



OPINION 6
INDIAN NATIONHOOD
THRIVES AMID DIVERSITY

WORLD 8
HOUTHI REBEL MISSILE SETS
CARGO SHIP ABLAZE

MONEY 10
SENSEX SURGES OVER
500 POINTS

RANCHI, FRIDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹3

Established 1864



the pioneer

www.dailypioneer.com

Published From
DELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL BHUBANESWAR
RANCHI RAIPUR CHANDIGARH
DEHRADUN HYDERABAD VIJAYWADA

Late City Vol. 17 Issue 52
*Air Surcharge Extra if Applicable

INDIA EYE 17TH
SERIES WIN ON
TROT AT HOME
12 SPORTS



TEMPLE TAX SPARKS OUTCRY

PTI ■ BENGALURU

The Government's move to collect funds from temples in the form of tax has not gone down well with the Opposition BJP. Red-flagging the Bill on the issue of Hindu places of worship being a soft target for the Congress, the BJP charged the ruling party with trying to fill its 'empty coffers' with temple money. A related Bill was passed on Wednesday.

Taking exception to the move, BJP State president BY Vijayendra said, "Corrupt, inept Loot Sarkaar with its penchant for anti-Hindu ideology in the guise of secularism, has cast its evil eyes on the temple revenues." "Through the Hindu Religious Endowments amendment act, it is trying to siphon-off donations as well as offerings from Hindu temples and religious institutions in order to fill its empty coffers," he said in a post on 'X'.

The Shivamogga MLA said the government plans to "gobble" up 10 per cent of the temple revenue exceeding Rs 1 crore and 5 per cent of those below Rs 1 crore. "This not only reflects the deplorable condition of this government, but also shows its abject hate towards Hindu Dharma." Temple funds should be dedicatedly utilised for renovation of temples and to

BJP accuses Karnataka Government of trying to fill its empty coffers with temple money



File Photo

facilitate work beneficial to devotees, rather than diverting it for other purposes, which would be an injustice and betrayal of people's religious beliefs, the BJP State chief said. Why only Hindu temples are targeted for revenue, leaving out other religions, is a question raised by millions of devotees, he said. "Instead of grabbing the devotees' money, government can install donation boxes so that the concerned citizens

can help this penniless Govt boost its revenue as a gesture of goodwill," he stated. Defending the move as aimed at ensuring welfare of different sections, the Congress sought to turn the tables on its rival saying the saffron party had effected an amendment in 2011 to seek funds from high-income Hindu shrines. The Karnataka Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments (Amendment) Bill was passed

in the State Assembly on February 21. Regarding the Bill, the Government said it was necessary to enhance the amount of common pool fund, include a person skilled in Vishwa Hindu Temple architecture and sculpture in the committee of management of notified institutions and to form district and state-level committees to improve shrines and infrastructure for the safety of pilgrims.

Transport and Hindu Religious Endowments Ramalinga Reddy told reporters that the provision was not new but has existed since 2003. He also said an amendment was brought by the then BJP Government in 2011 to collect funds from high income group temples. Karnataka Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments Act 1997 came into force on May 1, 2003 and provisions were made for Common Pool Fund under Section 17 of the said Act, he explained. Common Pool Fund was implemented in the year 2003 itself. Section 17 of the Act was amended in 2011 to collect funds from high income group temples so as to aid temples with lesser income under the said fund. The Rajya Dharmika Parishad, a committee to improve the temple management for the benefit of pilgrims, is authorised to utilise Common Pool, he said. According to him, there were 3,000 C-Grade temples in Karnataka, which have an annual income of less than Rs 5 lakh from where the 'Dharmika Parishad' gets no money. Temples earning between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 25 lakh were classified as B-grade temples, from where 5 per cent of the gross income had been going to the committee since 2003.

Bengal Fire Rages on

Sheikh Shahjahan still missing

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Sandeshkhali erupted once again on Thursday amid the visit of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes team, which received a plethora of complaints of land grab and torture on Adivasi people, including trafficking of their women. Hundreds of women from Jhupkhali, a hamlet in the Bermajur area adjacent to Sandeshkhali, armed with bamboo sticks, attacked and torched the properties of Sheikh Siraj, the brother of Trinamool Congress strongman and one of the prime accused in a land-grab and molestation case Sheikh Shahjahan, alleging that thousands of bighas of their lands had been forcibly occupied, sold via impersonation, and converted into fisheries. The incident took place hours after Director General of Police Rajeev Kumar left the riverine island at the mouth of the Sunderbans after an overnight stay in the area, during the visit of the NCST team led by its vice-chairperson, Ananta Nayak. "Whatever I have seen and heard makes me feel like crying... it should not have taken place in a democratic country... I spoke to the villagers, and they (Sandeshkhali residents)



Security personnel outside TMC leader Sheikh Shahjahan's home at Sandeshkhali

PTI

have mentioned the name of a political leader. We will include it in our report. We have received more than 23 complaints so far," Nayak said, adding that the findings of the team would be compared with the ground report before submitting it to President Droupadi Murmu. A woman, while describing her woes to the members of the visiting team, narrated how "no complaints of my missing daughter have been registered till now... she went missing seven years ago... when we went to the Sandeshkhali Police Station, they asked us to get a written recommendation from Sheikh Shahjahan." Another woman said how her land was occupied and converted into a Trinamool Congress party office "just because I

am a CPI(M) worker," while most of the others said how their lands had been grabbed and sold via impersonation. A large contingent of police force led by Barasat range DIG Bhaskar Mukherjee rushed to the area and held talks with the locals. "The police have controlled the situation and assured the local people that their issues will be addressed," he said. This was the third team to visit the strife-torn region after the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the National Commission for Women. Sandeshkhali shot into national news on January 5 when Shahjahan's henchmen attacked and injured a team of Enforcement Directorate officials during a search operation at his house.

CAPSULE

CBI searches Satya Pal Malik premises

New Delhi: The CBI conducted searches at the premises of former Jammu and Kashmir governor Satya Pal Malik and 29 other locations on Thursday in connection with alleged corruption in the Rs 2,200-crore Kiru Hydropower project, officials said. The federal agency started its operation in the morning, with around 100 officers mobilised to swoop down at the 30 locations in Jammu, Srinagar, Delhi, Gurugram, Mumbai, Baghpat, Noida, Patna, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Barmer, Nagaur and Chandigarh, the officials said. "During searches evidence of huge cash deposits, investment in fixed deposits, investment in properties in various cities, digital and documentary evidence, etc. Have been recovered," said the CBI.

US to reduce visa wait time for Indians

New Delhi: The United States is working towards further reducing the wait time for visitor visas for Indians following a decrease of 75 per cent last year, according to US Bureau of Consular Affairs Assistant Secretary Rena Bitter. In an interview with PTI, Bitter noted that today more Indians can travel to the US than in any other time in history. "Last year, the Embassy in India processed 1.4 million visas, explosion of an incredible number...In every category there is no wait time at all except in one area of travel where there is still some wait time and that is people travelling for the first time to the United States for tourism," she said.

Modi says Opposition thrives on negativity

PTI ■ MEHSANA/AHEMDABAD

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday targeted the Congress, saying it continues to live in negativity and is not ready to leave the path of hatred even when the grand Ram temple has been built in Ayodhya. He said his Government is making efforts to improve the lives of people from all sections of society. "The aim of Modi's guarantee is changing the lives of people at the last rung in society," he said. On one hand temples are being built in the country, the government is also building pucca houses for crores of poor people, the PM said.

"This is the time when whether it is the work of God or work of the country, both are happening at a fast pace," he said. "We will carry out development work and preserve our heritage," he added. The PM was addressing the public after inaugurating the Valinath Mahadev temple in Gujarat's Mehsana district. He also inaugurated and laid the foundation stones of various projects costing more than Rs 8,350 crore. Modi said for a long time in Independent India, the Congress



created a conflict and enmity "between development and heritage." "If anyone is to be blamed for this, it is the same Congress which ruled the country for decades. These are the same people who made even a holy place like Somnath (temple) a cause of controversy," he said. The Congress did not even show the desire to hoist a religious flag at the Pavagadh temple in Gujarat's Panchmahal district, and for decades linked the Sun temple at Modhera with vote bank politics, he said. "These are the same people who raised questions about the existence of Lord Ram and created hurdles in the construction of his

temple. And today, when a grand temple has been constructed at (Lord Ram's) birthplace, when the entire country is happy with it, the people who live in negativity are not leaving the path of hatred," he said. The PM also attended the consecration ceremony of Valinath Dham Temple. "Gujarat also has many symbols of ancient civilisation of India. These symbols are very important not only to understand history but also to connect the coming generations with their roots. That is why it has been the effort of our government to preserve and develop them as world heritage," he said.

AAP Congress Strategy for 2024 Unclear

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

A day after the Congress and the Samajwadi Party agreed on seat sharing for the Lok Sabha elections, the AAP is believed to have finalised and sealed the arrangements for Delhi, and the formal announcement can be made anytime. Sources said the Congress and the AAP have agreed on the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, with the AAP contesting on 4 and the Congress on 3. The Congress has also decided to allocate one seat to the AAP in Haryana and two in Gujarat. While the Haryana seat is likely to be either Gurugram or Faridabad, those in Gujarat include Bharuch and Bhavnagar. The AAP will field candidates from the South Delhi, West Delhi, North West Delhi, and New Delhi seats, while the

Congress will contest from the Chandni Chowk, East Delhi, and North East Delhi constituencies, according to sources in the AAP. Prior to this, the AAP had offered the Congress just one out of the seven Lok Sabha seats keeping in mind the 'dharma of alliance'. "Election on a merit basis, the Congress party does not deserve even a single seat in Delhi, but keeping in mind the 'dharma of alliance', we are offering them one seat in Delhi. We propose the Congress party on one seat and the AAP on six seats," AAP MP Sandeep Pathak had said while addressing a press conference. All the seven Lok Sabha seats in the national capital are currently held by the BJP. Former senior party leader Ahmed Patel's son and daughter were contenders for the

Bharuch seat. The Congress is also planning to field at least one Dalit candidate in the national capital. Additionally, the party will field a candidate from the general category and a woman candidate. Meanwhile, the AAP will give up its south Goa constituency for the Congress. Whether the Congress-AAP alliance in Delhi will help break the deadlock in Punjab is not yet clear. An alliance between the AAP and the Congress in Punjab was always going to be tricky given that they are the main rivals in the State as of now, though their tie-up in the Chandigarh mayoral polls managed to be a success. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, which followed the 2017 strong win for the Congress in the Punjab Assembly polls, the Congress won 8 out of the total 13 seats, securing 40.6 per cent of the vote. The Akali Dal and BJP won 2 seats each, with 27.8 per cent and 9.7 per cent of the vote share, respectively.

Freedom of Speech or Expression?

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A day after the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology finalised its emergency blocking orders against 177 social media accounts and posts linked to the farmers' protests, social media giant X (formerly Twitter) on Thursday said it disagrees with these actions in accordance with freedom of speech and expression but will "withhold the accounts and posts in India." Elon Musk, owner of X, has said the platform has received orders from the Indian Government to block certain accounts and links. Failure to comply could result in potential penalties for the platform and its employees, including significant fines and imprisonment. This marks a new flashpoint in the

escalating tensions between the social media platform and the Indian Government, with the former having sued the Centre over content-blocking orders in 2022. The ruling last year, however, went against the company. Nevertheless, the Centre is yet to respond to the allegations. Opposition parties allege that democracy is being "murdered" in the country after the microblogging platform X voiced disagreement with the Centre's order to block accounts and posts related to ongoing farmers' protests. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi questioned, "If farmers ask for MSP, shoot them — is this the mother of democracy? When the youth ask for an appointment, then refuse to even listen to them — is this the Mother of Democracy?"

Jumbo Shankar in Delhi Zoo ready for mate from Dubai

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Shankar, the solitary 27-year-old African elephant residing at the Delhi Zoo, may soon find companionship from an unexpected source - Dubai Safari Park. Indian Oil Corporation Ltd has stepped forward to facilitate the transportation of a female elephant from Dubai, according to sources at the Delhi Zoo, also known as the National Zoological Park. Initially, there were plans to bring a female elephant from South Africa, but talks could

not materialise due to technical and logistic glitches. Now, officials have identified Dubai Safari Park as the potential source to bring an African female elephant for Shankar. Shankar is not alone in this predicament; at the Mysuru zoo, Rambo, another African bull elephant in his 20s, has been solitary since 2016 following the death of its sire, Timbo. African elephants, the largest land mammals, differ from Asian elephants. Sources indicate that of the three

female elephants, one may be sent to Mysuru Zoo to

accompany Rambo. However, plans are still being finalised.



Having lived solitarily for the past two decades, concerns have arisen regarding their mental health, prompting efforts to find suitable companions to ensure their well-being and facilitate procreation. Reports have indicated instances of Shankar self-injuring, particularly during the 'musth' phase. As social creatures, elephants become distressed when alone and lacking companionship. Zoo officials previously attempted to mate Shankar

with Asiatic elephants, but without success. While elephants often heed their mahouts, there have been instances of aggression resulting in fatalities among handlers. "Discussions regarding bringing female elephants from Dubai are in preliminary stages. We intend to bring at least three elephants. We approach this potential pairing with cautious optimism, recognising the importance of ensuring compatibility and a smooth transition for the

female elephants from Dubai. Plans are being made for careful introductions and acclimatisation to prioritise the well-being of the animals," said the sources. With its extensive logistical capabilities and commitment to environmental stewardship, IOC's involvement marks a pivotal moment in Shankar's quest for companionship. As part of its corporate social responsibility and conservation efforts, IOC has already taken initiatives by adopting rhinoceroses in

various zoos across India. In fact, the rhinoceros serves as IOC's brand ambassador. Shankar has been housed singly and separately from the Asian elephants at the zoo since 2001 when the female African elephant brought from Zimbabwe passed away. Shankar was a one-year-old calf when it arrived at the Delhi zoo from Zimbabwe in 1998 as a diplomatic gift. Weighing up to 6,000 kgs and measuring up to 3.3m at the shoulder, the African Elephant is the world's largest land mammal.

2 cyclists of JSSPS win international competition

PNS : RANCHI

Two cyclists of Jharkhand State Sports Promotion Society, (J.S.S.P.S.) won gold medals in the 43rd Senior and 30th Junior Asian Track Cycling Championships held in New Delhi from 21 to 26 February 2024. Sabina Kumari won the gold medal in the women's team sprint event, while Narayan Mahato won the silver medal in the boys sprint category. These two winners (Narayan Mahato and Sabina Kumari) will represent Jharkhand as well as India in the upcoming World Championship to be held in China in August 2024. J.S.S.P.S, which is being



jointly run by Central Coalfields Limited and Jharkhand State Government

with the objective to encourage the sports talent among budding players across the



state. Altogether 42 cyclist riders including 03 from Jharkhand

(02 from J.S.S.P.S. and 01 from Lohardaga) from India are participating in this inter-

national event. However, 600 players from 18 countries are participating in various events in this competition.

On the first day of competition, Narayan Mahato and Sabina Kumari performed outstandingly and won medals for JSSPS.

Narayan Mahato and Sabina Kumari thanked the CCL management and Jharkhand Govt. for supporting them and fulfilling their childhood dream.

Altogether 380 J.S.S.P.S cadets are undergoing training at Sports Academy, Khelgaon, Ranchi. These cadets are provided free residential training under the supervision of professional coaches.

Intensify campaigning for voter awareness: DC

VINOD PRASAD : LOHARDAGA

The Sweep Cell meeting was held in the Collectorate Auditorium on Thursday under the chairmanship of Deputy Commissioner Dr. Waghmare Prasad Krishna. Discussions were held with various departments and non-government institutions present in the meeting regarding voter awareness related to the upcoming Lok Sabha elections 2024. It was suggested that the Postal Department, Bank and Supply Department, Gas Agency, should send the message of voter awareness to their respective customers through flex, banners, selfie points, stickers and stamps. The Animal Husbandry Department was directed to spread awareness messages to the voters in its animal vaccination camps. The Deputy Commissioner directed the Nodal Officer, Sweep Cell to provide the necessary design. There was discussion about installing selfie points in all offices and running signature campaigns for voter awareness.



Nuvoco Vistas launches its second ready-mix plant

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a significant expansion move, Nuvoco Vistas Corp. Ltd., the fifth-largest cement group, has inaugurated its second state-of-the-art Ready-mix Concrete Plant (RMX) in Patna. Positioned strategically at Ranipur Milki Chak, Begampur bypass, this plant exemplifies Nuvoco's unwavering commitment to delivering high-quality building materials to the Patna region.

The new plant, known as Patna-II, is situated approximately 24 kilometers from Nuvoco's first plant and is designated as the regional flagship plant for the company. Its location is carefully chosen to tap into the unexplored market potential and ensure quick access to Nuvoco's Cement Plant in the area. Moreover, the proximity to various Industrial, Commercial, and Residential

developments positions Patna-II to provide high-quality concrete solutions in a timely manner.

Prashant Jha, Chief of the Ready-Mix (RMX) Concrete and Modern Building Materials business at Nuvoco Vistas, expressed his enthusiasm during the inauguration, stating, "The launch of the Patna-II plant underscores Nuvoco's dedication to providing innovative solutions to meet the evolving needs of the construction industry in Bihar. This new facility will not only strengthen our presence in the region but also enable us to serve our customers more efficiently."

