103 SIC members — including the PTI-backed independent lawmakers — was staged after the SIC nominee for chief minister, Aftab, was not permitted to speak at the point of order.

"In today's session, only elections will be held for the chief minister. You cannot speak in today's session," Speaker Khan told the SIC candidate as he tried to speak up. The speaker eventually moved forward with the proceedings to elect a new leader of the House after efforts to bring back the boycotting lawmakers went in vain, according to Dawn newspaper. Before boycotting the session, the opposition chanted slogans of "Queen of Mandate Thieves" as the PTI claimed that Maryam had lost his seat with a margin of over 800 votes in the February 8 polls besides the

party's over 100 Punjab Assembly seats that had been stolen. It decried that the irony is a "defeated" candidate has become chief minister.

Taking a swipe at the walk-out by the SIC lawmakers, Maryam said, "Today, I am upset that the respectable members of the opposition benches are not present here [...] I wish they would be a part of the political and democratic process."

She said that despite several challenges and difficulties, her party members and the PML-N never left the ground empty. "If the opposition was present today, and if they had protested during my speech, I would have been happy," she said.

Meanwhile, the PTI nominee for the chief ministerial post, Aftab, said, "It seems as if dictatorship persists even today," according to the report. Speaking to the media in Lahore as the Punjab Assembly voted for the new leader of the House, Aftab said, "I am a political worker [...] the way I had to pass from there [the assembly], this is shameful for me, and it is also a moment of reflection for all politicians." He added that the PTI wanted justice as per the law and Constitution to take "this manoeuvred democracy forward".

Maryam paid a visit to her mother's grave at Jati Umra before going to the Punjab Assembly, where the election for the post of Chief Minister took place.

In a post on X, the PML-N said Maryam also visited the graves of her paternal grandparents.

PTI nominates Gohar as chairman again

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's party has once again tapped Barrister Gohar Khan as its chairman, in a U-turn from its earlier decision nominating Barrister Ali Zafar for the top post, a media report said on Monday.

Barrister Gohar, 45, was elected as the 71-year-old Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chairman after it held an intra-party poll in December last year on the directions of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). However, its result, which some disgruntled PTI workers challenged, was annulled after a bitter court battle. Subsequently, the party was deprived of its iconic cricket bat symbol by the top electoral body, and Gohar, who

became the chairman after those elections, was no longer the party head.

Last week, Gohar announced that the party's next chairman nominee is Barrister Ali Zafar, and its internal elections are scheduled for March 3. Quoting party sources, the Dawn newspaper said that while Zafar refused to accept the chairmanship, the deadline to submit nomination papers ended at 3 pm on Sunday, and only Gohar submitted his candidature for the top post.

Subsequently, the former ruling party nominated Gohar for its top position, the report said. A senior party official told the newspaper that Gohar's success is certain since PTI founder Khan nominated him.

The party's top post has been lying vacant for more than



a month after the ECP and the Supreme Court declared its intra-party elections conducted in December unlawful. The party is scheduled to hold fresh organisational polls on March 3. According to PTI's new election schedule, candidates intending to contest the intra-

party polls were to submit their nomination papers on February 23 and 24, with the scrutiny being carried out on February 25.

Meanwhile, the final decisions on nomination papers will be announced on February 27, and the polling will be held on March 3 at the party's central office and four provincial secretariats. On Saturday, the PTI issued a show-cause notice to senior leader Sher Afzal Marwat and sought his apology for making claims that Gohar has been "removed" from the post of party chairman for his "incompetence" and "poor" performance.

"Incompetence and poor performance are the reasons behind Gohar's removal as chairman. Barrister Gohar is a gentleman, but his performance was not satisfactory,"

Marwat told Geo News.

He said that following the election results, the party leadership's approach was not commendable and that Gohar, who should have led the party after the February 8 polls, failed. The PTI-backed independents won majority seats at the National Assembly in the controversy-marred general election. However, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have agreed on a power-sharing deal to form a new coalition government, effectively ending Khan's chances of returning to power.

The PTI has rejected the attempts by two of its arch-rivals to form a coalition government, warning that robbing its public endorsement by the "mandate thieves" will result in the worst political instability.

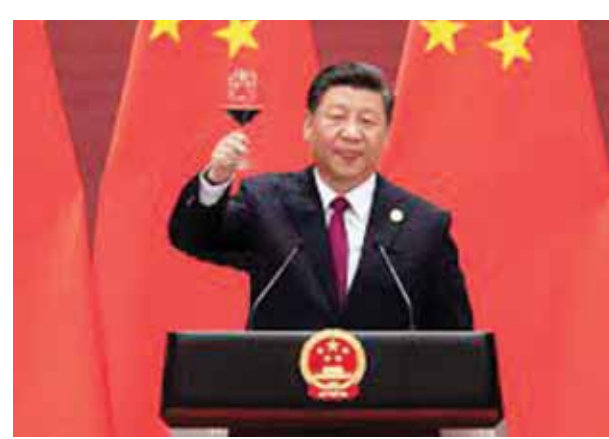
China's anti-graft body to probe corruption in BRI projects

PTI ■ BEIJING

President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative under which China doled out billions of dollars of investments will for the first time come under the scanner of the country's anti-graft body amid allegations of corruption and the projects turning into debt traps for small and medium countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Fighting corruption related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will be among the priorities for the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection's work report for 2024 (CCDI), the ruling Communist Party of China's (CPC) powerful anti-graft body, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported.

The CCDI report released on Sunday stressed the need to eradicate the breeding grounds for corruption, deepen the system reforms and strengthen the institutions for discipline inspection and supervision, and enhance the organisational development of Party discipline inspection commissions and supervision agencies, state-run Xinhua news agency reported. The report, which was released after it was submitted two months ago by CCDI chief Li Xi, said the organisation would this year



coordinate crackdowns both at home and overseas, according to the Post. The report said the graft buster would deepen a campaign targeting "unhealthy practices and corruption" in rural revitalisation, and seek better integrity in belt and road projects.

The trillion-dollar trade and infrastructure BRI and the rural revitalisation strategy are both signature policies of President Xi who launched it in 2013 to further China's global influence. It also made him an influential leader of the world. Li in November last year said China was committed to a "clean Silk Road" during his meeting with the Vietnamese counterpart Tran Cam Tu in Beijing.

The BRI, also referred to as the "New Silk Road", and the

pledge to keep it free of bribery and corruption was seen as a response to concerns from the West about the integrity of the projects, according to the Post.

Alfred Wu, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said the CCDI commitment to supervise every aspect of governance in China as well as overseas projects suggests that Xi sees anti-corruption efforts and party discipline as key to his political legacy.

"But it remains to be seen what Beijing will do to better supervise the belt and road projects," he told the Post.

It is still not clear how China proposes to launch anti-corruption investigations into the BRI projects abroad. Leaders in many countries

faced allegations of siphoning off millions of dollars of funds allocated to especially unsustainable projects leading their countries to huge debt owed to China. Significantly, according to the previous announcement, all cases of disputes related to BRI will be conducted by judicial organs set up in China.

Sri Lanka's Hambantota project furthered by its previous President Mahinda Rajapaksa besides other projects in the countries has become a global concern as China acquired the port for a 99-year lease as a debt swap.

Reeling under heavy loans Sri Lanka defaulted on its external loans in 2022. As the country faced a massive economic crisis, India provided about USD four billion in emergency financing for the island nation to recover. Critics point out that Pakistan's debt to its all-weather ally China under the USD 60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is piling up amid opaque project deals as the country faces a precipitous economic situation. China, which celebrated the 10th anniversary of the BRI last year, said it had signed more than 200 BRI cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and 30 international organisations across five continents.

Taliban hold another public execution

AP ■ ISLAMABAD

The Taliban held a public execution on Monday of a man convicted of murder in northern Afghanistan as thousands watched at a sports stadium, the third such death sentence to be carried out in the past five days. The execution took place in heavy snowfall in the city of Shibirghan, the capital of northern Jawzjan province, where the brother of the murdered man shot the convict five times with a rifle, according to a witness.