The Patna-II facility boasts a capacity of 60 cubic meters per hour and features a Twin Shaft Mixer capable of producing all grades of concrete. Among the offerings are Value Added Products (VAPs) under brands such as XCON - Xpert concrete with Nuvoco



mixes, CONCRETO showcasing Self-Compacting Smart Concrete, Light Weight Concrete (Structural & Non-structural grades), Fibre Enriched Concrete, High Strength Concrete, Water & Crack Resistant Concrete, and Foundation Expert Concrete. Additionally, the facility introduces the ECODURE range of Green Concrete, ARTISTE Decorative Concrete Floors,

and INSTAMIX Ready to use Bagged Concrete.

Nuvoco Vistas Corp. Ltd.'s expansion into Patna with the launch of Patna-II signifies not only growth for the company but also a step forward in catering to the dynamic construction needs of the region, setting a new standard for quality and innovation in the Ready-Mix Concrete industry.

Movie Tickets at Rs 99 at PVR INOX on Feb 23

RAHUL SHARMA : BOKARO

PVR INOX has announced a groundbreaking pricing strategy that promises to make cinematic indulgence more accessible than ever before. At the heart of this groundbreaking initiative is the remarkable offer of mainstream movie tickets priced at an astonishingly low rate of just Rs 99. People can now enjoy the latest blockbusters on the big screen without breaking the bank. This move is poised to democratize cinema-going, making it accessible to a wider audience than ever before.

For those craving a touch of luxury and comfort, PVR INOX is offering recliner seats in the mainstream for a mere Rs 199, allowing movie buffs to kick back and relax in style while enjoying their favorite films.

Expressing his enthusiasm for the occasion, Gautam Dutta, Co-CEO PVR INOX Ltd, said, "Movies hold a special place in the hearts of Indian audiences, celebrated with unparalleled zeal. We are thrilled to further amplify this celebration by commemorating 'Cinema Lovers Day', drawing inspiration from the success of 'National Cinema Day'.

Notably the celebratory offer of ₹99 is applicable to all mainstream cinemas for all movie screenings booked for the 23rd of February 2024, across various Indian cities, with the exception of the southern states, excluding Karnataka.

First meeting of Bokaro City OLIC held

PNS : BOKARO

The first meeting of the Bokaro steel City Official Language Implementation Committee (NARAKAS) for the fiscal year 2023-24 was convened under the chairmanship of Mr. B.K. Tiwari, Elected DIC of BSL, at the Conference Hall of Bokaro Residence. The meeting was attended by officials from the Government of India's Official Language Department, including Deputy Director (Implementation) Nirmal Kumar Dubey, as well as other officials from BSL and representatives of various member organizations of Bokaro NARAKAS.

The meeting began with the ceremonial lighting of lamps by the guests. Subsequently, N.A. Saifi, General Manager (HR & Admin) of BSL, welcomed the



guests. Shashank Shekhar, Assistant General Manager (HR & Admin) of BSL, briefed the attendees on the status of implementation of decisions taken in the previous meeting.

Addressing the representatives of member organizations, B.K. Tiwari, urged everyone to ensure increased usage of Hindi in official work. He emphasized that the adoption of the latest technologies and e-tools has facilitated the implementation of official language policies and

called for further momentum in this direction. Deputy Director (Implementation) Nirmal Kumar Dubey also provided necessary guidelines for ensuring official language implementation in Bokaro NARAKAS.

During the meeting, representatives of all member organizations expressed their commitment to promote the use of the official language. In conclusion, Umesh Kumar Singh, Deputy General Manager (HR & Admin), extended a vote of thanks.

XL Runathon 2024 on February 25, to celebrate 75 years of excellence

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a spectacular celebration marking 75 years of unparalleled leadership in management education, the XLRI Alumni Association is all set to organise inaugural XL Runathon 2024. Scheduled for Sunday, 25 February, in Jamshedpur, this landmark event aims to bring together the extended XLRI community, comprising students, alumni, faculty, and enthusiasts from the corporate and local communities, in a spirited celebration of health, heritage, and unity.

"The XL Runathon 2024, crafted as a tribute to XLRI's 75 years of legacy, is more than just a run; it's a celebration of the values and ethos that XLRI has stood for since its inception. Participants can anticipate an electrifying atmosphere, with three cate-



gories: the 2K Walk (reporting at 5 am), 5K Run (reporting at 5 am), and the 10K Run (reporting at 5:00 am) on Sunday, 25th February 2024, starting from the XLRI football ground. Each category is designed to accommodate varying levels of fitness and enthusiasm," said an official of the association.

The XL Runathon 2024 aims to foster a spirit of community and wellness among participants while also rais-

ing awareness and funds for the education of underprivileged students. This initiative underscores XLRI's commitment to social responsibility and inclusive growth, reflecting the institute's mission to shape responsible business leaders for tomorrow.

Special Features: A scenic route through the heart of Jamshedpur, offering participants a unique blend of natural beauty and industrial

heritage. Engaging activities and entertainment along the course to motivate runners. Eco-friendly event management practices to minimize the environmental impact. Attractive prizes and medals for top finishers in each category. Exclusive XL Runathon 2024 merchandise for all participants.

Registration details and further information about the event can be found on the official XL Runathon website: www.xlrunthon.com, and social media channels.

"We are thrilled to launch the XL Runathon 2024 as a fitting tribute to XLRI's 75 years of excellence. This event symbolizes the strength, endurance, and spirit of our community. We invite everyone to join us in celebrating this milestone and contributing to a noble cause," noted the official.

Regional Conference on remand and bail jurisprudence in Palamu on Feb 25

PNS : DALTONGANJ

Judicial Academy Jharkhand will hold a one day regional conference on key issues of remand and bail jurisprudence in Palamu. The Judicial Academy is organising it in association with the Palamu judgeship. It's going to be the first such regional conference of the year 2024. The last one was held in Bokaro on August 6, 2023.

Justice Ratnakar Bhengra will be the Chief Guest on the occasion. Justice Anil Kumar Chowdhury and Justice Ambuj Nath will also be gracing this regional conference.

The conference is slated for February 25 and its venue is the government engineering college at Basoura village under the Lesliganj police station limits.

Civil courts registrar Amit Gupta said "The venue of this regional conference is the government engineering college at Basoura under the Lesliganj police station limits."

On being asked as to why its venue so far away said around 11 kms from Daltonganj to which Gupta said "There was the space crunch. We tried to have Pdt Deendayal Upadhyay Smriti Bhavan here but it is

being renovated now. As the elite audience could be around 300 or so we needed space and government engineering college fits the bill for it."

The regional conference on key issues of remand and bail jurisprudence is an awareness drive, added the registrar.

It's a matter of concern if 154th report of the Law Commission of India and 3rd report of the National Police Commission is read together wherein it is stated that 60 per cent of arrests is 'unnecessary' that causes 42.3 per cent of prison expenses due to such arrests. Indiscriminate arrests and difficulty in obtaining bails are some of the bane of the criminal justice system.

Court sources said three fourths of any jail across India has undertrial inmates. The undertrials outnumber the convicts. It's dismissal or decline of bails more than grant of it at the trial courts level.

Many trial courts develop knee jerks when it comes to grant of bail. It declines bail in a very mundane or mechanical way.

Bail is declined or dismissed in a hackneyed manner at the trial courts where rhetoricism is most evident like bail petition stands rejected as the case is of heinous or serious nature.

BSL-RMHP Dept inaugurates renovated Hall, Quality Park

PNS : BOKARO

On February 22nd, in the R & M H P Department's Raw Material Storage Area (RMS-01) sector, the inauguration of the newly upgraded Human Resource Hall and the newly constructed Quality Park, along with a water fountain, was carried out by the DIC Birendra Kumar Tiwari. The event was attended by the Chief General Manager (C&D), Chief General Manager (RMHP), as well as department and plant officials and staff. The inauguration ceremony marked a significant milestone in the ongoing efforts to enhance facilities within the department. The upgraded Human Resource Hall, equipped with modern amenities, is set to serve as a hub for various training programs, workshops, and employee engagement activities aimed at fostering professional growth and development. Additionally, the newly constructed Quality Park adds to the aesthetic appeal of the area while providing a serene environment for relaxation and rejuvenation. The inclusion of a water fountain further enhances the ambiance, creating a tranquil oasis within the industrial setting. Speaking at the inauguration, Tiwari expressed his appreciation for the collaborative efforts that led to the successful completion of the project. He emphasized the department's commitment to providing top-notch facilities for its employees and reiterated the importance of creating conducive environments for productivity and well-being. The upgraded Human Resource Hall and the newly constructed Quality Park stand as testament to the department's dedication to continuous improvement and innovation, ensuring a positive work environment for all stakeholders.



PNS : HAZARIBAG

A lecture was organized on the theme of World Day of Social Justice in University Law College Vinoba Bhawe University. Dr. Jaydeep Sanyal delivered the welcome speech, highlighting that February 20 is celebrated globally as the 'World Day of Social Justice.' The main objective of this day is to raise

awareness against social injustice.

Rashmi Pradhan, Principal in charge presiding over the program, emphasized that achieving social justice requires the eradication of fear, exploitation, injustice, and discrimination in every segment of society. Dr. Margaret Lakda, the main guest, stressed the importance of organizing this day

internationally to create awareness about social justice issues. She mentioned the unfortunate conditions affecting millions worldwide, depriving them of basic necessities like home, job, healthcare, education, and nutrition without any fault of their own. Ensuring social justice is a shared responsibility, and creating awareness among the general public is

Body of BSF jawan found in well

AVINASH ANJAN : HAZARIBAG

BSF jawan Subhash Kumar died under suspicious circumstances during training in his battalion in Indore. Subhash Kumar, younger son of Horil Sav, was a resident of Oriya, Gram Panchayat located in Sadar block. According to the information, Subhash Kumar was missing from the training place at STC BSF Camp in Indore since Friday last week and the process of searching for him was going on. The family members were worried after getting the news of the missing and relatives including Subhash Kumar's elder brother rushed to Indore to search.

On Monday, the body of Subhash Kumar was found in a suspicious condition from the well located in the camp. As soon as the news



of his death reached home. Then there was mourning in his family and the entire village. He left behind his entire family including his parents, elder brother and sister. After the post-mortem in the district hospital of Indore, BSF soldiers saluted the mortal

remains of Subhash Kumar, offered flowers and bid farewell to their native place. Then from there his mortal remains were brought to BSF Meru Camp. Tiranga Yatra was taken out on the initiative of the villagers on Wednesday morning. The mortal remains

were brought respectfully from BSF Meru Camp to Prabhu Chowk residence. A large number of people participated in the funeral procession of Jawan Subhash Kumar. Locals demanded appropriate compensation from the BSF jawans and the government.

Budget Session of Assembly begins today, Speaker holds all party meet

Court denies former CM Hemant Soren's plea to participate in Budget session



Assembly Speaker Rabindranath Mahto, Chief Minister Champai Soren and Opposition leader Amar Kumar Bauri during a meeting in view of Budget Session at Assembly in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

The Champai Soren government will table its first budget on February 27. The session will have seven working days and will conclude on March 2. In this concise session, the state government will present a supplementary budget for the current financial year on the first day itself. February 24th and 25th will observe Saturday and Sunday as holidays. Discussions on the third supplementary budget will take place on Monday, February 26th. The budget for the financial year 2024-25 will be presented in the Assembly on February 27th.

Subsequently, debates will occur regarding the budget for the financial year 2024-25. Except for the first day, all days will have designated question hours. February 29th and March 1st have been allocated for the government's responses regarding the budget. The final day will see discussions on bills and non-government resolutions. On the preparations of the budget session, the Jharkhand Assembly Speaker Rabindra Nath Mahto on Thursday held an all-party meeting to discuss the strategy for smooth functioning of the House during the Budget session beginning Friday. Chief Minister Champai

Soren, Leader of Opposition Amar Bauri and senior leaders of other parties attended the meeting. "The budget session of the Jharkhand Assembly is beginning from Friday. So, a formal meeting was held with leaders of the political parties and various issues were discussed," the Speaker told reporters. Bauri and independent legislator Saryu Roy demanded that the Speaker raise the number of days of the session. "This is the first budget of the Champai Soren government. This is an opportunity for the new chief minister to present his vision, direction

and policies before the people of the state. We have requested the Speaker to increase the working days," Bauri told reporters. Roy said, "During the budget session, there should be a debate on the demands of every department. Earlier, there were budget sessions for 25-26 days. Then, it was reduced to 17-18 days. Now, it has been curtailed further, which is not good." The chief minister, however, said that the budget session was kept short due to political circumstances in the state. "The session will be fruitful and the budget will be in the interest of the state," Soren said.

Meanwhile, in another development the special court in Ranchi on Thursday denied permission to former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren to participate in the state Budget session beginning Friday. Soren, who was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on January 31 in a money laundering case, had filed a petition before the special PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) court seeking permission to participate in the budget session. Soren was sent to the Birsas Munda Central Jail on February 15 after his 13-day custody of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) ended.

Governor asks students to contribute to betterment of society

Attends First Convocation Ceremony of Dr. SP Mukherjee University

PNS : RANCHI

Governor CP Radhakrishnan today exhorted students to use their knowledge and skills for the betterment of the society. The Governor was addressing students in the first Convocation of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University here on Thursday. Congratulating the degree recipients the Governor said, "This is a momentous achievement, and it's not just your success but also a proud moment for your parents, the faculty members, and the staff who have supported and guided you along the way. As the Chancellor of this university, it brings me great pleasure to be with you all to share this joy."

"Today marks a significant milestone in your academic journey. This moment of joy and satisfaction will forever be engraved in your memory. However, let me remind you that your education doesn't end here; it's the foundation upon which you'll build your future endeavors. The knowledge and values you've acquired here will guide you through the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead," he said.

"Remember to dream big. Success doesn't happen



Governor CP Radhakrishnan presents a certificate to a student during the 1st Convocation of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University, in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

overnight; it results from hard work, determination, and perseverance. As our former president, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, said, 'You have to dream before your dreams can come true.' I have complete confidence in your abilities to overcome any obstacles that come your way," said the Governor. Radhakrishnan further said that education is not just about personal gain but also about contributing to the betterment of society. Have you thought about how you can make a difference? Please consider the importance of ethics and social responsibility in all your activities, he said. "Use your education and skills to impact your community and society positively.

Extend your help to students from the economically weaker section of the society and help them of access better education opportunities. Your achievements should not only benefit you alone but also uplift those around you," he said.

As many as 198 toppers of Graduation and Post-Graduation courses were given Gold medals in the convocation.

Vice Chancellor Tapan Kumar Shandilya, DSW Dr SM Abbas, Registrar Dr Namita Singh, Examination Controller Dr Ashish Gupta, Deans, HoDs and members of senate and syndicate along with hundreds of students participated in the programme.

Dalmia Cement launches 'RCF strong to Ghar strong'



PNS : RANCHI

Taking the onus of guiding and assisting customers with right usage of cement in the most critical part of the house that is Roof Column Foundation (RCF), Dalmia Cement is making a tectonic shift in its brand focus with its new campaign "RCF Strong to Ghar Strong" in the State Capital on Thursday.

The campaign that would consolidate Dalmia Cement as the 'RCF Expert' will feature Superstar Ranveer Singh. It launched through a comprehensive multimedia approach with Superstar Ranveer adding much efficacy to the

brand's message of predominant technical knowledge, and peerless service, as amplified by the slogan, "RCF Strong to Ghar Strong".

Commenting on the initiative, Dalmia Bharat Limited, National Sales Head, Sunil Agarwal said, "During our illustrious journey over the last eight decades, Dalmia Cement has stood shoulder to shoulder to build our Nation from its roots, contributing to create iconic national landmarks as well as happy homes for millions. Thus, constructing such a generational asset with the proper application of cement and technical expertise not only ensures structural integrity, but also represents an investment for life."

Zonal Head, Girish Rania Bohidar shared, "In addition to providing the right cement for RCF, we also have a strong on-the-ground technical workforce which assists home builders and contractors in using the cement in the right way. The RCF campaign brings to fore this value proposition". The State Head, Srikanth Verma was also present on the occasion.

BJP demands CBI probe in all JSSC, JPSC exam from 2019

PNS : RANCHI

BJP state spokesperson and MLA Amit Mandal on Thursday said that the youth of the state are being cheated by the coalition government demanding CBI probe in JSSC and JPSC examinations conducted from 2019 till now.

Mandal said that the full form of JSSC is JMM Government Services and Commission as the examination body is known for paper leaks and bugling in examinations.

The examination body was in the news this year after the JSSC paper leak. JSSC CGL 2023 was scheduled on 28 January 2024. However, the question paper was leaked even before the examination was conducted.

On February 6, the Jharkhand government announced the constitution of a special investigation team (SIT), to probe the leakage case.



BJP MLA Amit Mandal during a press conference at the party office in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

Jharkhand chief minister Champai Soren announced during the assembly session that a probe into the JSSC CGL exam paper leak constituted a Special Investigating Team (SIT).