Security around the stadium was tight, said the witness, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to talk to the media. It was also the fifth public execution since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021 as US and NATO troops were in the final weeks of their withdrawal from the country after two decades of war. The Taliban, despite initial promises of a more moderate rule, began carrying out severe punishments in public — executions, floggings and stonings — shortly after coming to power. The punishments are similar to those during their previous rule of Afghanistan in the late 1990s.

Taliban government officials were not immediately available for comment.

'Global eco weighed down by uncertainty, instability, war'

AP ■ ABU DHABI

The head of the World Trade Organisation warned on Monday that war, uncertainty and instability are weighing down the global economy and urged the bloc to embrace reform as elections across nearly half the world's population could bring new challenges.

WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala sought to offer some praise for her organisation as it held its biennial meeting in the United Arab Emirates, even as it faces pressure from the United States and other nations. But she was blunt about the risks ahead, as high-energy prices for food, energy and other essentials sting people's pockets, "fueling political frustration."

"People everywhere are feeling anxious about the future and this will be felt at the ballot box this year," she said. None are perhaps more critical for the WTO than the US presidential election on November 5.

Running again is former President Donald Trump, who threatened to withdraw the US from the WTO and repeatedly levied tariffs — taxes on imported goods — on perceived friends and foes alike. A Trump win could again risk global trade.

Okonjo-Iweala did not mention Trump by name, but offered a warning about attacks against multilateralism. "The multilateral trading system, which I term a global public good since it was created 75 years ago, continues to be misconstrued some quarters and undermined," she said.

But even if President Joe Biden is re-elected, the United States has deep reservations over the WTO. The US under the past three administrations has blocked appointments to its

operating. Washington says the WTO judges have overstepped their authority too often in ruling on cases.

The US also has criticised China for still describing itself as a developing country as it did when it joined the WTO in 2001. Washington, Europe and others say that Beijing improperly hampers access to emerging industries and steals or pressures foreign companies to hand over technology.

The US also says China floods world markets with cheap steel, aluminum and other products. The WTO's 164 member nations will discuss a deal to ban subsidies that contribute to over-fishing, extending a pause on taxes on digital media such as movies and video games, and agricultural issues while meeting this week in the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi.

But headwinds remain for the organisation and the world's economy, particularly as the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic remains uneven across nations. Okonjo-Iweala made no mention of Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, though she noted the ongoing disruptions to shipping caused by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Red Sea over the conflict.

"Shipping disruptions in vital waterways like the Red Sea and the Panama Canal are a new source of delays and inflationary pressure," she said. WTO is also hampered by its voting format, with major decisions requiring consensus — meaning countries must actively vote in favour of proposals to take effect. "If we thought the world looked tough in mid-2022, when we were slowly emerging from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine had shaken food and energy security, we are in an even-tougher place today," Okonjo-Iweala said.

'Swap for Navalny was in the final stages'

Moscow (AP): Associates of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on Monday that talks were underway shortly before his death to exchange him for a Russian imprisoned in Germany.

"Alexei Navalny could have been sitting here now, today. It's not a figure of speech," Maria Pevchikh, who lives outside Russia, said in a video statement. She said she received confirmation the talks were in the "final stages" on February 15, the day before Navalny was reported dead.

According to Pevchikh, Navalny and two US citizens held in Russia were supposed to be swapped for Vadim Krasikov. He was serving a life sentence in Germany for the 2019 killing in Berlin of Zelimkhan "Tornike" Khangoshvili, a 40-year-old Georgian citizen of Chechen descent.

She didn't identify the US citizens that were supposedly part of the deal. There are several in custody in Russia, including Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich

arrested on espionage charges, and Paul Whelan, a corporate security executive from Michigan, convicted of espionage and serving a long prison sentence. They and the US government dispute the charges against them.

German officials have refused to comment when asked if there had been any effort by Russia to secure a swap of Krasikov. US commentator Tucker Carlson earlier this month asked President Vladimir Putin about the prospects of exchanging

Gershkovich, and Putin said the Kremlin was open to negotiations. He pointed to a man imprisoned in a "US-allied country" for "liquidating a bandit" who had allegedly killed Russian soldiers during separatist fighting in Chechnya. Putin didn't mention names but appeared to refer to Krasikov. Pevchikh alleged in her video that Putin "wouldn't tolerate" setting Navalny free and decided to "get rid of the bargaining chip." She offered no evidence to back that claim.

Western leaders to show unity for Ukraine

Paris (AP): More than 20 European heads of state and government and other Western officials are gathering in a show of unity for Ukraine, signalling to Russia that their support for Kyiv isn't wavering as the full-scale invasion grinds into a third year. French President Emmanuel Macron, hosting the conference Monday in Paris, said he wants to discuss strengthening aid and ways to "give credibility to the fact that Russia cannot win in Ukraine."

"We are at a critical moment," Macron said this weekend. "With Ukraine having limited resources, we must reinforce the munitions, the military resources, what we send," he said. "But we must also think about how we manage this effort over time and how we ensure that Russia does not win."

A top French official said the conference isn't aimed at making new commitments in terms of weapon deliveries and financial aid, but rather at better coordinating support for Kyiv and ensuring that aid promises are kept. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the conference details and goals.

Russia seeks prison sentence human rights advocate

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russian authorities on Monday sought a prison sentence of nearly three years for a veteran human rights advocate who spoke out against the war in Ukraine. The prosecution demanded that Oleg Orlov, 70, be convicted of "repeatedly discrediting" the Russian army and sentenced to two years and 11 months in prison.

The demand came in a retrial after he was earlier ordered to pay a fine. Underscoring how little tolerance President Vladimir Putin's government has for criticism of its invasion of Ukraine, the prosecution appealed the fine, seeking a harsher punishment.

The charges against Orlov, co-chairman of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning human rights group Memorial, came after he posted on Facebook an article he wrote denouncing the invasion of Ukraine. He has rejected the case against him as politically motivated. A court in Moscow in October 2023 delivered a guilty verdict and fined Orlov 150,000 rubles (about USD 1,500 at the time), a significantly milder punishment compared to the lengthy prison terms some other Russians have received for criticizing the war.

Both the defence and the prosecution appealed the verdict, and a higher court voided the fine and sent the

case back to the prosecutors. A new trial began earlier this month, another step in a yearslong, unrelenting crackdown on dissent in Russia that the Kremlin ratcheted up after sending troops into Ukraine in February 2022.

Monday's hearing drew over 100 supporters of Orlov and more than a dozen Western diplomats, Russian independent news site Mediazona reported. Orlov brought a book to the hearing — "The Trial" by Franz Kafka — reflecting his view of the trial as absurd. At a hearing on Thursday, Orlov read the novel and refused to engage in the proceedings.

In his closing statement to the court on Monday, he once again denounced the war in Ukraine. "I don't regret anything and I don't repent anything," he said. Speaking to "those who are now moving the steamroller of repression forward with their work... government officials, law enforcement officers, judges, prosecutors," Orlov wondered if they were "scared themselves" of "what our country, which you probably love too, is turning into" — "this absurdity, in this dystopia".

"Doesn't the obvious come to mind — that the steamroller of repression may sooner or later roll over those who launched it and pushed it? This has happened many times in history," he said. The court is to deliver the verdict in the trial on Tuesday morning.