The BJP leader claimed that many contradictions are seen in the state government. The dispute regarding appointment rules, employment policy and language is not hidden from the youth of

the state.

He said that since the beginning, BJP has been fighting for the rights of the youth from the streets to the House regarding the JPSC-JSSC issues. BJP MLAs and workers, but the state government lathi-charged the BJP workers and even registered an FIR under serious section.

He said that the people of the state are seeing the evidence of collusion between the paper leak case and other blacklisted agencies and government people. Said that the Jharkhand Competitive Examination Bill is a well-planned conspiracy by the government to suppress the voice of the youth. Anyone who speaks against government scams will go to jail.

Said that all the agencies which were involved in the examination under the Hemant government have been banned in some state, blacklisted or action is going on. Amit Mandal said that in

2019, Satwat Infosol Private Limited Chennai was found guilty in the Railway Recruitment Board RRB JE paper leak case in Thane Maharashtra. In 2017, Infosol Private Limited was named in the CBI charge sheet in the Ordnance Factory Trichy appointment scam.

He said what is the reason that Satwat Infosol Private Limited was included in Lab Assistant and JSSC PGT whereas 6 questions in Lab Assistant and 22 questions in JSSC PGT were cancelled. The BJP leader further said that BINSYS Technology Agency was involved in JSSC JE exam, this is the same agency which is blacklisted in Bihar and is involved in Bihar State Constable Recruitment Scam. Said that ICN INDIA pvt ltd was involved in the JPSC 7th to 10th examinations, which is the same agency which was banned in Bihar in 2019 and an FIR was lodged against it.

British High Commission, Kolkata officials visit CMPDI

PNS : RANCHI

First Secretary Trade, Niall Ahern and Senior Trade Advisor (Agriculture, AgriTech, Responsible Mining, Maritime, Engineering & Manufacturing Sector), Department for Business and Trade from British Deputy High Commission, Kolkata, Anup Narayanan today visited CMPDI and interacted with Manoj Kumar, CMD, CMPDI and other Senior officials of CMPDI(HQ), Ranchi.

CMPDI presented the identified potential areas for Co-operation in various fields like Mining Technologies, Surface Coal Gasification and Renewables, Smart Mining & Safety, Fugitive Methane emissions and Rare and Critical Minerals and queries related to the above topics were raised during the interaction. Shri Niall Ahern assured all possible co-operation. Ajay Kumar, Director (Tech/P&D); Satish Jha, Director (Tech/ES); Achyut Ghatak, Director (Tech/RD&T); S.K. Dubey, General Manager (TS/PR) and other Senior officials from CMPDI were present.



SXC, BSAJ ink MoU for academic collaboration

PNS : RANCHI

The Department of Zoology, St. Xavier's College Ranchi signed an MoU with the Brainology Scientific Academy of Jharkhand under the IQAC Academic Collaboration Initiative here on Thursday. The objective of the MoU is to facilitate a comprehensive partnership to impart knowledge and skills in the areas of joint academic research, joint workshops and professional development programs to the students and academicians of both the institutions.

Fr. Dr. Nabor Lakra, Principal, St. Xavier's College, Dr. Bharti Raipat, Head of the Department of Zoology, BSAJ Founder Director Dolly Krishnan, President Rohit Verma, signed the MoU on behalf of the college and the institute respectively. On this occasion, Vice Principal of the college Dr. Robert Pradeep Kujur, Professor Dr. Venkat Appa Rao, Dr. Ritesh Shukla, Dr. Priya Srivastava, Deputy Director of the Institute Amos Topno, Prof. Mauli, Annie and students were also present. Emphasizing the need for such collaboration the Principal said, "It is the responsibility of both academia and industry to develop well-qualified professionals. This collaboration will help equip young researchers with the necessary skill sets and competencies to analyse and collate emerging technologies impacting academia."

British Dy High Commissioner visits Vikas Bharti

Dr. Andrew Fleming, British Deputy High Commissioner for East and North-East India, arrived at Vikas Bharati Bishnupur Center in Ranchi. On this occasion, in the courtyard of Vikas Bharati, Fleming discussed various aspects of India's development journey among the representatives of various universities located in Ranchi, including the National Education Policy, 2020 as well as the future plans of India for development. There were discussions related to collaboration between universities and the British.

On this occasion, Ashok Bhagat, Dr. Ajay Kumar Singh, Dr. Ramesh Pandey, Dr. Anjani Kumar Srivastava, Dr. SP Aggarwal, Dr. Gopal Pathak, Dr. Ranjana Kumari, Dr. Lalan Sharma, Avinash and many distinguished guests from other educational institutions of Ranchi were present.



Prof BK Mishra awarded by AUJ



During the three-day international conference that took place from the 21st to the 23rd of February at Amity University in Noida, Professor Dr. Bimal Kumar Mishra, the Principal of Adarsh College Rajdhawan, was bestowed with the prestigious Amity University International Academic Excellence Award on the 21st of February, 2024, in Noida. This esteemed recognition was presented to him by the renowned international statistician, Professor P.K. Kapoor. The honor was bestowed upon Professor Mishra in recognition of his remarkable research contributions in the field of cybercrime.

SBPS student shine at Dotx Championship

Abhinam of Std. X gave remarkable performance in the online Dotx Championship organised by Caterpillar Wings Pvt. Ltd., Hyderabad. He was honoured with an appreciation prize and a cash prize of ₹5000 in senior category for making a funny video highlighting the comical aspect of stress and its causes. School Head Personnel & Admin., Dr. Pradip Varma, congratulated him for his exemplary performance. Principal of the school, Paramjit Kaur, lauded the outstanding achievement of the student and encouraged others to participate in such competitions.



7 SCS students pass JEE Mains exam

Seven students of Surendranath Centenary School for the session 2022-23 and 2023-24 have performed brilliantly in the JEE Mains Exam. The students of the school have scored more than 90 percentile. They are Sarthak Patnaik- 98.85 per cent marks, Sunidhi Chauhan- 91.8 per cent marks, Yash Kumar- 99.52 per cent marks, Ananya Rai- 96.87 per cent marks, Harsh Mehta- 91.05 per cent marks, Anish Raj- 93.8 per cent marks. And Ishaan Shukla- 95 per cent marks. School Principal, Samita Sinha expressed happiness over the success of the children and extended best wishes to the successful students.

Škoda launches Slavia Style Edition

In its first product action after achieving one lakh sales in two years, Škoda Auto India has introduced the Slavia Style Edition of its best-selling, five-star safe, crash-tested sedan. According to Petr Janeba, Brand Director, Škoda Auto India, "The Slavia Style Edition is yet another instance of us listening to our discerning customers and offering an extremely exclusive, yet high value product." The Style Edition is slotted above the top-of-the-line Style variant of the Slavia. It comes standard with features like a Dual Dash Camera. Škoda Auto India will launch 500 units of the Style Edition of the Slavia. All 500 will come exclusively with the 1.5 TSI engine mated to the 7-speed DSG automatic gearbox. This Edition x all of its exclusivity and additional features is priced at a reasonable premium of Rs 30,000 over the equivalent Style variant of the Slavia sedan.

Dubey, Munda, Yogendra Pratap Singh top the list of prospective BJP candidates from Godda, Khunti and Chatra

ANUPAM SHESHANK : RANCHI

Godda MP Nishi Kant Dubey with 65 per cent, Union minister Arjun Munda with 59 per cent and Yogendra Pratap Singh with 56 per cent are the top three BJP candidates according to a survey conducted by a reputed national Hindi daily, Dainik Bhaskar. The nationwide survey was conducted to find the best BJP and best united opposition candidate for the forthcoming Lok Sabha Polls.

The survey, conducted between February 5 and 12, was for all Lok Sabha Constituencies of the country. In Jharkhand, Nishi Kant Dubey emerged as the most popular BJP candidate for Godda Lok Sabha seat by getting 65 per cent votes followed by Raj Paliwal who could get only 28 per cent and Anant Ojha who managed a mere one per cent. Pradeep Yadav with 38 per cent, Dipika Pandey Singh with 22 and Furqan Ansari with 21 per cent were the



most popular United Opposition candidates. Union agriculture minister Arjun Munda got the maximum 59 per cent votes as BJP candidate from Khunti followed by Neelkanth Singh Munda 15 per cent while Kali Charan Munda with 52 per cent votes was the United Opposition's choice. Social activist Dayamani Barla also got 22 per cent votes as Khunti's opposition candidate. For Chatra Lok Sabha Constituency, voters preferred Yogendra Pratap Singh as their most favourite BJP candidate. Singh got 56

per cent votes followed by Kali Charan Singh 19 per cent while the sitting BJP MP Sunil Singh was choice of only 7 per cent. For opposition, Dheeraj Sahu with 28 per cent and Subhash Yadav with 20 per cent were the top two candidates in the survey.

Sitting Jamshepur BJP MP Vidyut Varan Mahto with 34 per cent votes is merely one per cent ahead of his party mate and former Baharagora MLA Kunal Sarangi who got 33 per cent votes. On the contrary, Ajay Kumar got 76 per cent votes as United Opposition's candidate. For state capital Ranchi, sitting BJP MP Sanjay Seth got 49 per cent votes followed by Pradeep Verma 29. Former Union minister Subodh Kant Sahai got 35 while former Ranchi deputy Mayor Ajay Shahdeo got 33 per cent votes as united opposition's candidate. Ravindra Pandey with 28 per cent was most favourite BJP candidate from Giridih while Sudhivya Sonu was the most favourite opposition



candidate with 24 per cent. Sitting AJSU (BJP partner) MP Chandra Prakash Choudhary got only 18 per cent. Raj Sinha got 34 per cent votes, Chandrashekhar Agarwal 27 per cent as BJP candidate while Oppositions choice was Neeraj Purnima Singh with 46 per cent votes followed by Dadai Dubey 19 per cent. For Singhbhum BJP's Arjun Munda was again ahead with 37 per cent votes followed by Barkunwar Gagrai who got 23 per cent. However, opposition's candidate and sitting MP Geeta

Koda polled 61 votes. In Lohardaga sitting BJP MP Sudarshan Bhagat got 32 per cent while former Ranchi Mayor Asha Lakra was choice of 28 per cent voters. For opposition, Sukhdev Bhagat with 48 per cent was the top runner followed by Rameshwar Oraon with 23 per cent. Sitting Palamu BJP MP VD Ram got 45 per cent Ghuran Ram got 53 per cent votes as united opposition's candidate.

Manish Jaiswal of BJP has emerged as the most favourite BJP candidate from Hazaribagh with 45 per cent while sitting BJP MP Jayant Sinha could get only 27 per cent. Amba Prasad got 60 per cent votes as united oppositions candidate. In Rajmahal, Lobin Hembrom got 37 per cent and Paritosh Soren 15 per cent as BJP candidate while sitting MP Vijay Hansda got 65 per cent followed by Hemlal Murmu's 16 per cent as opposition choices. In Dumka Sunil Soren got 40 per cent as BJP candidate

Brahmos boost for Navy firepower okayed

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

With the objective of further bolstering the Navy's firepower, the Government has given the nod for a Rs 20,000 crore deal to procure 200 Brahmos supersonic missiles. The contract is likely to be firmed up in next few days. The nod for the mega deal was given by Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) on Wednesday, sources said here on Thursday. Brahmos is joint venture between India and Russia and the supersonic missiles are manufactured within India. The induction of Brahmos missiles will shore up Indian Navy's arsenal. The missiles

deployed on warships are used for anti-ship and attack operations. This highly sophisticated missile can be launched from ships, submarines, fighter jets and from land. Indian Army and Navy have already inducted the Brahmos missiles over the last few years. Given its proven capabilities, the Philippines has inked a deal for procuring Brahmos missiles from India in a deal worth 375 million dollars. The first set of these missiles will reach the Philippines in March, it was learnt. The Brahmos missile can accurately strike a target at sea and land at a range of more than 300 kms. Specifically designed for naval



deployment, this weapon can be launched in a vertical or inclined mode from a stationary or moving maritime platform, engaging targets at stand-off ranges on sea or land. In 2016, as India became a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), India and Russia are now planning to jointly develop a new generation of BrahMos missiles with 800 km range and an ability to hit protected targets with pinpoint accuracy. Plans are to eventually upgrade all missiles to a range of 1,500 km. Meanwhile, the CCS approval for Brahmos missile acquisition comes days after the defence ministry approved

a proposal to procure nine maritime surveillance aircraft for the Indian Navy and six maritime patrol aircraft for the Indian Coast Guard. The proposed acquisition involves the construction of 15 maritime patrol planes, which will be based on C-295 transport aircraft that are being manufactured in India in a joint venture between Tata Advanced Systems and Airbus. The estimated value of these projects stands at Rs 29,000 crore. The transport aircraft would be equipped with the required radars and sensors and turned into a maritime patrol plane by the Defence Research and Development Organisation's Centre for Airborne Systems (CABS).



Ghazwa-e-Hind fatwa puts Darul Uloom in a spot

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The apex child rights body National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has issued directive to the Uttar Pradesh government to register an FIR and take legal action against Darul Uloom Deoband, a renowned Islamic educational institution, following the discovery of alleged objectionable content on its website. In a letter addressed to the senior superintendent of police (SSP) of the Saharanpur District, NCPCR Chairperson Priyank Kanoongo highlighted the commission's concern regarding a fatwa published on the Deoband's website. The commission requested an action taken report to be submitted within three days. The fatwa in question reportedly discusses the concept of 'Ghazwa-e-Hind' and allegedly glorifies "martyrdom in the context of India's invasion". "This fatwa is exposing children to hatred against one's own country and eventually causing them unnecessary mental or physical suffering," said

Kanoongo in the letter, emphasising the alleged violation of Section 75 of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015. The NCPCR, invoking Section 13(1) of the CPR Act, 2005, emphasised the potential for such content to incite hatred against the nation. Referring to legal precedents, including the case of Kanhaiya Kumar vs the State of NCT of Delhi, the commission underlined the gravity of expressions that could be construed as an offense against the state. Furthermore, the letter noted the commission's previous attempts to address similar concerns with the district administration in January 2022 and July 2023. Despite these efforts, no action has been taken thus far, the NCPCR said and asserted that the district administration could be held responsible for any adverse consequences resulting from the dissemination of such content. In light of these developments, the NCPCR directed the initiation of legal proceedings against Darul Uloom Deoband under the Indian Penal Code and the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015.

Jaishankar to begin South Korea, Japan visit from March 5

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will embark on a four-day visit to South Korea and Japan beginning March 5 to hold talks with his interlocutors on key bilateral, regional and global issues, including the challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Jaishankar's visit to the Republic of Korea and Japan, two of India's major partners, will impart further momentum to bilateral exchanges and set the agenda for future cooperation, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said. The external affairs minister will first travel to Seoul on a two-day visit where he will co-chair the 10th India-South Korea Joint Commission Meeting (JCM) along with his Korean counterpart Cho Tae-yul.



Jaishankar is expected to meet with Korean dignitaries, heads of think tanks and Indian community, the MEA said, announcing the visit. India's Special Strategic Partnership with South Korea has expanded to diverse areas of cooperation, which include trade, investments, defence, education and technology among others. "The JCM is expected to comprehensively review the entire gamut of bilateral cooperation and explore

avenues for further strengthening it," the MEA said in a statement. "It will also provide an opportunity for the two sides to exchange views on regional and global issues of mutual interest," it said. In the second leg of his trip, Jaishankar will visit Japan from March 6 to 8. In Tokyo, Jaishankar will attend the 16th India-Japan Foreign Ministers Strategic Dialogue along with his Japanese counterpart Yoko Kamikawa.

"The two ministers are expected to discuss issues of bilateral, regional and global importance, and exchange views on cooperation for a free, open, inclusive, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific," the MEA said. "India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership has further deepened in the last decade in areas such as defence and digital technologies, semiconductor supply chains, clean energy, high speed rail, industrial competitiveness and connectivity," it said. The MEA said Jaishankar's visit and meetings in Tokyo will provide strategic guidance to the "functional cooperation" between the two countries in these areas. He is expected to interact with business leaders, think tanks and academia, building upon strong cultural and people-to-people ties.

Centre to continue scheme for women safety

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Centre has decided to continue its flagship scheme for women safety with an approval of Rs 1,179.72 crore till 2025-26. The Union Cabinet took the decision on Wednesday night in an effort to check incidents of crime against women in the country. According to the latest record of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a total of 4,45,256 cases of crime against women were registered across India in 2022 — almost 51 FIRs every hour on an average. The figure was 4,28,278 in 2021 and 3,71,503 in 2020. A meeting of the Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi,



approved the proposal of the Ministry of Home Affairs for the continuation of the umbrella scheme on "Safety of Women" at a total cost of Rs 1,179.72 crore from 2021-22 to 2025-26, an official release said. Of the total project outlay of Rs 1,179.72 crore, an amount of Rs 885.49 crore will be provided by the MHA from

its own budget and Rs 294.23 crore will be channelised from the Nirbhaya Fund. The safety of women in a country is an outcome of several factors, such as stringent deterrence through strict laws, effective delivery of justice, redressal of complaints in a timely manner and easily accessible institutional support structures to the victims, the release said. Stringent deterrence in matters related to offences against women has been provided through amendments in the IPC, the CrPC and the Indian Evidence Act. In its efforts towards women safety, the Centre, in collaboration with the states and Union territories, has launched

several projects. The objectives of these projects include strengthening mechanisms in the states for ensuring timely intervention and investigation in the cases of crime against women and higher efficiency in the investigation and crime prevention in such matters. The Centre has proposed to continue a number of projects under the umbrella scheme for "Safety of Women". These are Emergency Response Support System 2.0, upgradation of the central forensic sciences laboratories, including the setting up of the National Forensic Data Centre, strengthening DNA analysis and cyber-forensic capacities in the state forensic sciences laboratories (FSLs).

Normalisation of scores in CUET UG likely to be done away with

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Normalisation of scores for the Common University Entrance Test (CUET)-UG is likely to be done away with this year, with the National Testing Agency (NTA) planning a rejig of the crucial examination for its third edition, according to top officials. The examination, which is spread over a month, is likely to be conducted in a shorter duration as the agency is contemplating a hybrid mode, including OMR sheets and a computer-based test. The move will also ensure that most of the students get a chance to take the examination in a city of their

choice. "The NTA is working on the possibility of conducting papers with a large registration in the OMR mode. This will help us choose a large number of schools as test centres. This will ensure that the students will get a centre within their town or city and do not have to travel to faraway places," University Grants Commission (UGC) Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar said. "Adopting the pen-and-paper mode for subjects with a large registration and a computer-based test for papers with a smaller registration will ensure that the CUET-UG can be conducted in a shorter duration unlike in the last two years. The hybrid mode promotes equal

opportunities for all, ensuring that geographical constraints do not hinder the students' educational aspirations in rural and remote areas," Kumar said. He said conducting the exam for a subject on a single day will eliminate the need for normalisation of scores. "For the last two years, we had to conduct the test for the same paper over a period of two or three days in our endeavour to provide the first-choice centre to the students as much as possible. But this year, by adopting the OMR mode, a large number of centres will be available at schools and colleges, enabling us to conduct the test across the country on the same day.

Media should not be crushed in Bengal, Thakur appeals to Mamata

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur on Thursday took serious exception to the arrest of a TV journalist in West Bengal and appealed to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to ensure the media is not crushed in the state. Addressing a press conference here, Thakur called the journalist's arrest unfortunate. "It is my request to Mamata Banerjee that such thing should not happen again," Thakur told reporters. "Freedom of press is the right of media and it should not be crushed. This is my appeal to Mamata

Banerjee," he added. Santu Pan, a journalist with Republic Bangla, was arrested from Sandeshkhali late on Monday evening. Sandeshkhali in West Bengal's North 24-Parganas district has been tense with a large number of women in the locality accusing Trinamool Congress strongman Shajahan Sheikh and his supporters of "land-grab and sexually assaulting" them under coercion. Sheikh has been absconding since January 5 when a mob attacked Enforcement Directorate (ED) officers during a raid at his residence in connection with an alleged ration scam. Two of Sheikh's aides, who along with others were booked under charges of gang rape and attempt to murder, have been arrested.

The initiative's roadmap promises continuous improvement of educational assessments, aiming to inspire the evolution of India's education system to meet global standards," Sevak said. The last year saw PARAKH establishing a comprehensive framework for student assessment across India's school boards, conducting the First State Educational Achievement Survey (SEAS) that involved more than 84 lakh students in literacy and numeracy assessments across

Thakur launches portals to revolutionise media landscape

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Minister of Information and Broadcasting Anurag Singh Thakur here on Thursday launched four transformatory portals that promise to revolutionize the media landscape in India. They include Press Sewa Portal, Transparent Empanelment Media Planning and e-Billing System, Navigate

Bharat Portal and National Register for Local Cable Operators (LCOs). These initiative are aimed at ensuring ease of doing business by fostering a more conducive business environment for Newspaper publishers and TV channels, enhance transparency and efficiency in government communication, provide easy access to authentic Government videos and create

a comprehensive database of LCOs enabling the Government to streamline regulatory processes in the cable television sector in future. Addressing the audience present on the occasion, Thakur remarked today, India is viewed as an attractive destination for investment, with global companies eager to establish businesses there. He recalled Prime Minister



Narendra Modi's emphasis on transformative governance and economic reforms has greatly improved the ease of doing business in India and added that this has led to increased investment from both existing businesses and new entrepreneurs. The startup ecosystem, in particular, has flourished, with a significant increase in the number of startups and unicorns, he stated.

Elaborating on recognition of government's achievements towards improving ease of doing business, the minister said these have been recognized globally, as evidenced by its improved rankings in international indices like the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index and the Logistic Performance Index. He further said the success of platforms like the Government

e-Marketplace (GeM) reflect the government's efforts to create a level playing field for MSMEs and small businesses. He added that Prime Minister Modi's leadership has not only focused on economic reforms but also on fostering a mindset transformation, recognizing entrepreneurs as partners in national development. This approach has led to increased wealth creation, job opportunities, and higher

incomes, benefiting the country's overall welfare and development. Earlier, Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Sanjay Jaju during his remarks said these initiatives will help us streamline and increase our engagement with the media. These will foster not just transparency and innovation and help improve the functioning of the departments.

Elect Modi once again to make India Vishwa Guru, says Shah



Union Home Minister and BJP leader Amit Shah addresses the Vijay Sankalp Shankhnaad rally in Janjgir on Thursday

PTI ■ JANJGIR

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday urged the people of Chhattisgarh to elect Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a third term in office to make India a developed nation, and 'Bharat Mata' a 'Vishwa Guru'.

Sounding the poll bugle at a rally at Janjgir in the BJP-ruled state, he also hit out at the Congress, accusing it of delaying the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya for 75 years. "The coming (Lok Sabha) elections will decide the future of the country. These elections are to make India a completely developed nation, and to make

Bharat Mata (Mother India) a Vishwa Guru (world teacher)," the senior BJP leader said. The BJP won ten out of 11 Lok Sabha seats in the state in 2014 and nine in 2019, Shah noted, adding that in the recent assembly elections people voted his party to power with a thumping majority.

"The incompetent (Congress) government neither controlled Naxalism, nor did it ensure justice to the people. It committed corruption and did injustice to the people, who then ousted it from power," Shah said. Among other things, the Modi government provided tap water connections to 60 crore poor people in the country including 38 lakh households

in Chhattisgarh in the last ten years, he said.

The Vishnu Deo Sai-led BJP government in the state has completed 30 percent of "Modi ki guarantee" (BJP's poll promises) so far, the Union minister claimed. Modi himself is a guarantee, and he should be elected once again so that India becomes the world's largest economy in the world, Shah said.

"Chhattisgarh is Lord Ram's Nanhihal (place of one's mother's parents). But the Congress did not resolve the 550-year-old (Ram Mandir) issue in the last 75 years. But Modi solved it and performed consecration of Ram Lalla (lord Ram's idol) in Ayodhya," he added.

Amarnath Yatra service registration reviewed

PTI ■ JAMMU

Authorities here reviewed an action plan for registration of service providers for the upcoming pilgrimage to the holy cave shrine of Amarnath in south Kashmir Himalayas, an official said on Thursday.

Labour Commissioner Charandeep Singh chaired a preparatory meeting regarding the annual pilgrimage to the 3,880-metre-high shrine with the department officials who were asked to gear up for timely and hassle-free registration of service providers, the official said.

Last year, 32,819 service providers, including 15,903 ponywalas, 10,023 palki and dandiwalas and 6,893 pithuwalas were registered by the labour department for the

yatra, which usually takes place in the month of 'Shravan' (July-August). The official said detailed deliberations were held regarding this year's action plan for registration of service providers who come from various districts of Jammu and Kashmir and facilitate the pilgrims in their journey to the holy cave from both the Pahalgam and the Baltal axis each year.

Asserting that the labour department has a significant role in the smooth conduct of the yatra, Singh said as and when the dates for the commencement of the registration process are finalised, the same will be communicated to the service providers.

The department will be facilitating advance registration of service



providers both in their native districts and also at camps located in Ganderbal and Anantnag districts besides ensuring timely and hassle-free issuance of Radio Frequency

Identification (RFID) cards in their favour in coordination with the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board (SASB) and concerned district administrations, Singh said.

Registration camps for the purpose were established at Sonmarg, Kangan, Manigam, Gund, Gutlibagh and Baltal in Ganderbal district and Matigawran, Sallar, Khayar, Aishmuqam, Anantnag and Pahalgam in Anantnag district besides other district headquarters, he said.

While emphasising on better coordination with other line departments with regard to contractors and contract workers hired for different works for the yatra, Singh said line departments being the principal employers are required to share the list of all such contractors engaged by them with the labour department so that interest of contract workers are protected in terms of wages, hours of work and other basic amenities.

Haldwani violence: Fresh case registered against mastermind

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

A fresh case of fraud and criminal conspiracy was registered on Thursday against six people, including "mastermind" Abdul Malik and his wife, in connection with the Haldwani violence, police said.

Four more rioters were arrested, taking the total number of arrests so far to 78 in the February 8 violence that broke out over the demolition of an illegal madrasa in Banbhoolpura, they said.

Malik and his wife Safia are among six persons booked for criminal conspiracy and fraudulently using a dead

man's name for illegal plotting, construction and transfer of land, Nainital SSP Prahlad Narayan Meena said.

The accused have been charged with hatching a criminal conspiracy to mislead the government departments and the court on the basis of false affidavits, he said.

They have been booked under sections 120B (criminal conspiracy), 417 (cheating) and 420 (cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property) of the IPC, he told reporters.

Earlier, three FIRs were registered in connection with the incident.

A look-out notice against

Malik and his son Abdul Moid was issued earlier and their property in the town attached. Malik had built the illegal madrasa and vehemently opposed its demolition, police said.

His wife had even moved the court challenging the municipal corporation's notice for demolition.

Meanwhile, four more rioters were arrested for the violence on Thursday.

On a viral video showing that money is being distributed among people in the riot-hit area in Haldwani, the SSP said people who distributed money belonged to a Hyderabad-based NGO.

Naxal camp busted after two encounters

PTI ■ BIJAPUR

A Naxalite camp on the Bijapur-Dantewada border in Chhattisgarh was busted by security forces following two encounters with the ultras, officials said on Thursday.

The operation was part of an anti-Naxal operation launched by a joint team of the District Reserve Guard (DRG) of Bijapur and Dantewada, Special Task Force (STF) and 202nd battalion of CRPF's elite Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) on Tuesday, an official said.

The operation was launched

following a tip off about the presence of 70-80 Naxalites of 'Gangalur area committee' of the outlawed CPI(Maoist) in the hills of Pidiya and Itawar villages on the Bijapur-Dantewada border, said Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Kumar Yadav.

"Sensing the presence of the patrolling team, the Maoists opened indiscriminate fire near Itawar village on Wednesday. They fled after security forces retaliated. Another gun battle took place near the jungle of Lendra-Korcholi villages when the security forces were returning," the SP said.

Chief Wildlife Wardens can declare wild boars vermin: Minister

PTI ■ WAYANAD (KERALA)

Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav on Thursday said that Chief Wildlife Wardens (CWW) are empowered under the Wildlife Protection Act to declare wild boars as vermin, and therefore the law does not need to be amended. The minister also emphasised that the CWWs have the power under the Act to permit trapping, capture and killing of problematic animals, but urged the state to use this power "diligently and cautiously".

The union minister's statement assumes significance as the Kerala assembly recently passed a resolution seeking to get the wildlife protection law amended to prevent human-animal conflict in the state. One of the suggested amendments in the resolution was to declare or classify as vermin wild boars that come out of the forests and multiply in human-inhabited areas.

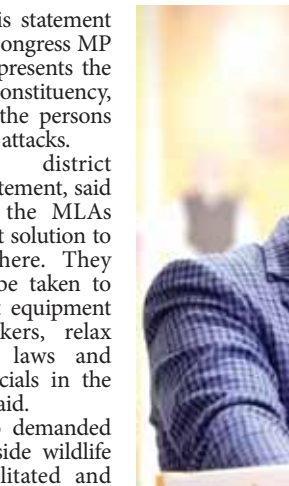
Yadav, while speaking to the media after a meeting with the local administration and forest officials here, said, "No amendment is required. Under section 11 of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, enough powers have been vested with the Chief Wildlife Warden of the state. "So, the power is already there. Under that power, he can issue permission to trap, capture or kill any problematic animal. I urge the government of Kerala that they diligently and cautiously use this power to protect the farming community and their crops." Later in a post on social media platform X, he blamed the Kerala government and the local representatives of Wayanad and adjoining regions for allegedly ignoring the escalating human-animal conflict in the district.

"This is rather unfortunate and has led to people losing lives. We request the state to be prompt in its response so that lives can be saved and wildlife can flourish," the

minister said on X. His statement comes in the wake of Congress MP Rahul Gandhi, who represents the Wayanad Lok Sabha constituency, visiting the homes of the persons who died in the animal attacks.

The Wayanad district administration, in a statement, said that in the meeting the MLAs demanded a permanent solution to the wildlife attacks here. They demanded that steps be taken to provide state-of-the-art equipment to the forest caretakers, relax provisions of forest laws and appoint high-level officials in the district, the statement said.

Besides that, they also demanded that families living inside wildlife sanctuaries be rehabilitated and concessions be given to the state to include cutting of undergrowth and trench construction works in the employment guarantee scheme, it said. Union Minister Yadav, told the press after his meeting that the central government has enhanced the compensation for human



casualties in animal attacks to Rs 10 lakh from Rs 5 lakh. He said that the payment is to be made by the state government which is provided the required funding based upon the Annual Plan of Operation (APO) raised by it.



"The payment has to be done by the state government. They should do it immediately and in a transparent manner," he said. Yadav requested the state government to create a suitable mechanism and protocol for payment of the compensation in

a transparent manner. "Whenever the state government raises the APO, we give them the money. The state government has to pay the compensation and raise the APO," he further said. The union minister also said that Centre has sanctioned Rs 15.82 crore during the financial year 2023-24 under various schemes to the state of Kerala. "Based on the demand/Annual Plan of Operations proposed by the state government, the Centre will consider funding support under CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority) and other schemes for site-specific elephant proof walls and other mitigation measures," he said.

He also said the Centre, through the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), will assist in preparing corridor management plans in Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, for the smooth movement of elephant herds in the region. Besides the human-animal conflict, the

minister also spoke about capacity building in the eco-tourism sector of the district, saying it will help create employment opportunities in the area. Yadav arrived in Kerala's Wayanad district on Wednesday evening following the rise in animal attacks here. He visited the families of the three men who died in animal attacks in this mountainous district of Kerala and assured them of all possible help to put their lives back on track. Two persons, Ajeesh and Paul, were trampled to death by two different wild elephants this month, and another person, Prajeesh, was killed by a tiger in December 2023. A state ministerial delegation had visited Wayanad on Tuesday on the directions of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and discussed remedial proposals during a meeting attended by the local people's representatives and officials. Prior to that, Governor Arif Mohammed Khan had visited the family members of those killed in the recent animal attacks.

Manipur High Court revokes inclusion order for Meitei community in ST List

PTI ■ IMPHAL

The Manipur High Court has ordered deletion of a paragraph from a March 2023 order that urged the state to consider including the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe list, saying the paragraph was in conflict with the Supreme Court's constitution bench stance.

The March 27, 2023 directive, believed to be a catalyst for ethnic unrest that claimed over 200 lives, was rescinded by a single judge bench of Justice Golmei Gaiphulshillu during a review petition hearing on Wednesday.

The contentious paragraph from last year's verdict, instructing the state to expedite consideration of Meitei community inclusion, was deemed for deletion.

The paragraph of the last year verdict stated the state government "shall consider the case of the petitioners for inclusion of Meitei/Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribes list, expeditiously, preferably within a period of four weeks" from the date of receipt of the order.

Justice Gaiphulshillu's ruling on February 21 emphasised the necessity of removing the directive, pointing to the Government of India's stipulated procedure for Scheduled Tribe list amendments.

Justice Gaiphulshillu said, "Accordingly, the direction



given at para no. 17(iii) needs to be deleted and is ordered accordingly for deletion of the para no. 17(iii) of the judgment and order dated March 27, 2023..."

Referring to the constitutional protocol detailed in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' 2013-14 report, the court highlighted the need for alignment with the Supreme Court's constitutional interpretation.

"...I am satisfied and of the view that the direction given at Para no. 17(iii) of the single judge dated March 27, 2023...Which is impugned herein needs to be reviewed, as the direction given at para no. 17(iii) of the single judge is against the observation made in the constitution bench of the Supreme Court," the high court said in its 19-page verdict.

The high court's detailed 19-page verdict underlined the legislative limitations on

judicial interference concerning Scheduled Tribe classifications, as outlined by a constitution bench ruling in November 2000.

"Courts cannot and should not expand jurisdiction to deal with the question as to whether a particular caste, sub-caste; a group or part of tribe or sub-tribe is included in any one of the Entries mentioned in the Presidential Orders issued under Article 341 and 342 particularly so when in Clause (2) of the said Article, it is expressly stated that said orders cannot be amended or varied except by law made by Parliament" the verdict of Supreme Court's Constitution bench in November 2000 said.