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TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001641/23-24 RC for Supply of 11kV Insulators -Pin, Disc and Post Insulators	78.17 Lacs/ 2,00,000	28.02.2024	20.03.2024/1600 Hrs / 20.03.2024/1630 Hrs
TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001640/23-24 Supply of Laptops	2.75 Crs / 6,13,000	28.02.2024	20.03.2024/1600 Hrs / 20.03.2024/1630 Hrs

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NOTICE
Notice is hereby given that Share Certificates pertaining to shares of the Company detailed below have been reported lost and request(s) for issue of duplicate Certificates in lieu thereof have been received by the Company :-

Sl. No.	Folio No.	Name of the Share Holder / Legal Heir (Claimant)	Cert-No.	Dist-No.	Lost Shares
1	K0001352	KALYANPUR RADHAKRISHNA BALIGA	17987	1809626-75	50
			65331	3377226-47	22
			1132744	295370762 -1049	288
2	B0002424	BAL DEV SHARMA : Deceased Shareholder YOGESH SHARMA : Claimant	305132-4	15796639-99	61
			454132-4	23816431-91	61
3	SRF0120090	BAL BIR SINGH : Deceased Shareholder SUNIL KUMAR : Claimant	1136285	296098482-9053	572
			90118112	6255969-89	21
			429372-3	18374621-50	30
4	B0000135	BAL BIR SINGH : Deceased Shareholder SUNIL KUMAR : Claimant	578372-3	26394413-42	30
			1132819	295381938-2177	240
			2804	1208361-400	40
5	S0011609	SURYAKANT DEVJI NISSAR	303892-4	15771989-2023	35
			452892-4	23791781-815	35
			1134375	295712058-577	520
6	SRF0106550	BIFCO LEASING & FINANCE LIMITED	149396-7	5930442-503	62
			1127979	309205190-437	248
			34848	2290726-75	50
			1132159	295259898-60097	200

Any person having any claim / objection in respect of the above requests should lodge such claim / objection with the company at its Corporate Office within 15 days of the publication of this notice, failing which the company will consider to give effect to the above requests.
Public is hereby cautioned against dealing with the aforesaid share certificates.

for SRF LIMITED
Sd/-
RAJAT LAKHANPAL
Sr. VP (Corporate Compliance) & Company Secretary
Place: Gurugram
Date: 26-02-2024

Government expedites inspection of BYJU'S

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The corporate affairs ministry has asked its field officers to expedite the inspection of the books of BYJU'S and submit the report, a senior official said on Monday as trouble continues to brew at the edtech firm. The ministry, which is implementing the companies law, will decide the further course of action after receiving the report from its regional office. In July 2023, the ministry had asked the office of the Regional Director in Hyderabad to conduct an inspection of the company Think & Learn Pvt Ltd, which is registered in Bengaluru. Think & Learn Pvt Ltd operates under the brand BYJU'S. On Monday, the senior official said the ministry has sought to expedite the inspection and submission of the report with respect to BYJU'S. Specific details about the inspection could not be immediately ascertained. Last year, the ministry ordered the inspection in the wake of various developments at that time at the edtech company, including its inability to finalise the statements and resignation of auditor. A BYJU'S spokesperson said the inspection is ongoing and the company



has received multiple communications requesting information and documents from time to time. "It has cooperated completely and responded with all necessary responses along with documents to the MCA (Ministry of Corporate Affairs). "The company also apprised them of the corporate governance measures implemented, including the constitution of the advisory council. All directions of the MCA have also been complied with," the spokesperson said in a statement. The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) is also looking into the financial disclosures made by the edtech firm for certain financial years. ICAI President Ranjeet Kumar Agarwal, last week, said the case is under process. According to BYJU'S spokesperson,

the company has also closed its financials for FY 2022 and has effected the necessary filings with the Registrar of Companies (RoC). "Given all of the above, the company is also hoping for an expedited closure of the matter," the spokesperson added. On February 23, shareholders of BYJU'S voted unanimously for removing Founder CEO Byju Raveendran and his family members from the board over alleged "mismanagement and failures" at what was once India's hottest tech startup. However, the company had called the voting done in absence of founders as invalid and ineffective. Raveendran, his wife and brother — the only three members on the company board as of now — stayed away from the Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) called by a group of six investors, who collectively hold more than 32 per cent in Think & Learn. At the end, more than 60 per cent of the shareholders voted in favour of all the seven resolutions, which included removing the current management, reconfiguration of the board and a third party forensic investigation into acquisitions done by the company, sources close to the investors had said. However, sources close to BYJU'S had put the number at 47 per cent.

Government may look at enhanced KYC for certain firms

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The government might look at enhancing the scrutiny of certain class of corporates, including in terms of KYC requirements, as efforts continue to weed out unscrupulous elements and curb possible misdoings, according to a senior official. The matters related to KYC (Know Your Customer), including a simplified and uniform system, are still under discussion, and a committee headed by the finance secretary is looking into various aspects. The senior official on Monday said that various aspects related to having a uniform KYC are being discussed and in the case of the corporate affairs ministry, Permanent Account Number (PAN) is being used for KYC requirements. The ministry is implementing the companies law and Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) Act, among other legislations. Further, the official said enhanced KYC requirements might be explored for certain class of corporates. As many as 26,28,865 companies were registered in the country as on January 31, 2024, and out of the total, 16,65,438 companies, or 63 per cent were active, as per the latest official data. According to the data, a total number of 3,16,402 LLPs were active at the end of January this year. Meanwhile, the ministry-appointed



panel is discussing possibilities of having a stricter regulatory regime for startups against the backdrop of instances of corporate governance concerns at some of the entities. The Company Law Committee (CLC), which was set up by the ministry in September 2019, is yet to firm its views and a final decision will be taken after receiving the panel's recommendations, the official said. Over a period of time, the ministry has been clamping down on entities, suspected of carrying out illegal activities. Last week, the Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC), chaired by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, discussed strengthening inter-regulatory coordination in the financial sector to support inclusive economic growth. The council also deliberated on prescribing uniform KYC norms, inter-usability of KYC records across the financial sector, and simplification and digitalisation of the KYC process, among others.

Sebi cautions against fraudulent trading platforms offering stock market access via FPI route

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Capital markets regulator Sebi on Monday cautioned investors against fraudulent trading platforms, claiming to facilitate stock market access to Indians through Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) route. Sebi noted that fraudsters are enticing victims through online trading courses, seminars, and mentorship programs in the stock market, leveraging social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram, as well as live broadcasts. Posing as employees or affiliates of Sebi-registered FPIs, they coax individuals into downloading applications that purportedly allow them to purchase shares, subscribe to IPOs, and enjoy "institutional account benefits" — all without the need for an official trading or demat account, Sebi said adding that these operations often use mobile numbers registered under false names to orchestrate their schemes. The cautionary statement came after Sebi received a number of complaints regarding fraudulent trading



platforms, which falsely claimed affiliation with FPIs and claimed to offer trading opportunities through FPI or institutional accounts with special privileges. Under the rule, FPI investment route is unavailable to resident Indians, with limited exceptions as outlined in the Sebi's FPI Regulations. Further, there is no provision for an "Institutional Account" in trading, and direct access to the equities market requires investors to have a trading and demat account with a Sebi-registered broker and depository participant respectively. The regulator clarified that it has not granted any relaxations to FPIs regarding securities market investments by Indian investors.

Sensex declines 352 points on profit taking

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Closing in the red for the second straight session, benchmark Sensex on Monday declined 352 points due to profit-taking in IT, metal and consumer durable goods shares amid weak global trends. The 30-share BSE barometer closed at 72,790.13 points, down 352.67 points or 0.48 per cent over the previous close. As many as 26 index constituents declined while four advanced. The broader Nifty of NSE dropped 90.65 points or 0.41 per cent to end the day at 22,122.05 points and 37 stocks in the index were in the red. Selling in index heavyweights, including Infosys, TCS, ICICI Bank and Reliance Industries, dragged the benchmark indices into the negative for the second straight session, analysts said. Among the Sensex shares, Asian Paints fell the most by 3.9 per cent as analysts expressed concerns over rising competition in the domestic paints market following the entry of Aditya Birla group company Grasim Industries into the paints segment. IT shares Infosys, TCS, HCL Tech, Wipro and Telenor Mahindra continued to slide amid inflation concerns in the US market. Tata Steel, JSW Steel, Titan, Bharti Airtel, Axis Bank, Kotak Bank, IndusInd Bank, Bajaj Finance and Maruti were among the other Sensex losers. On the other hand, Larsen & Toubro gained the most by 2.36 per cent. Power Grid, HUL and Nestle were also among the gainers. "The market took a breather after the recent run-up as investors' focus shifted from earnings to economic triggers this week. "The US and India GDP data, eurozone inflation, and US jobless claim data will be influential economic numbers for the central bank to take a call on interest rates, which will dictate market sentiment in the



near term," Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services, said. The uncertainty over demand and high US inventory pushed oil prices down, Nair added. In the broader market, BSE Midcap fell 0.38 per cent while BSE Smallcap slipped 0.06 per cent. Among sectoral indices, BSE Metal fell the most by 1.27 per cent. BSE Consumer Durables dropped by 1.25 per cent, BSE Tech by 1.13 per cent, and BSE IT by 1.06 per cent. On the other hand, BSE Utilities gained 1.41 per cent, BSE Power by 1.01 per cent, and Capita Goods by 0.84 per cent. The underperformance of the

Wipro, Nokia team up to provide 5G private wireless solutions to enterprises

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
IT services firm Wipro on Monday said it has partnered with Finnish telecom and IT company Nokia to deliver private wireless solutions to enterprises. Through this solution, enterprises will be able to create an integrated private environment that they can control to better manage their performance and mitigate security risks, as per a statement said. Wipro said the joint private wireless solution with Nokia will "help enterprises scale their digital transformation". This joint solution will provide enterprises with a more secure 5G private wireless network solution integrated with their operation infrastructure, it said. "The solution will bring greater reliability, mobility, connectivity speed, real-time access to business insights, and the ability to process high volumes of data with low latency," the statement said. This AI-driven solution will initially be made available to customers in the manufacturing, energy, utilities, transportation, and sports entertainment industries. While Nokia will provide the Nokia Digital Automation Cloud (DAC) and Modular Private Wireless (MPW) solutions, Wipro will offer strategic guidance and industry insights with its Def-i Innovation Center. "This partnership will unlock new capabilities to help businesses in various sectors experience enhanced connectivity and AI-driven operational efficiencies, ushering them to the forefront of innovation," Vice President of Enterprise Campus Edge Solutions, Nokia, Stephan Litjens said.



BUSINESS BRIEF

IIITD, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS SYSTEM INK MOU
NEW DELHI: Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi (IIITD) and the University of Illinois System have joined hands to strengthen educational and research endeavors on a global scale. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was formalized during the visit of University of Illinois System President, Timothy L. Killeen, to IIITD's campus recently. The MoU outlines a comprehensive framework for cooperation, including faculty exchange programs, collaborative research projects, and mutual participation in academic events and conferences. Professor Ranjan Bose, Director of IIITD, expressed optimism about the partnership, emphasizing its potential to cultivate academic excellence and promote cross-cultural learning. At the same time, President Killeen highlighted the importance of international partnerships in advancing education and research on a global scale. Covering a diverse range of disciplines, from agricultural resilience to quantum technology, this collaboration signifies the convergence of intellectual expertise and innovative spirit. By leveraging each other's strengths and resources, both institutions aim to drive impactful research and education initiatives that address complex global challenges, said a statement here.

ECO HOTELS EYES 2,000 ROOMS BY MARCH 2025
NEW DELHI: Eco Hotels and Resorts is targeting more than 2,000 hotel rooms under its operations by March 2025. Earlier this month, the company inked an initial pact with Vitzen Hotels Ltd (VHL) to acquire a 100 per cent stake of VITS in the VHL. With this acquisition, Eco Hotels and Resorts will operate 20 hotels with around 1,200 rooms. At present, Eco Hotels and Resorts does not have any hotel rooms under its operations. Vinod K Tripathi, Executive Chairman of Eco Hotels and Resorts said, "This breakthrough moment marked by the signing of this momentous MOU and its reflection on our team's dedication to reach ambitious goals through clever decision-making." He explained that with this acquisition, Eco Hotels and Resorts will operate 20 hotels with around 1200 rooms, representing a significant step toward their ambitious goal of acquiring over 2000-plus hotel rooms by March 2025.

SRM HOSTS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
KATTANKULATHUR: The role of educational institutions, especially universities should not just be restricted to giving degrees, but also at the same time, focus on research, innovation, and inventions, Dr. T.R.Paarivendhar, MP, and Founder & Chancellor, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, said on Monday. Presiding over the inaugural function of the International Conference on Advanced Functional Materials and Devices - AFMD 2024, Dr. Paarivendhar said that young researchers and scholars, ably assisted by faculty and their institutions should focus on productive research, and also in the process patent their inventions. He added that such fruitful research should benefit society, not just in India, but all over the world. In his inaugural address, Dr. Ashish Lele, Director, National Chemical Laboratory, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, said advancements in material sciences had today spanned in different applications and advanced the functionality of materials, thereby getting incorporated in various devices.



Ericsson deploys one lakh 5G radios for Bharti Airtel

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Swedish telecom company Ericsson on Monday said that it has deployed 1,00,000 massive MIMO 5G radios for Bharti Airtel across its 12 circles. In a regulatory filing, Airtel said that it has deployed energy-efficient Ericsson radio system products and solutions from Ericsson's 5G Radio Access Network (RAN) and MINI-LINK (microwave) mobile transport portfolios. "Ericsson has successfully deployed 1,00,000 Massive MIMO (Multiple-Input, Multiple-Output) 5G radios for Bharti Airtel across its 12 circles within a record time of 500+ days," the statement said. "Ericsson is a long-standing partner of Airtel and we are happy to partner them in achieving this milestone of

deploying 1,00,000 5G radios across 12 Airtel circles. We have over 65 million customers on our network who are now enjoying blazing fast unlimited 5G data at no additional cost," said Randeep Sekhon, CTO of Bharti Airtel. Multiple-input multiple-output (MIMO) 5G radio technology helps in faster data transmission using multiple transmitters and receivers. In October 2023, Airtel and Ericsson announced the successful testing of Ericsson's pre-commercial Reduced Capability (RedCap) software on the Airtel 5G network. The testing on the 5G TDD (Time Division Duplex) network represented the first implementation and validation of RedCap in India. Airtel and Ericsson have been partners for 25 years.

Passenger vehicle volume to touch new peak in next fiscal: Report

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Passenger vehicle (PV) volumes are expected to log 5-7 per cent growth, touching a new peak for the third straight time in the next fiscal driven by the SUV segment, credit rating agency Crisil said on Monday. This anticipated growth is expected to come on the back of an estimated high base of 6-8 per cent this financial year even as demand for cars and exports remain muted, it said. A significant change in consumer preference has cranked up demand for SUVs leading to its market share doubling to around 60 per cent of total domestic volume this fiscal from around 28 per cent before the pandemic in fiscal 2019, the ratings agency said. This preference is expected to



grow further, backed by a healthy pipeline of new model launches across price points, including electric variants, and normalised availability of semiconductors after a prolonged period of short supply, it said. "While the overall PV volume is seen rising 5-7 per cent next fiscal, we expect demand for SUVs to accelerate at twice the pace at over 12 per cent, driven by an array of feature-laden launches at competitive price

points, varied technology options including hybrid and electric, and increased access to credit," said Says Anuj Sethi, Senior Director at CRISIL Ratings. In contrast, Crisil said, demand for cars is seen slowing this fiscal too due to the ongoing weakness in the rural market and lower affordability at the entry level. The cost of vehicles has risen in the past 3-4 years as manufacturers have been passing on higher commodity prices and have had to comply with more stringent regulations on safety and emissions, it said. The situation is similar on the export front. The share of PV exports is estimated to have slowed to 14 per cent this fiscal compared with around 17 per cent in fiscal 2019.



SBI Mutual Fund mops up over ₹6,700 crore from new fund

PTI ■ MUMBAI
SBI Mutual Fund, the country's largest mutual fund house, has collected over Rs 6,700 crore through its latest offering — energy opportunities fund — beating its internal target of Rs 5,000 crore. In a statement, the fund house said the NFO has received a widespread response from all distribution channels and the overall number of applications crossed close to 5 lakh. The NFO saw a large number of new investors participating which underscores the trust of investors and distributors in SBI Mutual Fund. It also underlines the strong belief that investors have in the energy theme, it said. The Energy Opportunities Fund is an open-ended equity scheme following the energy theme tracking the energy index of the benchmark Nifty. The scheme would invest 80-100 per cent of its assets in equity and equity-related instruments of companies engaged in energy (traditional and new) and allied business activities and the balance in other equity and equity-related instruments, including equity derivatives, debt securities, including securitised debt and debt derivatives, and money market instruments. The fund house appointed Raj Gandhi and Pradeep Kesavan as the dedicated fund managers of the scheme.