The constitution bench had elucidated that courts should not overstep their jurisdiction in determining such categorisations. Following the eruption of violence post the March 27 order, a series of petitions, including challenges

to the high court directive, were presented to the Supreme Court.

The apex court, on May 17 of the same year, denounced the high court's directive as "obnoxious" and considered staying the order due to its perceived inaccuracies.

A bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud had said, "I will tell you (lawyers) one thing that the high court order was incorrect... I think we have to stay the order of the high court. The high court order is absolutely wrong."

The apex court bench had made clear it will not deal with legal issues arising out of the Manipur High Court's decision on grant of reservation to majority Meiteis as the pleas challenging the order were pending with the larger division bench there.

Amid the legal discourse, the Supreme Court refrained from addressing the core legal aspects arising from the Manipur High Court's decision, as the challenges were pending before a larger division bench.

The court invited tribal participation, particularly from Kukis, in the ongoing legal proceedings related to the intra-court appeals.

The violent unrest in Manipur, triggered by dissent over Meitei community's Scheduled Tribe status aspiration, underscores the complex demographic fabric of the region.

Dhankar calls for deeper cooperation among nations in maritime domain

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar on Thursday inaugurated the international maritime seminar here as part of multinational naval exercise 'MILAN 2024,' and called on the participating nations to explore avenues for deeper cooperation, exchange of ideas and best practices.

The seminar is an important component of MILAN 2024, which offers convergence of global maritime excellence and serves as a platform for collaboration, synergy and growth among nations across the oceans.

"As we engage in discussions, let us collectively explore avenues for deeper cooperation, exchange of ideas and best practices to address the evolving challenges in the maritime domain," Dhankar was quoted as saying in an official press release.



Themed 'Partners across Oceans: Collaboration, Synergy, Growth,' the seminar featured an array of presentations and deliberations in critical areas such as economic growth, maritime security, capacity building, climate change mitigation, blue economy initiatives and sustainable development of maritime infrastructure.

Further, the Vice President emphasised on

the importance of protecting global supply chains, avoiding deeper regional tensions and strengthening maritime security.

"This august assemblage of domain experts serves as a testament to the shared commitment of nations towards ensuring the much needed maritime safety and security," he said. According to Dhankar, observing maritime order is quintessential for peace and harmony of the region, maintenance of supply chains and promotion of trade and commerce.

Moreover, the Vice President highlighted that 'MILAN' started with modest beginnings in 1995, which has now grown to see the participation of 15 warships and 51 delegations.

Chief of Naval Staff R Hari Kumar, Naval chiefs of friendly foreign countries, diplomats, delegates and several other senior dignitaries participated in the event.

Opposition creates ruckus in Assam Assembly seeking discussion on misconduct in board exams

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

The Assam Assembly was adjourned for 10 minutes on Thursday as opposition parties created an uproarious scene demanding an adjournment motion to discuss allegations of misconduct in state board examinations, including a purported question paper leak.

When the House re-assembled, the Congress and

the lone Independent legislator staged a walkout as the Speaker remained firm on disallowing the adjournment motion.

Leader of opposition Debabrata Saikia, along with others of his Congress party, and Independent MLA Akhil Gogoi had given separate notices for adjournment motions to discuss the allegations of problems in conducting the class 10 and 12 state board exams, which

are underway currently. Saikia said that question paper leaks had happened in class 10 exams last year, which led the government to order a CID enquiry. He demanded to know what corrective measures were taken based on the CID's probe report.

"There may not have been paper leaks this time, but there are reports of wrong labelling of question paper bundles and other such

mistakes since the first day of the exams. We will allocate funds for the department but we also want to know how it is utilised," the Congress leader said.

Gogoi, however, alleged that a question paper has been leaked this year also and cited newspaper reports indicating problems in the conduct of the exams.. He also demanded the resignation of Education Minister Ranuj Pegu over the matter.

Modi with a message

The PM’s planned visit to Sandeshkhali challenges Mamata, seeks to gain ground in Bengal

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's planned visit to Sandeshkhali on March 7 holds significant implications not only for the BJP's Lok Sabha poll strategy but also for the political fortunes of Mamata Banerjee, the TMC supremo and an important constituent of the INDIA bloc. Sandeshkhali, in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, has emerged as a focal point of political strife due to incidents of alleged sexual abuse and land grab by a TMC leader, Shahjahan Sheikh. Ahead of Modi's visit, the BJP has unveiled a 20-minute documentary highlighting the TMC's alleged atrocities in Sandeshkhali with the apparent aim of pushing Mamata on the defensive. The film features Sandeshkhali women's testimony recounting alleged instances of land grab and sexual assault by Sheikh and his cohorts. The BJP's decision to schedule Modi's visit to North 24 Parganas signals its intent to bolster its support base and make inroads into areas traditionally dominated by the ruling TMC. The timing, just ahead of the elections, underscores the BJP's concerted efforts to sway voters in its favour by exposing the TMC's 'wrongdoings'. Modi's persona and oratory have often been instrumental in galvanising public support, and his presence in Sandeshkhali is likely to energise the BJP cadre and attract undecided voters. Besides, the symbolism associated with Modi's visit cannot be overstated. By highlighting Sandeshkhali, which has witnessed political unrest and clashes, the BJP aims to convey a message of development and security to the residents.

This narrative directly attacks Mamata's leadership, which has faced frequent criticism over law and order issues, and poses to her a formidable challenge. The BJP's relentless campaign, coupled with Modi's visit, threatens to erode TMC's support base in key constituencies. As she seeks to counter the BJP narrative, Mamata's response to Modi's visit will be closely scrutinised. It seems quite likely that the coming weeks would see a surge in BJP attacks on the TMC Government. This is not the first time that the BJP has launched a concerted attack on Mamata but her hold over the State remains more or less unshaken. That said, electoral outcomes are influenced by a multitude of factors beyond high-profile visits and political rhetoric. While Modi's visit may generate momentum for the BJP, the TMC's grassroots outreach, welfare schemes and organisational strength cannot be discarded. Mamata remains a formidable leader with a dedicated support base, especially among certain demographics and rural communities. Moreover, the political landscape in West Bengal is characterised by complex socio-cultural dynamics, where regional identity and issues often play a significant role. The BJP's attempts to make inroads into the State must navigate these intricacies sensitively to resonate with the diverse electorate. How the PM's visit plays out remains to be seen but the attention Sandeshkhali is getting would indeed have one positive outcome: The victims of Sandeshkhali may get justice and Mamata may have to bite the bullet.

PICTALK



Schoolchildren perform Surya Namaskar on the occasion of 'Surya Saptami', in Jaipur

Indian nationhood thrives amid diversity

Despite regional differences and identity quests, the strength of Indian nationhood persists, supported by a dedication to constitutional values and productive conversations

There is much talk about the nature of change in all aspects of Indian life, as is natural in changes envisaged at such a large scale. There are bound to be differences of opinion, multiple articulations, and an attempt to project one's point of view. This is how it should be. This is amplified by the Sanskrit dictum "Vade Vade Jayat Tatva Bodhah" (through discussion one arrives at the truth). However, discussion must follow a protocol. This protocol is often unwritten and is a bedrock of any civil society. It has some enduring principles. The first and foremost of which would be that it cannot be and must not be abusive.

The right to civil disagreement in a civil manner is the foundation of a civil society. Thus, it is that mutual respect and agreeing to disagree are required as essential to civil discourse.

One can add to it, for good measure, certain other attributes and certain attributes of the mind. These attributes recognise the need to not only listen but honestly weigh the merits of another person's point of view and have a genuine openness to consider it.

Agreeing to another point of view or modifying one's own in a civil society is not a hallmark of weakness but a source of genuine strength and maturity. Going by these principles, the Indian civil society has an interesting record with significant regional variations. The Dravid school of thought is an interesting example. They are saying in the twenties of this century, roughly the same things they were saying in the thirties of the last century.

The Dravidian leadership has in the last seventy-five years then been in power in that part of India for several decades, though not always continuously. Similarly, the exclusionist identity sought by some of the DMK ideologues has had on various occasions to be moderated because they have been in power. Notwithstanding long patches of time, not much significant progress has been made in the implementation of some of the

components of the DMK ideology, such as it may be. The ideological component itself has undergone a major split with an exclusivist ideology for DMK being considerably whittled down in the birth of All India Anna Dravid Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK). M.G. Ramachandran was the major proponent of the AIDMK version. Jayalithaa was a key supporter. They linked up with the Dravidian Movement with all Indian processes. How it panned out is another story and fit enough for another discussion.

More to the point, it is important to realise that similar identity quests or some version thereof have been witnessed in the North Eastern States, Jammu & Kashmir State, parts of Andhra Pradesh, and a few other pockets of the southern Indian peninsula. This is a very understandable process. By and large, it has been contained within the constitutional framework. At times the divergent point of view has been espoused by neighbouring states of the Deccan peninsula or between the

MORE TO THE CREDIT OF EVERYONE CONCERNED IS THE URGE ON THE PART OF MOST PEOPLE TO EVOKE THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION WHENEVER NEED BE AND NOT PRACTICE BRINKMANSHIP

Deccan States and the Central Government at New Delhi over many matters including the distribution of river waters. Notwithstanding these differences, Indian nationhood has endured and might even be seen as having gone from strength to strength. It is this resilience which is, also, the hallmark of Indian nationhood. This is not to deny the fact that once in a while, offensive or extreme statements are made, some of which are avoidable, though sometimes understandable. The long and short of it is the ability of people to work together despite differences and different articulations. More to the credit of everyone concerned is the urge on the part of most people to evoke the Indian Constitution whenever need be and not practice brinkmanship. The time is here to ensure that these practices of healthy debate and the setting of shared perspectives become a regular habit and a part of the national methodology of dialogue and discussion. Sometimes when extreme statements are made and

some new thinking seems to arise, there is nothing wrong with that either, only that the model of integrative thinking would have to show far more resilience than it is many times currently showing. This text has looked at the vantage point of collective cohesion. It is not as if there are no dangerous signs that need to be tackled, but that attempting to tackle them sensibly and systematically is necessary. It is this institutionalisation of handling dissent and allowing seemingly alternative perspectives to live peacefully with each other that will be the touchstone on which much of the future of Indian nationhood will continue to flourish.

In an era where subtle dissent becomes a part of covert political strategy, much care needs to be exercised. The number game can have dangerous manifestations. There is no substitute for good sense and integrity of thought, deed, and follow-up.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PM PAYS TRIBUTE TO VIDYASAGAR JI

Sir — India is truly blessed with so many noble saints, intellectuals, and spiritual persons who have dedicated their entire lives to the welfare of mankind. Renowned Jain seer Acharya Vidyasagar Ji Maharaj was one of the greatest saints of our time who attained Samadhi "Sallekhana", saddening us. He was the most renowned saint in the Digambar Jain community. He took sallekhana, a Jain religious practice involving voluntary fasting until death, for spiritual purification.

PM Narendra Modi is paying tribute to this great saint. He will be all the more remembered by the generations to come for his invaluable contributions to society, especially his efforts towards spiritual awakening among people. His notable work was towards poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and more. His life exemplified the core principles of Jainism, embodying its ideals through his actions and teachings. Today, the world over, fundamental elements are fighting, but the teachings of Acharya Vidyasagar Maharaj to mankind have become even more relevant; they should be followed by all of us to enrich the lives of human beings and promote peace and harmony. We should all strive to live coherently to shape a new era of national and social integration. Education was very close to his heart. He was a true tapas, whose life was dedicated to the ideals of Bhagwan Mahavir. He will always be remembered for his rich contribution to society.

Ramesh G Jethwani | Bengaluru

DANGERS OF PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

Sir — The British Medical Journal has recently given information about the dangers of video games, especially in this research, in which scientists from the World Health Organisation were also involved. A total of 50,000 people were surveyed in video games using headphones, earbuds, and headphones. Also, the music venue has a definite effect on

Sandeshkhali crisis



The recent upheaval in Sandeshkhali, West Bengal, marked by allegations of sexual assault, land grabs, and political clashes, demands immediate attention. The state government's tendency to dismiss these accusations as political manoeuvres must give way to a genuine commitment to justice. While some

commendable arrests have been made, holding accountable those in power implicated in these crimes is essential. With the Supreme Court rejecting a CBI or SIT investigation, the onus now falls on Mamata Banerjee's government to prioritise citizens' well-being over political considerations, ensuring transparency and decisive action to restore trust.

Amidst the turmoil, concerns over authoritarianism arise with the arrest of a journalist, emphasising the need to safeguard the freedom of the press. The dismissal of widespread fear and systematic abuse by the government does not instil confidence in a thorough inquiry. Mamata Banerjee must demonstrate the same dedication to justice she exhibited in opposition, addressing these grave issues transparently. Acknowledging the plight of women prisoners and taking decisive action against sexual violence as a political tool is imperative for rebuilding trust and integrity in the government's response to the Sandeshkhali crisis.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

the ear and reduces the ability to hear. An international research team reviewed 14 studies conducted by nine countries in this regard. North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, Asia, Australia, etc. were included in these nine countries. It is necessary to discourage children from playing video games. If not, a generation of young children will go deaf. This is a very sensitive subject. Parents should pay proper attention to their children and ensure that they do not watch those video games. It is necessary to tell the children about the consequences of this in various schools.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

NIFTY AT ALL-TIME HIGH

Sir — Indices moved up for a fifth consecutive session, with the Nifty hitting a fresh all-time high amid mixed global cues. Benchmark Sensex spurted by 349 points while Nifty scaled a fresh life-

time high on the sixth straight day of gains on February 20, driven by buying in banking and select FMCG shares. The broader market outperformed the front-line indices.

Everything looks favourable, be it the strong macroeconomic fundamentals or the robust retail inflows. Both upstream and downstream oil companies benefit from a robust up-cycle in oil and gas markets and stable crude prices, which have boosted volumes and marketing margins, said Siddhartha Khemka, head of retail research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services. Reflecting broader investor bullishness, the 50-share index surged to a record high of 21,654.75 on intense buying in the metal, commodity, auto and banking sectors.

Jayanthi Subramaniam | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Ayurveda: Seek balance of tridoshas for wellness

Ayurveda's mantra for wellness is 'seek balance.' Its holistic approach offers a timeless roadmap to good health in today's fast-paced world

In an era marked by fast-paced lifestyles, stress-induced ailments, and an increasing reliance on synthetic medication, the ancient wisdom of Ayurveda emerges as a beacon of holistic healing. Originating in the Indian subcontinent over 5,000 years ago, Ayurveda is not merely a system of medicine but a way of life deeply rooted in the balance between mind, body, and spirit. Its holistic approach offers a comprehensive framework for promoting well-being and preventing disease, making it highly relevant in today's fast-changing world.

At the heart of Ayurveda lies the belief that health is a state of equilibrium between the three doshas - Vata (air and space), Pitta (fire and water), and Kapha (earth and water). According to Ayurvedic principles, imbalances in these doshas lead to physical, mental, and emotional disturbances, paving the way for illness. By understanding an individual's unique constitution, or Prakriti, Ayurveda seeks to restore harmony through personalised lifestyle modifications, dietary



changes, herbal remedies, yoga, and meditation. One of the key strengths of Ayurveda is its emphasis on prevention rather than cure. By addressing the root cause of disease rather than merely treating symptoms, Ayurveda empowers individuals to take charge of their health proactively. Through practices such as daily self-care routines (Dinacharya), seasonal detoxification (panchakarma), and mindful eating habits, Ayurveda cultivates resilience and strengthens the body's natural defences, reducing the likelihood of illness. Moreover, Ayurveda recognises the interconnectedness of all aspects of existence - from the food we eat to the environment we inhabit. This holistic perspective underscores the importance of living in harmony with nature and aligning our lifestyle choices with its

rhythms. By promoting sustainable living practices and environmental awareness, Ayurveda not only fosters personal health but also contributes to the well-being of the planet as a whole.

Ayurveda expert Vicram Sharma, Director of Shree Baidyanath Ayurved Bhawan emphasises the importance of maintaining balance among the three elements—Vata, Pitta, and Kapha—to ensure fitness. "Imbalances in these elements lead to diseases and advocated for Ayurveda's ancient wellness system, particularly pertinent in today's times when unhealthy dietary choices, lifestyle habits, and indulgence in alcohol and smoking disrupt this equilibrium." He said this in his address at Gurugram's Wellness Carnival. It was organised to create awareness about the importance of health and wellness. A wellness carnival was recently organised at Cybercity Gurugram. In the face of modern challenges such as chronic stress, pollution, and sedentary lifestyles, Ayurveda offers invaluable insights into

maintaining vitality and balance. Its integrative approach acknowledges the role of mental and emotional factors in health, emphasising practices that promote mental clarity, emotional resilience, and spiritual well-being. While Western medicine excels in acute care and crisis intervention, Ayurveda excels in promoting longevity, enhancing vitality, and restoring equilibrium. Integrating Ayurvedic principles into mainstream healthcare can lead to a more comprehensive and patient-centred approach, bridging the gap between traditional wisdom and modern science.

By embracing its principles of balance, harmony, and interconnectedness, individuals can cultivate resilience, vitality, and well-being on all levels - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. As we strive to navigate the complexities of modern life, Ayurveda serves as a guiding light, reminding us of the profound wisdom inherent in nature.