M&A deal value in India drops in 2023: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
M&A deal value in India fell 27 per cent in 2023 to USD 136 billion but the deals market is expected to remain steady in the current year, Deloitte India said in a report on Monday. "Amidst significant global challenges posed by high-interest rates, macroeconomic uncertainty, regulatory scrutiny, and geopolitical risks, India's M&A landscape stood resilient in 2023," India M&A Trends 2024 report said. "Despite global economic and geopolitical challenges, India's deals market is expected to remain steady, reflecting strong confidence from



businesses and investors amidst a global economic slowdown," it added. In 2024, M&A (Merger and Acquisition) momentum is expected to remain steady with the manufacturing sector, driven by automotive, with deal growth expected in auto-components and Electric Vehicles (EVs). Also, the government's proactive initiatives to promote clean energy are expected to catalyse a significant rise in M&A within the energy sector. M&A in the financial services sector is anticipated to be driven by large-scale consolidations and responses to regulatory shifts. Private Equity (PE) is projected to

remain consistent in 2024, while deal momentum is expected to revive post-2024, supported by flattening interest rates and recovering economic growth. Sumeet Salwan, Partner, Consulting, Deloitte India, said, "The global challenges posed by high interest rates, macroeconomic uncertainty, and geopolitical risks, that characterised 2023, are expected to continue into 2024 as well. While the global M&A market remains soft, Indian companies continue to be steered by a strong domestic economy. They may increasingly see M&A as a

crucial strategy to help them expand, integrate supply chains, and reinforce market positions." According to the report, M&A deal value in India reduced to USD 136 billion in 2023 from USD 186 billion in 2022. Financial services, technology, media, and telecom (TMT) continue to be the top sectors driving M&A. Financial services sector witnessed a 45 per cent decline in deal value and a 23 per cent increase in deal volume from 2022. TMT sector encountered a 33 per cent YoY (Year on Year) reduction in deal value, while deal volume fell 34 per cent. Overall cross-border deal value declined 11 per cent in 2023.

TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA MADE US STRONGER: HARMANPREET

PTI ■ ROURKELA
Indian men's hockey team skipper Harmanpreet Singh feels the team building activities they did in their recent tour of South Africa have made the side stronger. India had toured South Africa for a four-nation series, winning against the hosts and registered a win and a draw against France, while their only loss came against the Netherlands. On Sunday, India produced an emphatic performance to drub Ireland 4-0 in their final home leg match of the FIH Hockey Pro League. India are currently third in the points table, behind the Netherlands and Australia. "I think we came back from our South Africa tour feeling mentally and physically fresh. We did a lot of team building activities there that made us a stronger unit. I think we performed well here and stood up to the challenge posed by top teams of the world,"



Harmanpreet said after Sunday's victory. In the home leg of Pro League, India began with a 4-1 win over Spain in Bhubaneswar, followed by a 4-2 shoot-out win over the Netherlands. Although India lost 4-6 to Australia, they beat Ireland 1-0 before coming to Rourkela. Echoing Harmanpreet's thoughts, vice-captain Hardik Singh stated, "I think we showed a lot of character in these matches, both in Bhubaneswar and Rourkela. We built on our performance from match to match and we considerably improved our defence." "These matches were crucial in our preparations for the Paris Olympics, and now we will go back to the drawing board and analyse how we can further up our performance from here on." The Indians would continue their Pro League commitments on May 22 with matches in Belgium against the hosts and Argentina, followed by games in London against Germany and Great Britain on June 1.

Indian shuttler Raksha wins Italian Junior singles title

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Indian shuttler Raksha Kandhasamy maintained her dominant run to clinch the Italian Junior singles title defeating compatriot Ananya Agrawal in the final 21-14, 21-12. Raksha had an impeccable run in the tournament held in Milan, Italy from February 23-25 as she did not drop a single game through the course of the competition from the round of 64 to lift the title. In the semifinal, Raksha had produced another one-sided effort getting the better of Indian player Prakriti Bharat 21-10, 21-8. In the quarterfinals, Raksha defeated Slovenia's Anja Blazina 21-9, 21-14. "This win is really motivating and I am really happy with how my game has developed over the last few months," said Raksha, who won the silver medal in All England Junior Open Championships last year. "I believe in staying focused, working on my physical fitness as I have been doing for the last 2-3 months and being patient



and trusting the process to achieve my goals," said Raksha, who also won gold medals at Cyprus Junior International Series Tournament and Bulgarian Junior Open Championships last year. "Next up are a couple of senior international tournaments here itself in Europe and my main target for this year is to compete in the World Juniors," Raksha added. The 17-year-old shuttler from Mumbai, who is studying in 11th standard, will remain in Europe to participate in a few more events with the aim of making it to World Juniors. "I believe in staying focused, working on my physical fitness as I have been doing for the last 2-3 months and being patient



Wounded Bayern Munich poised to appoint Max to oversee shakeup

AP ■ BERLIN
Stung by the prospect of its first season without a major trophy for 12 years, Bayern Munich looks set to appoint Max Eberl to oversee a major shakeup. The Bavarian powerhouse is expected to confirm Eberl as its new sporting director this week. He will be charged with rejuvenating a team that has lost its aura of dominance and no longer demonstrates the assured belief it used to as the best in Germany. Eberl enjoyed success as sporting director at Borussia Mönchengladbach from 2008 until he quit abruptly citing burnout in January 2022. He joined Leipzig in the same role eight months later but was fired last September for "his failure to commit to the club." At Leipzig, Eberl led a rebuild

that saw established players like Joško Gvardiol and Dominik Szoboszlai depart for big sums, while young talents like Lois Openda and Paris Saint-Germain loanee Xavi Simons arrived to star this season. Eberl's alleged lack of commitment to Leipzig likely had to do with the speculation linking him with Bayern, where the former right-back's work in a managerial capacity at Gladbach had long been admired. Eberl was already a target for Bayern before it appointed Hasan Salihamidžić as sporting director in 2017. Salihamidžić was fired hours after Bayern clinched the league title last season, along with chief executive Oliver Kahn, as both paid the price for the problems that Eberl will now be expected to address.



Bayern only won the Bundesliga last season because Borussia Dortmund squandered its chance on the final day. The decision to axe Kahn and Salihamidžić had been taken earlier, after a season in which the team's

decline had been plain to see. Former chief financial officer Jan-Christian Dreesen took over as CEO and Bayern hired former Salzburg sporting director Christoph Freund to take over from Salihamidžić, though he didn't start officially until Sept. 1, and wasn't involved in the summer transfer business. Eberl and Freund will be expected to work together, with a priority being the hiring of a new coach following Bayern's decision not to continue with Thomas Tuchel next season after the team lost three games in a row. Tuchel said Friday he wasn't the "only problem" at Bayern and his employers were unable to contradict him over the weekend. "If FC Bayern loses three times in a row, then we all have to question ourselves, the team, the coach, we in management, we do it as well, it's not in question at all," Bayern president Herbert Hainer said Saturday. "But you will see, we will draw the right analysis and conclusions and do the right thing."

Chelsea looks to respond to Neville taunt

AP ■ LONDON
Chelsea's underperforming players were described by one leading British soccer pundit as "billion-pound bottle jobs" after their loss in the English League Cup final. They'll need to show they have the stomach for a fight when they return to action on Wednesday in another cup competition that represents their last chance of winning a trophy this season. Fresh off Sunday's defeat by a youthful Liverpool team at Wembley Stadium, Chelsea hosts Leeds - an in-form second-tier side on course for an immediate return to the Premier League - in the fifth round of the FA Cup. No doubt ringing in the ears of Chelsea's squad will be that cruel taunt by Gary Neville - a former Manchester United and England defender who is now a high-profile analyst for broadcaster Sky Sports - that is dominating the post-League Cup final media agenda. Chelsea manager Mauricio Pochettino brushed off the criticism, saying it was "not fair to talk in this way" and that Neville knew the "dynamics" in play as the London club looks

to get a squad of young players that have been expensively assembled over the past two years. Before the recent January transfer window, Chelsea had spent more than USD 1 billion across three windows in the new Todd Boehly-Clearlake Capital regime and has yet to see the benefits. The tag of "bottle jobs" - meaning people who collapse under pressure - might stick if Chelsea succumbs to Leeds at Stamford Bridge, given how much of a favourite Pochettino's team will be for the pre-quarterfinal match. "They need to feel the pain," Pochettino said of his players. "We played for a trophy we didn't get and now, it is the same - what can you tell me to feel better? Nothing. They need to feel the pain and of course, they need to realize we need to work more, do better things, we need to improve." Chelsea is not in Europe this season and is also far from certain of making it into any European competition next season. The team is in 11th place in the Premier League, though only four points off seventh spot. Finishing in seventh would guarantee a

berth in either the Europa League or the Europa Conference League. The FA Cup, therefore, is suddenly a big deal for Chelsea and Pochettino. Their problem is that there are quite a few top teams left in the draw. Like defending champion Manchester City, which continues its defence of the trophy - and its bid for back-to-back trebles - with a trip to Luton on Tuesday. Like Liverpool, which is at home to second-tier Southampton on Wednesday, Jurgen Klopp might have to roll out the kids once again, with an injury crisis robbing the manager of at least 10 senior players. Ryan Gravenberch and Wataru Endo were the latest to pick up injuries in the final against Chelsea. Manchester United visits Nottingham Forest in an all-Premier League match-up on Wednesday, when Wolverhampton has a home game against fellow top-flight team Brighton. Tuesday's other games see second-tier Blackburn hosting struggling Newcastle and Bournemouth at home to second-tier leader Leicester.

AP ■ CARSON, CALIFORNIA (USA)
Anyone who thought Lionel Messi and Inter Miami would steamroll over the rest of Major League Soccer this year has already been proven wrong by the upstart LA Galaxy. Messi was still brilliant enough to keep Miami unbeaten after an early-season test from another marquee MLS club. Messi scored in the second minute of second-half injury time off a pass from Jordi Alba, and Miami salvaged a 1-1 draw with the Galaxy on Sunday night. Dejan Joveljic scored in the 75th minute for the Galaxy, who were close to delivering a surprising early-season blow to Messi and his new MLS powerhouse - but with LA down to 10 men, the Argentine superstar worked another bit of magic. After executing a give-and-go pass sequence with Alba, his long-time Barcelona teammate, Messi slid forward and chipped a shot into the roof of the net above Galaxy goalkeeper John McCarthy. The goal delivered another thrill to the raucous crowd cheering on both teams at Miami's first road game of the season. Thousands of fans wore Messi shirts among the 27,642 in attendance - a record for a Galaxy regular-season

match at their suburban stadium. "It was their home opener, and the atmosphere was pretty electric," said Miami goalkeeper Drake Callender, whose eight saves included a stop on an early penalty shot from Riqui Puig. "It's still early in the season, so there's

Messi scores in injury time



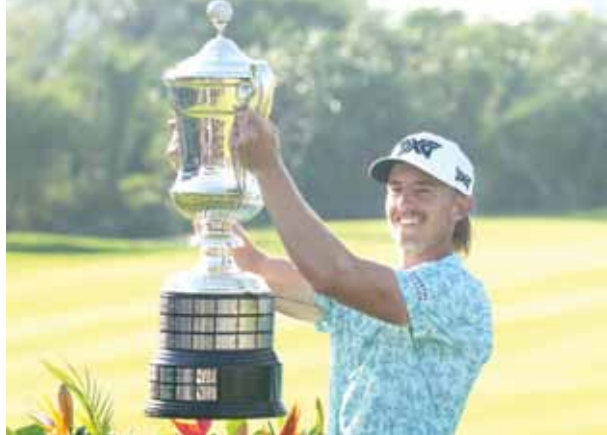
things we need to work on, but earning a point on the road is good. We don't want to get comfortable at all. We have a long season ahead." Inter Miami is a major betting favourite to dominate MLS this season after uniting Messi and Luis Suárez

alongside fellow ex-Barca stars Sergio Busquets and Alba - but everybody on Messi's side knows it won't be easy. Miami won its season opener at home last Wednesday but was frequently outplayed by the rebuilding Galaxy four days later in Messi's first appearance against the club that once employed Inter co-owner David Beckham. The Galaxy are famous for the type of high-profile veteran signings amassed by Miami in the past year, but the LA club is rebuilding without big names this time. The young Galaxy still applied more consistent offensive pressure than the league's new showcase team, racking up 23 shots to Miami's 11 while repeatedly generating chances in the box. "Playing against fantastic players, it doesn't make you afraid," said Galaxy forward Joseph Paintsil, who was impressive in his debut. "It should give you a boost to be the best version of yourself. ... You can see we have really young and talented players in this team. We just need a little bit of time, because we just arrived." Miami responded to the Galaxy's attack with physical defence, but couldn't put together a consistent response despite Messi's playmaking.

Jake holds on to win Mexico Open

AP ■ VALLARTA (MEXICO)
PGA Tour rookie Jake Knapp lost a four-shot lead in seven holes and then held it together with a remarkable short game, closing with an even-par 71 to win the Mexico Open at Vidanta and earn a trip to the Masters. Knapp said on Sunday he still sends a text after each round to his grandfather, who died last year, and this message might require a lot of detail. He didn't hit a fairway until the eighth hole and found only two the entire round. He never lost the lead, but twice allowed Sami Valimaki of Finland to catch him. They were tied with six holes to play until Knapp took over, getting up-and-down on four of the next five holes, one of them for birdie. It wasn't easy until the end. Another big par save on the par-3 17th gave him a two-shot lead going to the par-5

closing hole at Vallarta Vidanta. Valimaki, needing eagle to have a chance, hit his drive down the right side, off a cart path and it nestled next to a boundary fence. He had to take a penalty drop, effectively ending his chances. Valimaki made par for a 69 to finish runner-up, still a big boost to his rookie season. Knapp, who finished at 19-under 265, won in his fifth start of his rookie season. Along with winning \$1,458,000 and moving into the top 10 in the FedEx Cup, the 29-year-old Californian is headed to the Masters and PGA Championships. He also gets into the remaining five \$20 million signature events, starting with Bay Hill in two weeks. It was a big turnaround for the former UCLA player who leans on a pair of initials.



One of them is LTD, an acronym he and his older brother have been using for years that means, "Living The Dream." The other initials are tattooed on the inside of his left arm - GSF, which stands for Gordon Sydney Frederick Bowles, his grandfather who died last year. Playing golf at the highest level was a dream they shared, and Knapp had to choke back emotions Saturday talking about him, apologizing because he had never been asked publicly about his grandfather. "Papa, than" you," he said, pointing to the sky as he walked off the 18th green, soaked after friends and players doused him with water bottles after he tapped

in for par. Knapp was hopeful of the outcome. He didn't imagine how he would get to the finish line. Staked to a four-shot lead, he made bogey on the opening hole with a weak chip. He had to save par on the next hole after another pulled tee shot. The third drive was the worst, a hook some 50 yards left of the fairway into the water, leading to another bogey. Three holes into the final round, his lead already was down to two. "I didn't have my best stuff today, that's for sure," Knapp said. "I knew I was going to be a nervous wreck. I knew it was going to be tough." Valimaki made an 8-foot birdie on the fourth hole, and he drove the par-4 seventh green to within 6 feet for eagle. Knapp had to get up-and-down from a bunker, making a 5-foot birdie putt just to stay even.

Báez wins Rio Open title

AP ■ RIO DE JANEIRO
Sebastián Báez won his fifth and biggest title with a 6-2 6-1 victory against his Argentine compatriot Mariano Navone at the Rio Open. The fifth-seeded Báez wasn't seriously challenged by the 22-year-old Navone, a qualifier, in the final of the clay-court tournament. Neither of the two Argentinians had been among the favorites to lift the title, but defending champion Cameron Norrie, Carlos Alcaraz, Stan Wawrinka and Nicolás Pietrangeli had all stumbled. Báez is the second Argentinian to lift the trophy, with Diego Schwartzman the first in 2018. Báez is set to climb to a career-high No. 21 in the rankings on Monday, from his current No. 30. Navone will become a top 100 player for the first time, reaching No. 60 after Rio. Despite a somewhat tepid final in Rio de Janeiro, some high profile tennis players past and present have argued in favor of



more top tournaments in South America to please the eager crowds that flocked to the Rio Open and the Argentina Open earlier this month. "Unpopular opinion. South America should have its own dedicated swing on the tennis tour with its own Masters series," said three-time major winner Andy Murray on the X platform, formerly known as Twitter. "The way the fans support the tournaments there is incredible. Amazing atmospheres and is clearly part of their sporting culture. Vamos, ATP Tour." Six-time Grand Slam champion Boris Becker agreed: "Why unpopular? You're absolutely right. Tennis should go to countries/continents where tennis is booming." Argentina's Diego Schwartzman asked for more pressure. "Let ATP know this, Andy. Every year they put us, less support," he said, adding there should be more tournaments in South America "not just because of how the fans support the tournaments," but also "how many players we have and we had on the top.