(The writer is a business consultant; views are personal)



KANISHKA SRIVASTAVA

FIRST COLUMN

GREEK PM'S VISIT
BOLSTERS HISTORIC TIES

India and Greece are poised to deepen
their ties across various sectors



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The visit of Greek (Hellenic Republic (Greece)) Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis this week marks an important chapter in Indo-Greek relations, an ancient bilateral relationship that often gets shadowed in the wider European context. Legend has it that the mighty Greek conqueror Alexander reached the northwestern frontier of the Indian sub-continent some 2500 years ago, fought two mighty kings, but didn't cross the Indus to enter India. However, a diplomatic relationship was established some years down the line, under the Mauryan rule (whose ruler Chandragupta Maurya had a Greek ambassador in his court named Meghashthanes). Cut to contemporary times, Greece established its embassy in India in 1950, however, India took 28 years to start an embassy in Athens. Now a European country, just two and half hours behind Indian standard time, during summer, often featured in many Bollywood films, wasn't still an important ally until last year. During a state visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2023, the bilateral relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership. The joint statement released in August 2023 highlighted: "Appreciating the increase in bilateral trade and economic engagement in recent years, the leaders also directed that both sides work to double bilateral trade by 2030. Both leaders reiterated the need for further broadening and deepening bilateral engagements in the fields of defence, shipping, science and technology, cyberspace, education, culture, tourism and agriculture. They took note of the signing of the MOU on Cooperation in the field of Agriculture... Both leaders directed their senior officials to ensure regular dialogue in the areas including political, economic, defence, security and public diplomacy. They also agreed to encourage direct flights between Greece and India."



This week's visit by the Greek PM has put the relationship under ample spotlight it deserves. When some of Greece's neighbours in Europe had made not-so-friendly statements on some of the most recent policy developments in India such as the "Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)/National Register of Citizenship (NRC), Abrogation of Article 370, Reorganisation of the new Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh, and Judgement on Ram Janam Bhoomi, etc. Greece had officially stated that it is an internal affairs matter of India. Greece and India have reciprocally supported each other for a reformed UN reflecting the current realities with a permanent seat for each other in the UN security council. As per a Ministry of External Affairs booklet released in 2023, just ahead of the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Athens, Greece, "voted for India's candidature to UNSC for 2021-22. It supported India at the Nuclear Suppliers Group in 2008, and 2016, MTCR, WASSENAAR arrangements, and Australia Group. Greece supported India's candidature for ICJ, ITLOS, IMO, Postal Operations Council (POC), World Heritage Committee and the position of External Auditor of the IAEA for the term 2022-27 and various other international bodies." Similarly, in Jammu and Kashmir, internal security concerns particularly arising out of state-funded terrorist activities, Greece has been on India's side. Greece supports many of India's concerns in the larger European Union bilateral. India interestingly has held several rounds of discussions with the EU trade representatives, to hammer out a free trade agreement. Although with elections in India around the corner, a complicated, trade agreement with the EU with several moving parts looks difficult. However, to have preferential voices in the EU, with member nations like France and Greece, Italy, looking at India favourably, is always welcome. Some of the unfavourable comments India received from EU member countries, post former, not taking a Western approach towards long-standing ally Russia, are likely to fade away with India developing closer bilateral partnerships in the region. *(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)*

Upholding the essence of agriculture amidst market pressures

The ongoing farmers' protest underscores the clash between economic and social objectives, particularly regarding the legal guarantee of minimum support prices

The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways, said John F. Kennedy. Agriculture is the mother of all human cultures and all modes of man-made production. Agricultural production and its consumption are primarily guided by values of human existence, health and welfare; the values of the market are superimposed on it. Agriculture, thus, is not only a source of income and livelihood for many farmers but also a way of life and identity. Agriculture is a springboard to food security, rural development, cultural heritage and landscape preservation and, thus, requires mechanisms to



SUKHDEV SINGH

safeguard it from the post-industrial market economy founded on the principles of profit rather than the exchange of goodwill and well-being. The market creates a conflict between the economic and social objectives of agriculture. It is for the social objective of 'food security' and the livelihood of farmers that justify the Indian farmers' protest for a legal guarantee on minimum sup-

port price. The system of minimum support price introduced in 1966 to help India fight the food deficit has been a productive driver for development and food safety for the Indian population; a system to determine minimum support price has evolved through the years which yet needs improvement and support. At present, the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP), Government of India calculates the paid-out costs on seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, hired human and machine labour, and leased-in land rent etc (A2) and the imputed value of unpaid family labour (FL), and adds 50% of its total to recommend minimum support price (MSP) for Cereals (Paddy,

Wheat, Barley, Jowar, Bajra, Maize and Ragi), pulses (Gram, Arhar/Tur, Moong, Urad and Lentil), oilseeds (Groundnut, Rapeseed/Mustard, Toria, Soybean, Sunflower Seed, Sesamum, Safflower Seed and Nigarseed), Copra, De-Husked Coconut, Raw Cotton, Raw Jute and Sugarcane every year. Then, keeping in view the production costs, fair remuneration for farmers affordability for consumers and the market conditions, the CACP recommendation is approved by the parliament of India to notify the MSP before the sowing season. In its recommendation, the CACP does not consider the 'Swaminathan National Commission for Farmers' rec-

ommendation fully to include capital assets and the rentals and interest forgone on owned land which the protesting farmers demand. Another cause for farmers' protest is the demand for legislation providing farmers 'the Right to Sell at MSP' which the CACP itself had suggested in its price policy report 2018-19. The farmers are demanding the same legal entitlement for their produce insulating it against the market pressures of 'demand and supply' as the markets can be subject to manipulation by the private traders and corporations, a concern shared by the CACP in its 2018-19 report. The crops are unlike industrial production that can be controlled with resilience to

market pressures; the cropping patterns are not so easy to shift. The biological nature of agricultural produce makes it vulnerable to unpredictable and uncontrollable weather conditions, pests and diseases on the one hand, and its 'all at once' yield makes it vulnerable to the market players if left for itself to guard. To enhance its resilience to the negative market pressures, a legal guarantee for MSP is required. Unlike the corporate, the small farmers can not store and service 'value addition'; they have to sell the entire yield immediately. So, it is reasonable for the farmers to expect a guaranteed MSP announced by the government. The legal guarantee for MSP is not about the procurement

of the entire crop by the government but about its purchase at a price not less than the minimum remunerative price declared by the government itself. In the absence of a legal guarantee, the traders purchase the agricultural produce at prices lower than the MSP, yet they sell it to the consumers at prices much higher than the MSP without passing on the benefit to the consumers. Agriculture produce is for survival while all other industrial or service products are for additional comfort. To keep the farmers growing sufficient for the people to survive, it is well within the reasonable sense for the government to compensate the gaps in case 'demand and supply' forces the sale of crops at

prices lower than the MSP following the principle it employs in its intervention to support the corporate failures. The legal guarantee for all crops in all states can act as an instrument for organic farming and diversification, as the farmers will have no insecurity about price fluctuations. If left unguarded and subject to the 'demand-supply' principle, it may lead to food insecurity and compromise social values inherent in agriculture. Leaving agriculture on the market is neither desirable nor pro-national; it is only pro-corporate and anti-national. *(The writer is a retired professor of Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar and a member of the governing council of INTACH, New Delhi; views are personal)*

A saga of resilience and adaptation

Trees, nature's silent guardians, witness the ebb and flow of civilisations, endure natural calamities and adapt to the relentless march of time



BKP SINHA



Embark on a journey through a mystical forest, where trees, the ancient storytellers, whisper tales of survival against the backdrop of ever-evolving landscapes. These silent guardians of nature stand tall and firm, their leaves rustling with tales of time. They bear witness to the rise and fall of civilizations, endure natural calamities, and adapt to our planet's shifting climate. Indeed, trees are nature's superheroes, their power lies in their remarkable adaptability. Like shapeshifters, they ingeniously tweak their structure, physiology, and even their regeneration mechanisms to thrive in varied habitats. India, with its diverse climates and landscapes, is home to a spectacular array of tree species. Each species, intricately woven into its habitat, embodies a unique journey of evolution and survival. Among these, Conifers stand out, particularly in the cool, windswept mountain regions. Unlike their deciduous counterparts, who shed their leaves with the changing seasons, Conifers wear their emerald attire year-round. Their foliage retains vital nutrients, helping them thrive in nutrient-deficient mountains. As winter swathes the land in the snow, Conifers with their needle-like leaves stand poised to seize any fleeting warmth and bask in the sun's shy smile. Their ability to adjust their metabolism and lower their energy needs enables them to survive extended periods without photosynthesis. Conifers, with their evergreen nature, play a pivotal role in combating climate change. Even during the cold months when many trees stand bare, Conifers continue their silent vigil, actively absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Unfazed by winter's chill, they tirelessly continue to purify the air, showcasing their importance in our ecosystems. As spring arrives with its warmth, Conifers are ready to immediately kickstart photosynthesis, thereby facilitating their growth and in times of intense heat, they close their stomata, thereby preserving water and enduring severe droughts. In contrast, broadleaf trees require time to sprout leaves, which delays their photosynthetic activity. This gives conifers an edge in regions with cold winters and dry summers while posing challenges for leafless deciduous trees with limited water supply. Conifers, with their long, thin needles, have adapted remarkably to their often challenging habitats. The needles' minimised surface area, coupled with fewer stomata, smartly reduces water loss. Interestingly, the stomata located deep within the needle structure create air pockets, resulting in less transpiration compared to exposure to moving air. Their slender shape also prevents snow accumulation, protecting the branches from breakage. The needle's outermost layer, a thick, waxy cuticle, serves as nature's exquisite raincoat, masterfully locking in moisture to ensure the tree's hydration even in the icy grip of winter. This same layer, inclusive of the cuticle, epidermis, and occasionally the hypodermis, also shields the tree from harmful ultraviolet-B radiation. In foggy regions, these needles efficiently condense airborne moisture into droplets. These droplets then merge and fall onto the forest floor, hydrating the trees. Inversely, deciduous trees with their broad leaves hold tiny droplets that evaporate. This gives Conifers a distinct advantage in areas prone to advection fog, where rainfall is scarce.



THE SAGA OF TREE ENDURANCE IS MORE THAN A MERE SHOWDOWN WITH THE WEATHER; IT'S A BATTLE AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND HUMAN-INDUCED SCARS. WHILE SOME SPECIES MAY SUCCUMB TO RESILIENT WARRIORS, PIONEER SPECIES EMERGE

Under their bark, Conifers harbour a complex network of tissues, including the xylem and phloem, which transport water, nutrients, and sugars throughout the tree. However, during harsh winters, the sap, a life-sustaining fluid, faces the threat of freezing, which could severely damage the cell walls. But nature, in its infinite wisdom, has equipped these trees with a remarkable defence mechanism. Both deciduous and evergreen trees can osmotically move water out of their living cells into their intercellular (non-living) spaces. This strategic relocation of water confines the freezing process to these non-living zones. Also, the sap due to its higher sugar concentration transforms into a thick syrup that acts as an antifreeze. This transformation reduces the internal freezing point of each cell and enhances its resistance to freezing. Thus, by employing these strategies, Conifers protect their living cells from ice rupture, ensuring the tree's survival through the harshest winters. Conifers, particularly those in the Pinaceae family, are in a constant battle against formidable adversaries like bark beetles and their symbiotic microorganisms. Their defence mechanism is a sticky resin that seeps from their bark, serving both as a shield and a sword in their fight for survival. This resin forms a barrier that slows the movement of freezing air molecules, a feature that is especially beneficial in dry climates or during droughts as it helps preserve the tree's vital moisture. Moreover, the stickiness of the resin traps infiltrating insects, while its chemical composition deters or even exterminates these invaders, thereby ensuring the tree's continued growth and survival. However, climate change and invasive species are disrupting this balance, posing new challenges for these tenacious trees. Unlike broadleaf trees with large

vascular conduits that foster high growth rates and rapid leaf turnover, conifers possess narrow tracheids in their vascular system. The slender shape of these tracheids only allows tiny bubbles to form, which quickly dissolve back into solution, effectively averting freeze-thaw embolisms. Such embolisms occur after a long, cold winter when the vascular system thaws and air bubbles form. In broadleaf trees, these bubbles can grow large and struggle to dissolve back into solution, leading to an embolism. However, Conifers' narrow tracheids prevent this from happening, making them mountain marvels. As we descend from the high altitudes towards the equator, we witness a captivating shift in the botanical world. The reign of conifers gracefully passes the baton to the broadleaf trees. These trees, preferring warm and moist climates, become the stars of tropical and subtropical regions, thriving in valleys blessed with fertile and humid soils. Broadleaf trees, unlike conifers with exposed seeds on cone-like structures, protect their seeds within fruits. This strategy shields the seeds from harsh weather and predators, thereby improving the likelihood of successful germination and ensuring the continuation of the broadleaf lineage. During the dry season, these trees shed their leaves to conserve water and energy, a survival strategy akin to an investor offloading costly assets in times of scarcity. This process, known as abscission, involves specialised cells at the stem base acting like microscopic scissors, severing the leaf connection. However, before the leaves fall, the tree reclaims vital nutrients, storing them in the branches. When spring arrives, these stored nutrients fuel new leaf growth, transforming the landscape into a vibrant green canvas. While the botanical narrative often portrays conifers as inhab-

itants of frigid heights, they also demonstrate resilience in unexpected environments. Consider regions with high rainfall and poor water retention due to sandy or rocky soils. These challenging environments might seem inhospitable for most vegetation. Yet, in these very landscapes, Conifers, equipped with needle-like foliage and a waxy coating, defy expectations and adapt to thrive in water-deficient soils. Their presence attests to life's remarkable adaptability, reminding us that nature's stories are often far more surprising and nuanced than we initially imagined. The saga of tree endurance is more than a mere showdown with the weather; it's a battle against environmental challenges and human-induced scars. While some species may succumb, resilient warriors, the pioneer species emerge. These trail-blazers, including Albizia, Dalbergia, and the hardy duo of Willows and Birches in temperate climes, act as nature's first responder. They rejuvenate once the chaos subsides, splashing vibrant hues onto landscapes left barren and desolate. However, as the environment stabilises and resources become abundant, climax vegetation, the slower-growing, shade-tolerant species, begins their steady march. Their endurance enables them to replace the swift pioneers, asserting their dominance in the landscape. This transition paints a dynamic picture of movement, upheaval, and significant transformation in the landscape, illustrating the timeless wisdom of the tortoise and the hare: it's not always about the speed, but the resilience and persistence that truly counts in the race for survival. This is nature's beautiful way of reminding us that every player, swift or steady, has a crucial role in the intricate tapestry of life. *(The writer is a former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, UP; views are personal)*

Israeli strikes in Gaza kill 48

Fears mount over humanitarian crisis

AP ■ RAFAH

Israeli strikes killed at least 48 people in southern and central Gaza overnight, half of them women and children, health officials said Thursday, as European foreign ministers and UN agencies called for a cease-fire, with alarm rising over the worsening humanitarian crisis and potential starvation in the territory.

Tensions were also rising in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, where three Palestinian gunmen on Thursday opened fire on morning traffic at a highway checkpoint, killing one person and wounding five others, Israeli police said. A member of Israel's War Cabinet said late Wednesday that new attempts are underway to reach a cease-fire deal between Israel and Hamas that could pause the war in Gaza and bring the release of around 130 Israeli hostages held by the militants since their Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. It was the first Israeli indication of new efforts since negotiations stalled a week ago.

But Benny Gantz, a former military chief and defense minister, repeated his pledge that unless Hamas agrees to release the remaining hostages,

Israel will launch a ground offensive into Gaza's southern-most town, Rafah, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins around March 10.

More than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million is crowded into Rafah after fleeing fighting and bombardment elsewhere in the territory. Israel has said it will evacuate them before attacking. But it is not clear where they would go, with much of the rest of the tiny Mediterranean enclave consumed in combat — raising fears civilian casualties could spiral in an Israeli assault that has already killed more than 29,400 people.

The heads of 13 UN agencies and five other aid groups issued a joint plea for a cease-fire late Wednesday, warning that an attack on Rafah will bring "mass casualties" and could "deal a death blow" to the humanitarian operation bringing aid to Palestinians, which "is already on its knees."

Earlier this week, the World Food Program had to halt food deliveries to northern Gaza because of increasing chaos. "Diseases are rampant. Famine is looming," they said, adding that aid workers are facing "shelling, death, movement restrictions and a break-

down of civil order." They called for the opening of more entry points for aid to Gaza — including in the north — security assurances of safe passage for distribution and a release of hostages.

The foreign ministers of 26 European countries on Thursday called for a pause in fighting leading to a longer cease-fire. They urged Israel not to take military action in Rafah "that would worsen an already catastrophic humanitarian situation."

Thursday's shooting came at a checkpoint on a West Bank highway where the gunmen opened fire on cars in the morning rush-hour traffic jam. An Israeli man in his 20s was killed and five others wounded, including a pregnant woman.

Security forces killed two of the gunmen and detained the third, police said.