INDIA SECURE 17TH STRAIGHT TEST SERIES WIN AT HOME

PTI ■ RANCHI
India's home supremacy weathered the 'Bazball' storm as Rohit Sharma's men secured a hard-fought five-wicket win over England in the fourth and penultimate Test for a 17th consecutive series triumph in their own backyard here on Monday, handing a harsh reality check to the visitors' unidimensional approach.

Overnight 40/0 in a chase of 192 here, India romped home after surviving a few hiccups with the opening duo of skipper Rohit Sharma (55 off 81 balls) and Yashasvi Jaiswal (37 of 44 balls) providing the perfect platform for others to build with their 84-run stand on day four of the match.

There were some jitters after the two departed in close succession followed by Rajat Patidar and Ravindra Jadeja's dismissal but Shubman Gill (52 not out) and Dhruv Jurel (39 not out) guided the side past the finishing line with an unbeaten 72-run partnership.

Left-arm spinner Tom Hartley (1/64) took the prized scalp of Rohit, while Shoaib Bashir was the most successful English bowler, scalping 3/79 in the

second innings for a match haul of eight wickets. India lead 3-1 in the series with the last game scheduled in Dharamsala from March 7. The team's last home series loss was a 1-2 defeat to an Alastair Cook-led England in 2012-13. Since then, India have won 39 out of 50 Tests at home.

The host team's victory marked a stunning downfall for 'Bazball', which has been a much-hyped winning mantra for England since 2022 and is now facing all-round criticism for being too rigid and lacking in depth.

Conceptualised after the appointment of Brendon McCullum as coach and Ben Stokes as captain, England's plan to attack irrespective of circumstances found its match in the unflappable approach of the Indians.

While the visitors remained stubborn barring the conservative hundred by veteran Joe Root here, the Indians adapted and refused to be bogged down by setbacks.

The opening loss in Hyderabad was expected to unsettle the home side which was already without superstar Virat Kohli, out due to personal reasons, and the injured K.L. Rahul.



On the contrary, the team was galvanised by the arrival of rookies, who grabbed their opportunities with both hands. Whether it was batter Sarfaraz Khan in Rajkot or

wicketkeeper Dhruv Jurel and pacer Akash Deep here, the team gained from the infusion of fresh energy. Jurel was a key factor in ensuring series-deciding win

with his gritty 90-run knock in the first innings and the solid cameo in the second essay — both efforts coming in high-pressure situations. On Monday, Rohit and Jaiswal

started positively. After seeing through veteran pacer James Anderson's opening over, Rohit brought out his swat flick to dispatch the 41-year-old for a maximum over wide long-

on. Bashir operated from the other end as runs came thick and fast for India, be it in singles or in boundaries. The sense of desperation was palpable as Anderson was seen sprinting down to the fine leg boundary and even threw his body but could not stop a boundary off Jaiswal's bat. The duo swept and reverse swept to tackle the low bounce from the spinners with Rohit playing the lead role in the partnership. He also got past 9,000 runs in first-class cricket. With nothing going their way, Stokes brought in Joe Root to unsettle the rhythm and the part-timer did just that by exploiting the rough against the Indian left-hander. Jaiswal failed to control his inside-out shot and Anderson pulled off an absolute stunner with a forward diving catch at backward point. Stokes was quick to take Root out of the attack and operated with his two spin twins in Bashir and Hartley, who did a decent job in stopping the run flow. Gill looked under pressure to rotate the strike, which affected a well-set Rohit at the other end as boundaries dried up, pushing India on the back-

foot. Hartley was finally rewarded for his miserly spell with the prized scalp of the Indian captain. Rohit came down the track only to be beaten by the flight and spin from Hartley and Ben Foakes did the needful behind the stumps. Though Rohit was way out of the crease, he was adjudged caught behind after getting a faint tinkle on the way to the wicketkeeper. Bashir raced to his eight-wicket match haul in his second Test by sending back Ravindra Jadeja and Sarfaraz Khan off successive deliveries right after the lunch break. The Indian chase began to unravel with those dismissals but Gill teamed up with Jurel to steady the ship. Against the run of play, Jurel produced a lovely cover drive off Bashir who went too wide and full. The Indian made full use of the opportunity to get the team's first boundary in 31 overs. There was a sigh of relief and the Indian victory did not seem remote anymore. The target soon came down to less than 50 and Gill too joined in the party smashing Bashir for back-to-back sixes.

No point in playing those who are not hungry: Rohit

PTI ■ RANCHI
India skipper Rohit Sharma on Monday had a stern message for aspirants wanting to make the national Test team without putting in the hard yards — opportunities will only be given to those who show "hunger for success" in the "toughest" format.

India sealed a 17th straight Test series win at home after beating England by five wickets in the fourth Test here on Monday. New entrants like Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel, Yashasvi Jaiswal and Akash Deep played decisive roles in the team's overall success, leaving Rohit mighty pleased and also quite clear about the kind of talent he wants in the side.

"Jin logon ko bookh hai, hum unhi logon ko mauka denge (We will give opportunities to only those who are hungry)," Rohit declared, making it clear that the team management is not willing to entertain players who do not display a burning desire to perform.

"Agar hunger nahi hai to unko khila ke koi matlab nahi hai (There's no point in playing those who don't have the hunger)," he said.

His comments came close on the heels of a BCCI diktat asking players like Ishan Kishan, and Shreyas Iyer to turn up for Ranji Trophy matches, a missive that was ignored by the duo.

"I don't see anyone in the team here who is not hungry. All the boys who are here and also those who are not, they all want to play. But the thing with Test cricket is that you get very few opportunities. If you don't



utilise them, they go away," he asserted.

The 25-year-old Kishan skipped the Ranji Trophy for his state Jharkhand, but was spotted in Baroda, training with Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya for the IPL scheduled next month.

Asked if the cash-rich league is affecting the drive for Test cricket among young players, Rohit said, "Test cricket is the toughest format. If you want to excel and achieve success in this format, you have to show the hunger."

Without naming anyone, Rohit pointed out the stringent selection criteria set by the team management.

"Yeh pata chal jata hai kisko bookh nahin hai aur kin logon ko yahan pe rehna nahin hai. Yeh pata chalta hai. Jo logon ko bookh hai, tough conditions mein khelna hai, un logon ko preference diya jayega. (It becomes apparent who is not hungry and who does not want to stay here. Those who are hungry, who want to play in tough conditions, will be given preference). It's very simple," he

emphasised.

"IPL is a very good format for us, but this is the toughest format and difficult to excel. You have to work hard to win...The last three wins didn't come easy, bowlers had to do long spells, batsmen had to grind it out. It's tough," he explained. Rohit further hailed the youngsters' performance particularly that of Jaiswal, who has scored two double hundreds so far, and wicketkeeper-batter Jurel, whose efforts in both the innings proved match-winning for India here.

"To adapt to the style of our play, these guys have come with an open mind and are ready to put their hands up and do it. That is the kind of guys we need in our squad. Basically, putting the team before individual," he said.

"Moving forward, it's a big plus for us. They showed they belong here, they have ability, skills to excel in this format. A lot of these guys are quite young, you will see these guys playing quite regularly in this format in the coming 5-10 years for sure," he added.

RCA president Vaibhav resigns

PTI ■ JAIPUR
Rajasthan cricket was thrown into turmoil on Monday after the state association's president Vaibhav Gehlot resigned from his position and alleged that the government action against RCA for non-payment of dues was driven by "malicious intent".