Hamas in a statement Thursday praised the attack in Jerusalem and said it was a "natural response" to Israel's ongoing war in Gaza and raids in the West Bank, and called for more attacks until they can achieve a "fully sovereign" Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. The militant group did not claim responsibility for the attack.

Tensions are rising in the West Bank ahead of Ramadan, which in the past has seen increased clashes, often in connection to restrictions imposed on Palestinian worshippers going to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City during the holy month.

Tempers are likely to be even more volatile this year over the Gaza war and spiraling violence in the West Bank.

Since the war began, the Israeli army has carried out near-nightly raids across the West Bank, arresting more than 3,200 Palestinians, including 1,350 it says are suspected Hamas members. Almost 400 Palestinians have been killed during the operations, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Israeli settlers have stepped up attacks on Palestinians, and there have been a number of militant shooting attacks against Israeli civilians. A flurry of seven Israeli strikes hit Rafah early Thursday, one of them flattening a large mosque and devastating much of the surrounding block.

Footage from the scene showed al-Farouq Mosque pancaked to the ground, with its concrete domes tumbled around it and nearby buildings shattered.

Houthi missile attack sets ship ablaze in Gulf of Aden

AP ■ DUBAI

A suspected missile attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels set a ship ablaze in the Gulf of Aden on Thursday as Israel intercepted what appeared to be another Houthi attack near the port city of Eilat, authorities said. The attacks come as the rebels escalate their assaults over Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The attack on Thursday in the Gulf of Aden saw two missiles fired, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said. It said the unnamed ship was ablaze, without elaborating.

Meanwhile, sirens sounded early on Thursday morning over Eilat, followed by videos posted online of what appeared to be an interception in the sky overhead.

The Israeli military later said the interception was carried out by its Arrow missile defense system.

Israel did not identify what the fire was, nor where it came from. However, the Arrow system intercepts long-range ballistic missiles with a warhead designed to destroy targets while they are in space.



The system "successfully intercepted a launch which was identified in the area of the Red Sea and was en route to Israel," the Israeli military said. "The target did not cross into Israeli territory and did not pose a threat to civilians."

The Houthis did not immediately claim either attack. They typically acknowledge assaults they conduct hours afterward.

Eilat, on the Red Sea, is a key port city of Israel. On October 31, Houthis first claimed a missile-and-drone barrage targeting the city. The rebels have claimed other attacks targeting Eilat, which have caused no damage in the

city.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea and surrounding waters over Israel's war against Hamas.

They have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for trade among Asia, the Mideast and Europe. Those vessels have included at least one with cargo for Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor.

Despite a month of US-led airstrikes, Houthi rebels remain capable of launching significant attacks. This week, they seriously damaged a ship in a crucial strait and downed

an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars. The Houthis insist their attacks will continue until Israel stops its combat operations in the Gaza Strip, which have enraged the wider Arab world and seen the Houthis gain international recognition.

On Wednesday, ships in the Red Sea off the Houthi-held port city of Hodeida in Yemen reported seeing an explosion, though all vessels in the area were said to be safe, the UKTMO said. The UKMTO earlier reported heavy drone activity in the area.

The US military's Central Command acknowledged shooting down a Houthi bomb-carrying drone during that time.

US airstrikes separately targeted seven mobile anti-ship cruise missiles and one mobile anti-ship ballistic missile prepared to target ships in the Red Sea, Central Command said.

The US State Department criticised "the reckless and indiscriminate attacks on civilian cargo ships by the Houthis" that have delayed humanitarian aid including food and medicine bound for Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen.

France says, Russian forces threatened to shoot down aircraft patrolling Black Sea

AP ■ PARIS

Russian forces threatened to shoot down French pilots patrolling in international airspace over the Black Sea, signals of increasingly aggressive behaviour from Moscow as its invasion of Ukraine struggles to make headway, France's defense minister said Thursday. The minister, Sébastien Lecornu, didn't give specific details about the French flights or aircraft involved in the threatened shoot-down. But he said Russia is returning to a "particularly aggressive" posture reminiscent of the former Soviet Union's behaviour during the Cold War.

"A month ago, to give you a very concrete example, a Russian air traffic control system threatened to shoot down French aircraft in the Black Sea when we were in a free international zone where we patrol," he said on RTL radio.

"The behaviour of Russia in 2024 bears no relation to what we saw in 2022 and, obviously, before the aggression in Ukraine," the minister said. "It is explained by the fact that Russia is in difficulty on the battlefield in Ukraine."

A French military spokesman, Col. Pierre Gaudillière, said Lecornu was referring to an incident in mid-November that involved one of France's four giant Airborne Warning and Control System, or AWACS, surveillance aircraft. Gaudillière described the incident as unprecedented for a

French flight in that region.

"It was a French AWACS" flying over international waters in the Black Sea, Gaudillière said. "Through a radio it exchange, it was threatened by the Russians."

"It was a particularly aggressive radio exchange," he added. "It's a first."

French air force pilots regularly patrol on the eastern flank of NATO, part of efforts by the 31-nation military alliance to boost its defenses since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years ago come Saturday.

The French flights include long-range patrols by its AWACS surveillance aircraft. Flying high above the Black Sea coast, they use their powerful radar and other surveillance gear to peer across to the Crimean Peninsula that was seized from Ukraine by Russia and annexed in 2014. The surveillance flights can spot missile launches, airborne bombing runs and other military activity in the Ukraine conflict.

Russian pilots have at times made clear that they don't like being watched.

In 2022, a Russian fighter jet released a missile near a British air force RC-135 Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft that was flying in international airspace over the Black Sea, Britain's government said.

The United States government released video in March 2023 of a Russian fighter jet dumping fuel on a US Air Force surveillance drone. The drone crashed into the Black Sea.

Biden calls Putin 'crazy SOB'

AP ■ SAN FRANCISCO

During a fundraiser for his reelection campaign Wednesday night, President Joe Biden called Russian President Vladimir Putin a "crazy SOB" and took aim at former President Donald Trump's comments comparing himself to the Russian opposition leader who died last week in an Arctic prison.

Biden was talking about climate change when he said, "We have a crazy SOB like Putin and others, and we always have to worry about nuclear conflict, but the existential threat to humanity is climate."

Speaking to donors at a private San Francisco home Wednesday as part of a three-day California swing to raise money for his 2024 reelection campaign, Biden also said he

was astounded by recent comments made by his likely Republican challenger.

Trump compared the suspicious prison death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny to his own legal troubles in the U.S. Trump was fined \$350 million after a New York judge found he lied for years about his wealth on financial statements in his companies. Trump said the ruling was a form of "communism or fascism."

"Some of the things that this fellow's been saying, like he's comparing himself to Navalny and saying that — because our country's become a communist country, he was persecuted, just like Navalny was persecuted. I don't know where the hell this comes from," Biden said.

"I mean, if I stood here 10, 15 years ago and said any of

this, you'd all think I should be committed," he said. "It astounds me."

"I've been around a long time and I've never quite seen a crowd like this MAGA Republican crowd," Biden added, referring to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan. "They seem to have very little moral compass on what is important to people."

During a campaign fundraiser in Beverly Hills on Tuesday night, Biden highlighted his efforts to help middle-class Americans and warned that a win in November for Trump could lead to a nationwide abortion ban, more Republican efforts to undo the health insurance program started during President Barack Obama's administration and more policies that would disproportionately help the wealthy.

Knife attack at German school injures five, suspect arrested

AP ■ BERLIN

Five people were injured in an incident Thursday at a school in the western German city of Wuppertal and a suspect was arrested, police said. The incident took place at the Wilhelm Dörpfeld high school in the city's Elberfeld district. Police said there was no shooting in the incident, German news agency dpa reported, but gave no further information. The Bild newspaper, which didn't name sources, said it was a knife attack.

Police said they deployed large numbers of officers to the scene. They said the suspect was injured.

Wuppertal is a city of some 350,000 people near Duesseldorf and Cologne.



Police and ambulances at the scene of an attack, at the Wilhelm Dörpfeld school, in Wuppertal, Germany, Thursday.

Farmers from EU countries join protest

AP ■ PRAGUE

Czech farmers were driving their tractors and other vehicles to several border crossings on Thursday to meet their colleagues from neighbouring countries and join forces in their protests against European Union agriculture policies, bureaucracy and overall conditions for their business.

Farmers complain that the 27-nation EU's environmental policies, such as the Green Deal, which calls for limits on the use of chemicals and on greenhouse gas emissions, limit their business and make their products more expensive than non-EU imports.

The farmers also complain about low prices for their products and say grain and other agriculture products coming from Ukraine and Latin America negatively affect the



market. The farmers met their colleagues from neighbouring Germany, Poland and Slovakia at a number of border crossings. Farmers from 10 EU countries, ranging from Central Europe to the Baltics and the Balkans, were participating in the protest, organisers said.

The farmers invited Czech Agriculture Minister Marek Vyborný, his Slovak counterpart Richard Takac, and the representatives of farmers from Poland and Hungary to rally at a Czech-Slovak border crossing known as Hodonin-Holic, which was blocked by hundreds of tractors. "We don't protest against the EU, we protest against the wrong decisions by the European Commission," said Andrej Gajdos from the Slovak Chamber of Agriculture and Food.

Albanian Parliament approves deal to hold migrants for Italy

Tirana (AP): Albania's Parliament on Thursday approved a deal for the country to hold thousands of asylum seekers rescued in international waters by Italy while their applications are processed, despite protests from opposition lawmakers and human rights groups.

Under the five-year deal, Albania would shelter up to 3,000 migrants at any one time. With asylum requests expected to take around a month to process, the number of asylum-seekers sent to Albania could reach up to 36,000 in a year.

The idea of sending asylum seekers outside the EU is controversial. The deal was endorsed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen but has been widely criticised by human rights groups. Albania is currently seeking EU membership.

ment. Gazment Bardhi of the opposition Democrats declined to say anything about the agreement, which they have opposed earlier.

Mesila Doda of the small Justice, Integration, Unity Party, whose three members voted for the deal, said that "we are talking about a country that always has supported us in our path."

Italy's lower chamber of parliament approved the deal in January, followed by the Senate earlier this month.

Two processing centers will be set up in Albania at a cost to Italy of more than 600 million euros (about USD 650 million) over five years.

The facilities would be fully run by Italy while it fast-tracks their asylum requests. Meloni has said she expects them to become operational by the spring of 2024.

Italy would remain legally responsible for the migrants throughout the process, and would welcome them if they are granted international protection or organize their deportation from Albania if refused.

Those picked up within Italy's territorial waters, or by rescue ships operated by non-governmental organisations, would retain their right under international and EU law to apply for asylum in Italy and have their claims processed there. Rama has said that Albania stands beside Meloni in a sign of gratitude on behalf of Albanians who found refuge in Italy and "escaped hell and imagined a better life" following the collapse of communism in Albania in the 1990s. Italy has sought help from other EU nations to handle the increasing number of arrivals. Data from Italy's Interior ministry showed that migrant arrivals in Italy jumped 50 per cent in 2023 from the previous year.

Jaahnavi's killers will not face criminal charges

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The Seattle police officer who struck and killed Indian student Jaahnavi Kandula while responding to an overdose call, will not face any criminal charges due to lack of "sufficient" evidence, authorities said.

On Wednesday, the King County Prosecutor's Office said they will not move forward with criminal charges against Seattle Police Officer Kevin Dave, FOX13 Seattle reported. In a statement released Wednesday, the King County Prosecuting Attorney said, "Kandula's death is heartbreaking and impacted communities in King County and across the world."

Kandula, 23, was struck by a police vehicle driven by Officer Dave when she was crossing a street in Seattle on January 23. He was driving 74 mph (more than 119 kmh) on



the way to a report of a drug overdose call. Kandula was thrown 100 feet when she was struck by the speeding police patrol vehicle.

In bodycam footage released by the Seattle Police Department, Officer Daniel Auderer laughed about the deadly crash and dismissed any implication Dave might be at fault or that a criminal investigation was necessary.

King County Prosecuting

Attorney Leesa Manion said that she believes they lack the evidence to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt, the report added.

"It is the responsibility of the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office to review all available evidence relating to the case involving Seattle Police Officer Kevin Dave and the January 2023 collision death of Jaahnavi Kandula. After staffing this case with senior deputy prosecuting attorneys and office leadership, I have determined that we lack sufficient evidence under Washington State law to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt."

The statement also said that the prosecutor's office also finds the comments made by Seattle Police Officer Daniel Auderer, recorded on his body-worn video, "appalling and deeply troubling."

Auderer, who was not

involved in the January collision, was captured in the video saying, "But she is dead" and laughing while on the phone.

She was 26 anyway," Auderer said in the video. "She had limited value."

"Officer Auderer's comments were also unprofessional and undermined the public's trust in the Seattle Police Department and law enforcement in general," said Manion.

"As egregious as Officer Auderer's comments are, they do not change the PAO's legal analysis into the conduct of Officer Dave. It is the Office of Police Accountability that bears the responsibility of disciplinary investigation and proceedings relating to Officer Auderer's comment, not the PAO."

Auderer was pulled from patrol in September 2023 and reassigned to a "non-operational position." Auderer could still be fired after the fallout of

his insensitive comments captured on bodycam.

Auderer's chain of command and the Office of Police Accountability (OPA) found he acted unprofessionally. For that, he faces the highest disciplinary range of nearly two weeks suspension up to termination, according to a disciplinary action report.

Before a final disciplinary decision, Auderer will have the chance to meet with Police Chief Adrian Diaz to disagree.

His disciplinary hearing is scheduled for March 4, K5 News reported.

Seattle local media reported that speed was the cause of the collision, as the speed at which Dave was travelling did "not allow (Kandula) or him sufficient time to detect, address and avoid a hazard that presented itself."

Dave was responding to a "priority one" call at the request of the Seattle Fire Department,

according to the Seattle Police Department. According to the police report, the officer was responding to a report of a drug overdose.

The officer did not have his siren activated continuously. Instead, the officer "chirped" his siren at the intersection. He did have his emergency lights on, according to a previous statement from the police department.

In a memo to Seattle police, prosecutors wrote there was not enough evidence to prove Dave showed "conscious disregard for others safety."

A drug recognition expert responded to the scene and found no impairment in the officer.

Kandula was a graduate student at Northeastern University at the Seattle campus. The university said in January 2023 that they would award her degree posthumously and present it to her family.

Will urge IMF to stop support to Pak over ‘rigged’ polls: Imran

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan on Thursday announced that he will write to the IMF, demanding the global lender to stop its support to cash-strapped Pakistan until it seeks an “audit” of the elections mired in controversies, including vote rigging.

Khan’s message from jail was conveyed through Barrister Ali Zafar, who met him in the Adiala Jail Rawalpindi where the former cricketer-turned-politician has been incarcerated since last year.

“A letter will be written to the International Monetary Fund that it should first seek an audit of elections and then decide about any loan to Pakistan,” Zafar said, adding that any loan to Pakistan without an audit of votes would be harmful to the country facing financial woes. Zafar, who has also been nominated by Khan to contest intra-party election for the chairman’s post, also said that the IMF has laws which bar aid to countries not having democratic governments. He said a democratic government was only possible after having fair and free elections. He rejected the impression that the letter would further jeopardise Pakistan’s fragile economy which, without assistance from the donors, may default on external liabilities.

Pakistan is heavily dependent on the IMF and currently implementing a short-term USD 3 billion agreement. The global lender has already provided two tranches of loan and the last tranche of USD 1.2 is expected by the end of March or early April.

According to experts, the new government after taking office would have to enter into fresh talks with the IMF to get a new loan. The statement by Khan drew criticism from his opponents, who said that the former prime minister was bent on damaging the country.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Atta

PTI’s organisational elections on March 3

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan’s beleaguered party will conduct fresh organisational elections on March 3, a senior leader announced on Thursday, months after the election commission annulled a previous intra-party poll.

Earlier this month, intra-party polls of the 71-year-old former-cricketer-turned-politician’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) were postponed after top party leadership asserted that it could “divert” attention from the February 8 general elections.

PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Khan said that the decision to conduct fresh intra-party polls had been made in the light of instructions from the party founder Imran Khan.

“The intra-party elections will take place on March 3 and this time Ali Zafar will be our candidate for chairman,” he said while addressing a press conference along with Barrister Zafar and other party leaders. He reiterated that it was the decision of Imran Khan. Gohar, who was nominated by Khan to contest the intra-party elections as chairman last year and also won, said that Khan nominated Omar Ayub Khan to contest as secretary general of the party. The party members can submit nomination papers by Friday and Saturday. According to the poll schedule, the scrutiny of the

Tarar condemned the statement about writing a letter to the IMF and said that the PTI founder was trying to harm the country. “The party has always tried to damage the country to save its politics,” he said.

The development comes after the PML-N and the

nomination papers will be completed by February 25 and decisions on the nominations will be made by February 27.

The polling for the organisational elections would be held at the party’s central secretariat here and PTI offices in all four provinces of the country, the Dawn newspaper reported. The development came as the Express Tribune newspaper reported that the PTI is expected to hold its intra-party elections in the next 15 days. It had also reported that Gohar Khan has been nominated as the chairman and Raoof Hassan will be the Chief Election Commissioner for PTI’s intra-party polls.