Gehlot's resignation came after the Rajasthan State Sports Council (RSSC) sealed the Sawai Man Singh Stadium, which is to host IPL matches from next month, as well as the RCA office on Friday for non-payment of dues.

"The RCA office was hastily locked. Now efforts have been started to create an atmosphere of distrust in the RCA by targeting me. Due to this, there is a possibility of spoiling the positive atmosphere of cricket



in the state," Gehlot said in a statement.

"In such a situation, it is unbearable for me that there should be any crisis in IPL matches in the state and cricket suffers loss. Therefore, to save the state's cricket and cricket players from this situation, I voluntarily resign from the post of RCA president." He said after the BJP came to

power in Rajasthan, action against RCA was started with "malicious intent".

"...Efforts have been started to create an atmosphere of distrust in RCA by targeting me," he alleged. Gehlot said that he got to know that a no-confidence motion has also been moved against him.

"In this regard, all I have to say is that no officer or member of

RCA discussed with me nor expressed disagreement on any issue, otherwise I would have already tendered my resignation."

Besides sealing the RCA office, the Rajasthan Sports Council had also written to the concerned bank to freeze the state cricket body's accounts over non-payment of dues of over Rs 40 crore. Former Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot said that Vaibhav, who is his son, has resigned from his post after being upset with the state government's behaviour. He said that action against RCA cannot be justified.

"He (Vaibhav) has resigned because he was upset with the behaviour of the government. There was no need to bring a no-confidence motion. If the government itself had expressed its sentiment that we want you to step down, then

resignation would have come. "Politics is going on. If the government changes, who will become the new president (of RCA)? How do we take possession? They want to capture. They have no feelings for cricket in their hearts and minds. Had it been so, proper action would have been taken. The action that has been taken (against RCA) cannot be called appropriate," the former CM said.

The MoU between RCA and Rajasthan State Sports Council (RSSC) concerning the SMS stadium had expired on February 22. RSSC had served a notice to the RCA for handing over the property on Friday, but it did not happen. RCA asked RSSC to extend the time period of the MoU. RSSC refused to do so and took possession of SMS Stadium and RCA Academy on Friday.

Madhya Pradesh reach Ranji Trophy semifinals

PTI ■ INDORE
Anubhav Agarwal ran through Andhra's batting lineup with a superb six-wicket haul to propel Madhya Pradesh into the semifinals of the Ranji Trophy following a four-run victory over Andhra here on Monday.

In a low-scoring quarterfinal played at the Holkar Stadium, bowlers ruled the roost for the majority of the contest and despite a spirited fight from the visiting side, Madhya Pradesh prevailed to make it to the final four.

With this win, the 2021-22 champions Madhya Pradesh became the second team after Tamil Nadu to enter the semifinals.

On what turned out to be the final day, Andhra were bowled out for a mere 165 chasing 170 to win on the fourth day. Resuming at 95/4 and with their senior batter Hanuma Vihari on strike with 75 runs more needed to win, Andhra were the more confident side but Agarwal led a stunning fightback once again for Madhya Pradesh.

Having taken three wickets in the first innings to help Madhya Pradesh take a vital lead of 62 runs, Agarwal terrorised the Andhra batters in the second innings to return figures of 6/52 from 19 overs. Kulwant Khejroliya picked 2/40 while Kumar Kartikeya and Saransh Jain bagged one wicket apiece.

Agarwal struck thrice to put Madhya Pradesh in complete command when he had overnight batter Karan Shinde (14) trapped leg-before in the 51st over of the innings. In his next over, Agarwal had Vihari (55 off 136 balls, 5 fours) caught by wicketkeeper

Himanshu Mantri and pinned Shoaib Mohammed Khan (0) in front of the wickets for a first-ball duck.

While Khejroliya removed KV Sasikanth (7), Andhra threatened to take the game away from MP's grasp with a 32-run stand for the ninth



wicket between Girinath Reddy (15 off 42 balls) and Ashwin Hebbar (22 off 52 balls). Agarwal found a timely breakthrough getting rid of Girinath, which made the task more difficult for Andhra who needed another nine runs with one wicket in hand.

With five runs needed for Andhra to win, Khejroliya trapped No 7 Hebbar (22 off 42 balls) to deliver a narrow win for his side.

For his match-haul of 9/85, Agarwal was declared the player of the match. Brief scores: Madhya Pradesh 234 & 107 beat Andhra 172 & 165 in 69.2 overs (Hanuma Vihari 55; Anubhav Agarwal 6/52) by 4 runs.

from leadership role due to "personal reasons" but now the right-handed batter said the association had asked him to resign.

"I was the captain in the first game against Bengal, during that game I shouted at the 17th player and he complained to his dad (who is a politician), his dad in return asked the Association to take action against me. "Although we chased 410 against last year's finalists Bengal, I was asked to resign from captaincy without any fault of mine," said Vihari.

The 30-year-old said he has put his body on the line for the team, recalling last year's Ranji Trophy quarterfinal match against Madhya Pradesh. A forearm injury to his right-hand had forced him to bat left-handed in that game, but he could not prevent Andhra's ouster.

IDCA wants deaf cricket inclusion in Para Asian Games

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Indian Deaf Cricket Association (IDCA) on Monday said it is working hard for the sport's inclusion in the Para Asian Games to provide a level-playing field to the differently-abled athletes.

IDCA is a founder member of Differently Aabled Cricket Council of India (DCCI), which is being supported by BCCL.

"We are working, we are already in touch with the Asian countries. We have already visited Hong Kong, which is one of the Asian countries who are ready to host the first Asian match with IDCA. But, right now, we are focussing on the World Cup," IDCA president Sumit Jain said here.

"We have got all the government certifications and some of them are under process which we will be getting very soon.

"Everything is in process right now and we are working very hard to get that into action very soon."

Even though they are being recognised and supported by BCCL, the IDCA doesn't get any monetary assistance from the nation's cricket board, which it hopes it will get in future.



"As of now, the BCCI has recognised us under DCCI and has been providing us kits and all other cricketing equipments. But there is no monetary support. We are hoping to get financial assistance from BCCI through DCCI in future," said IDCA CEO Roma Balwani.

"We have learnt that in 2025 cricket will be included in Paralympics, so we are hoping that this committee of BCCI

will come in the forefront and get all the disability cricket teams to participate." Balwani also hopes one day a deaf cricketer will represent the Indian mainstream team as besides hearing impairment they have no other problems.

"We are only hoping, we would love at least one of our players if he or she can join the mainstream team. It has been Sumit's vision for over a decade," she

said.

A 15-member Indian deaf cricket team, under Virendra Singh's captaincy, is set to participate in the Deaf International Cricket Council (DICC) T20 Champions Trophy 2024 to be held in Sharjah from March 6 to March 12.

Six countries — Australia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka and India — will fight for the top honours.

I will never play for Andhra again, lost my self respect there: Vihari

PTI ■ BENGALURU
Lashing out at the Andhra Cricket Association for mistreatment, senior batter Hanuma Vihari on Monday said he will never play for the state again.

Andhra's campaign in the ongoing Ranji Trophy came to an end when they lost to Madhya Pradesh by four runs in the quarterfinals on Monday.

"Sad part is the association thinks that players have to listen to whatever they say and players are there because of them. I've decided that I'll never play for Andhra where I lost my self-respect.

"I love the team. I love the way we're growing every season but the association doesn't want us to grow," Vihari wrote on Instagram.

The middle-order batter, who has played 16 Tests for India, started the season as Andhra



captain but stepped down after the first match against last year's runners-up Bengal. Ricky Bhui led the team for the rest of the season, and he now leads the season's run chart with 902 runs.

At the time, Vihari attributed his decision to move away

from leadership role due to "personal reasons" but now the right-handed batter said the association had asked him to resign.

"I was the captain in the first game against Bengal, during that game I shouted at the 17th player and he complained to his dad (who is a politician), his dad in return asked the Association to take action against me. "Although we chased 410 against last year's finalists Bengal, I was asked to resign from captaincy without any fault of mine," said Vihari.

The 30-year-old said he has put his body on the line for the team, recalling last year's Ranji Trophy quarterfinal match against Madhya Pradesh. A forearm injury to his right-hand had forced him to bat left-handed in that game, but he could not prevent Andhra's ouster.