It was not known why Imran Khan changed the candidate for the post of chairman. To a question, Gohar Khan rejected the impression that he had been demoted. Previously, a day after PTI announced the schedule for fresh intra-party polls, the party postponed them on February 2 until after the elections which were held on February 8.

The party cited commitments of members in their respective constituencies and PTI venues being “unlawfully blocked by the administration” as reasons for the delay.

The earlier round of the party’s intra-party polls was declared null and void by the Supreme Court before the general elections. The party also lost its iconic ‘bat’ electoral symbol.

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) agreed on a power-sharing deal to form a coalition government led by former prime minister Shehbaz Sharif. No political party managed to secure enough seats in the National Assembly following the February 8 general elec-

tions, leading to a hung Parliament.

Both the PML-N and the PPP won fewer seats in Parliament than candidates backed by Imran Khan in an election mired in controversies, including vote rigging. Khan, who could not contest the February 8 elections due to his convictions in some cases including that of corruption, has been barred from holding any public office for 10 years. The PTI has said that the PML-N and PPP are trying to form a government with a stolen mandate and the nation would not accept the “PDM 2.0”.

It alleged the “regime change conspiracy” was backed by the chief election commissioner by making a mockery of the Constitution and law in the country. The IMF’s review mission might visit Islamabad by the end of this month or early next month, provided the government formation at the federal and provincial levels is complete. The mission will finalise the salient features of the anticipated medium-term bailout package to avert a default on repayment of foreign debts.

Earlier, the IMF’s review mission was scheduled to visit the country in the first week of February, but the delegation refused to visit on the eve of the general elections. After the general elections threw a fractured mandate, doubts have been raised about the fairness of the whole process, with the US, the European Union, and other countries demanding an investigation into the irregularities and fraud allegations.

Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves hovered around USD 8.04 billion during the week ending February 2, after witnessing a decline in reserves by USD 173 million due to external debt repayments. A Finance Division official last week said the IMF would only come to begin the second review talks once a new government was sworn in at the national level.

Maryam set to be first woman CM of Pakistan’s Punjab provincial assembly

Lahore (PTI): Maryam Nawaz, the daughter of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, is set to become the first woman chief minister of Pakistan’s Punjab province following the summoning of the inaugural session of the provincial legislature on Friday.

Out of five assemblies in Pakistan that went to the polls on February 8, the Punjab Assembly is the first house convening its opening session. “Punjab Governor Balighur Rahman has called the Punjab Assembly session for Friday, in which newly elected members of the assembly will swear in and formation of the new government will begin,” a spokesperson for the Governor’s House said on Thursday. Maryam, 50, is also senior vice president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party. She is considered to be the political heir of PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif, who surprisingly nominated his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif as his party’s prime ministerial candidate. The PML-N has nominated Maryam as the chief ministerial candidate of the party in Punjab, a province of over 120 million people. The PML-N won 137 seats while independents backed by former prime minister Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) won 113 in the Punjab Assembly. Separately, 20-odd independents, not PTI-backed, have already joined the PML-N. The PTI-backed independent candidates have joined the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) to get reserved seats for women and minorities besides saving their elected members from being forced to change their loyalty by the military establishment.

“Xiang Yang Hong 03 was moored close to Male City this morning. Around noon, the ship was shown to be near Thilafushi,” news portal Edition.mv reported, quoting the Marine Traffic website that tracks all ocean liners across the globe. “Xiang Yang Hong 03 began its journey on January 14, 24 hours after Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu concluded his state visit to China. It arrived near Male’ today after spending about a month near the Maldives’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ),” said Adhadhu.com, a news portal. It also claimed that the vessel was “not visible on common tracking sites starting from January 22. It is believed that the vessels tracking systems had been turned off when it was in the Java Sea off Indonesia then.”

An analysis by Adhadhu using satellite AIS tracking showed that the Chinese vessel was later at the EEZ of Maldives, the report said, adding, “The vessel had spent about a month near the EEZ.”

Ukraine’s fate hangs in balance, Polish prime minister says

Warsaw (AP): Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said on Thursday that the border crossings with Ukraine are being added to a list of critical infrastructure to ensure that all military and humanitarian aid can reach Ukraine without any delays.

“The fate of Ukraine is hanging in the balance and I don’t need to convince anyone that this means that our fate is also hanging in the balance,” said Tusk, whose country is located along NATO’s eastern flank and borders Ukraine.

Tusk spoke following protests by angry Polish farmers that have included border blockades and the spilling of Ukrainian grain from freight trains at a Polish border crossing. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Wednesday that the blockade was hampering the transport of military supplies to Ukrainian forces on the front line.

Poland is one of the main staging posts for Western military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Poland has donated many of its own weapons but transports from other NATO countries often pass through

Chinese ship moors near Maldives after a month in Indian Ocean

PTI ■ MALE

A high-tech Chinese marine research ship on Thursday arrived near the Maldives after spending about a month in the Indian Ocean near the island nation, media reports said here. The ship, ‘Xiang Yang Hong 03’ reached the Maldives on the same day when Indian and Sri Lankan coast guard ships reached the strategically located archipelago for a trilateral naval exercise.

India had already expressed concern about the movement of the Chinese research ship in the Indian Ocean and also prevailed on Sri Lanka to refuse permission for the ship to dock at the Colombo port.

“Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03 was moored close to Male City this morning. Around noon, the ship was shown to be near Thilafushi,” news portal Edition.mv reported, quoting the Marine Traffic website that tracks all ocean liners across the globe. “Xiang Yang Hong 03 began its journey on January 14, 24 hours after Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu concluded his state visit to China. It arrived near Male’ today after spending about a month near the Maldives’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ),” said Adhadhu.com, a news portal. It also claimed that the vessel was “not visible on common tracking sites starting from January 22. It is believed that the vessels tracking systems had been turned off when it was in the Java Sea off Indonesia then.”

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Muizzu, widely seen as a pro-China leader, won last year’s presidential election on an ‘anti-India’ stance. He made Beijing his first port of call going against the tradition of visiting New Delhi first as the Maldivian President.

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

On January 23, the Maldives government permitted the research vessel. But while the Maldivian foreign ministry said the Chinese Research Vessel Xiang Yang Hong 3 will “not be conducting any research while in the Maldivian waters,” sources in the Indian defence establishment had indicated that New Delhi was keeping a close watch on the movement of the ship. In February, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said, “China’s scientific research activities in relevant waters are for peaceful purposes and aimed at contributing to humanity’s scientific understanding of the ocean.”

Earlier on January 5, Sri Lanka, while denying entry to the Chinese ship, had said it had declared a moratorium on foreign research ships entering its waters for a year amid concerns from India over Chinese research vessels docking in its neighbourhood.

The Maldives’ proximity to India, barely 70 nautical miles from the island of Minicoy in Lakshadweep and 300 nautical miles from the mainland’s western coast, and

its location at the hub of commercial sea lanes running through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) gives it significant strategic importance. The Maldives is India’s key maritime neighbour in the IOR and occupies a special place in its initiatives like SAGAR’ (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Neighbourhood First Policy’ of the Narendra Modi government.

Meanwhile, Thursday morning, Coast Guards of Maldives, India, and Sri Lanka, along with observers from Bangladesh, joined in at the Trilateral Joint Exercise ‘DOSTI-16’.

“MNDF welcomes participating ships from India and Sri Lanka for the Trilateral Joint Exercise ‘DOSTI-16’ from Feb 22-25. Coast Guards of Maldives, India, and Sri Lanka, along with observers from Bangladesh, join in this biennial event to enhance collaboration between the forces,” Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) said in a post on X along with the photos of the two vessels. “The purpose of the biennial exercise is to enhance military collaboration between the three nations and explore ways the nations can work together with respect to incidents unfolding at sea,” news portal Sun.mv reported.

DOSTI exercise had initially kicked off between Maldives and India in 1991. Sri Lanka first participated in the exercise in 2012. The exercise was last held in 2021, the portal said.

The visit of the Indian coastguard ship to the Maldives comes amidst President Muizzu’s demand for the withdrawal of 88 Indian military personnel manning three Indian aviation platforms in the island nation by March 15.

Russian war blogger dies after facing criticism for revealing Moscow’s losses

Moscow (AP): A Russian military blogger has died in an apparent suicide after facing a barrage of criticism for revealing heavy losses in Ukraine, and his supporters have blamed Kremlin propagandists for his death. Andrei Morozov, who also served as a soldier on the front line in Ukraine, said in his last post Wednesday that he decided to “execute” himself to help his comrades in arms avoid fall-out from his critical publications, which had angered the military command.

Maxim Pashkov, a lawyer who knew him, confirmed Morozov’s death in a messaging app statement, saying that he shot himself dead. Morozov was 44 years old. Morozov, who went by the nickname Murz, said in a recent post that about 16,000 Russian troops were killed and the military lost about 300 armored vehicles since October when the four-month battle for the eastern stronghold of Avdiivka began. Russian troops captured Avdiivka over the weekend after Ukrainian troops pulled back.

Morozov’s remarks drew angry comments from a top TV show host on Russian state TV and others who called for him to be prosecuted for “discrediting” the military. Several fellow bloggers blamed those

who attacked Morozov for his death. In his last post before killing himself that he posted on his channel in Telegram, Morozov said he was forced by military officials to remove his post about the Russian losses. He harshly criticised the military command for turning a blind eye to losses and ignoring troops’ needs. Alexander Kofman, head of the Public Chamber in the Moscow-controlled part of the Donetsk region, described Morozov’s suicide as a “huge mistake” in a statement on his messaging app channel. Morozov’s death came as Russian authorities have become increasingly intolerant ahead of March’s election in which President Vladimir Putin is all but certain to win another six-year term.

Imran’s party-backed winning independent candidates join Sunni Ittehad Council

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Amidst a flurry of post-election activities in Pakistan, jailed former prime minister Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party-backed winning independent candidates of national and provincial assemblies officially joined the Sunni Ittehad Council to claim the share in the quota of seats reserved for women and minorities.

The independents submitted affidavits to the Election Commission on Wednesday, vowing to become part of the right-wing party dominated by Sunni Muslims. As many as 89 Members of National Assembly (MNAs), 85 members of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly, 106 members of the Punjab Assembly and nine members of the Sindh Assembly have submitted their affidavits, the Dawn newspaper reported. However, PTI chief

Barrister Gohar Khan and candidate for Prime Minister post Omar Ayub Khan did not join the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC). The PTI candidate for CM Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Ali Amin Gandapur also stayed away from the SIC.

Earlier, it was reported by some media that Gohar Khan had also joined the SIC which would hamper his chances to contest the intra-party elections of the PTI which the party was planning to hold in the coming weeks. The PTI-backed independent candidates joined the SIC to claim a share of the reserved seats. The development comes after the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) agreed on a power-sharing deal to form a coalition government led by former prime minister Shehbaz Sharif.

Both the PML-N and the PPP won fewer seats in Parliament than candidates

backed by Imran Khan in an election mired in controversies, including vote rigging. Khan, who could not contest the February 8 elections due to his convictions in some cases including that of corruption has been barred from holding any public office for 10 years. The PTI has said that the PML-N and PPP are going to form the government with a stolen mandate and the nation would not accept the “PDM 2.0”.

It alleged the “regime change conspiracy” was backed by the chief election commissioner by making a mockery of the Constitution and law in the country. A party spokesperson said that a group “rejected by the nation” had gathered once again to stage a “drama” of PDM 2.0 in the country, which was unacceptable and intolerable. He claimed that the nation had given a clear mandate to the PTI to form its government in Centre, Punjab and Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa provinces despite the incarceration of PTI founding chairman Imran Khan, the snatching of the party’s election symbol ‘bat’, and obstacles to carry out poll campaigns.

He claimed that as per Form-45s, the citizens had given the PTI an overwhelming majority of 180 seats in the 266-member National Assembly. “It is high time we learned a lesson from history and respected the public mandate, as Pakistan had to go through a tragedy like the fall of Dhaka as a result of daylight poll fraud,” the party’s spokesperson said. He alleged that the heirs of those who “dismembered Pakistan” were again active in facilitating the state’s efforts to trample on the public mandate. However, he made it clear that the people of Pakistan would not tolerate any attempt to make a mockery of the Constitution and democracy and the robbery of their votes.

Ukraine weighs unpopular plan to expand draft

AP ■ LYMAN

When the Russian army mounted a full-scale invasion two years ago, Ukrainian men zealously rushed to recruitment centres across the country to enlist, ready to die in defence of their nation. Today, with Russia in control of roughly one-quarter of Ukraine and the two armies virtually deadlocked along a 1,000-kilometre front line, that spirit to enlist has faded: Few Ukrainian men are evading the draft by hiding at home or trying to bribe their way out of the battle.

Along the frigid and muddy front line, commanders say their army is too small and made up of too many exhausted and wounded soldiers. As the war enters its third year, the most urgent and politically sensitive challenge pressing on Ukraine is whether it can muster enough new soldiers to repel an enemy with far more fighters at its disposal. Russia’s population is more than three times as large as Ukraine’s, and President Vladimir Putin has shown a

willingness to force men to the front if not enough volunteer. The lack of soldiers isn’t Ukraine’s only predicament — it is also desperate for Western military aid, which has been harder to come by as the war drags on. But mobilizing enough soldiers is a problem only Ukraine can solve.

The parliament is considering legislation that would increase the potential pool of recruits by about 400,000, in part by lowering the enlistment age from 27 to 25. But the proposal is highly unpopular, forcing elected officials to grapple with questions that cut to the heart of nationhood: Can they convince enough citizens to sacrifice their lives? And, if not, are they willing to accept the alternative?

A Ukrainian soldier fighting near the city of Avdiivka — where soldiers retreated last week to save lives — said his unit was recently outnumbered by about 5 to 1 when dozens of Russian soldiers stormed their position, killing everyone but himself and two others. “We were almost completely defeat-

ed,” said Dima, who refused to provide his last name for security reasons. Roughly 800 kilometres away, a 42-year-old man afraid of being sent to the front hides at home outside of Kyiv, distressed. “I feel a sort of guilt for being a man ... I cannot feel myself free,” said Andrii, who insisted on using his first name only to speak about dodging the draft. Tens of thousands of other eligible Ukrainian men are estimated to be evading the draft, at home or abroad.

WHO WILL DIG THE TRENCHES?

Because there aren’t enough new recruits, soldiers on the front line aren’t getting enough rest in between rotations. Two years of gruelling battles have left men fatigued and more susceptible to injury. When there are new recruits, they are too few, too poorly trained and often too old, according to interviews with two dozen Ukrainian soldiers, including six commanders. Commanders say they don’t have enough soldiers to launch

offensives, and barely enough to hold positions amid intensifying Russian assaults.

Brigades of 3,000-5,000 soldiers are typically fighting with only 75 per cent of their full strength, according to Vadym Ivchenko, a lawmaker who is part of the parliament’s national security, defense and intelligence committee.

Igor Ivantsev, 31, was among a dozen men treated recently at a field hospital near the front. He has been wounded twice in the span of four months. His body aches when he carries his machine gun, but doctors deem him fit to serve. Ivantsev said that of the 17 men he enlisted with, most are dead; the rest are like him, wounded.

Ivantsev’s commander, who would only provide his first name, Dmytro, said his exhausted and depleted company is working overtime to dig deeper trenches and build better locations from which to counter constant Russian artillery. “We have no people, nowhere to get them from,” Dmytro said. At the start of the

war, soldiers were rotated every two weeks for one week of rest, he said. But now his soldiers fight for a month, then get four days of rest. “We are not made of steel,” said Ivantsev.

A PLAN TO DRAFT MORE MEN

The legislation being discussed in parliament would enable the military to draft more men so that those already enlisted can get more rest or even be relieved of duty. An estimated 300,000 Ukrainian soldiers are currently fighting along the front line, while others serve elsewhere, lawmakers said. Putin has said twice as many Russian troops are in Ukraine. The Ukrainian military seeks to mobilize up to 500,000 more men, but realizing how unpopular such a move would be, lawmakers are treading carefully. Over a thousand amendments have been attached to draft legislation that even President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has yet to publicly endorse. Under the draft legislation, any individual who fails

to respond to call up notices could potentially have their bank accounts frozen and their ability to travel outside the country restricted. Lawmakers critical of the legislation, including Ivchenko, say the military hasn’t adequately explained how a surge in conscription will meaningfully change the outcome of the war.

DRAFT DODGERS

The legislation’s toughest sell are men like a 35-year-old website creator who insisted on anonymity to discuss his decision to hide at home in a suburb of Kyiv rather than join the war effort. He refuses to fight, he said, because he doesn’t want to kill people; his plan is to raise enough money to escape Ukraine.

The legislation being considered in parliament would, in theory, leave less room for men like him to hide by requiring all draft-eligible citizens to check in with the government via an electronic-tracking system.

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Approx cost of the works in

Rs. 29.97 Lacs

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Bid Security

Rs. 60000.00

Date & time of submission of tender

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Sensex surges over 500 points

Nifty scales new high on bullish sentiments

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Stocks staged a strong recovery on Thursday, with Nifty notching up a fresh all-time high and Sensex surging over 500 points as investors went on a buying spree in IT, technology and automobile stocks.

After volatility persisted for most part of the session, the benchmark indices rebounded in the last one hour of trading amid improving domestic macroeconomic indicators and positive global cues, including impressive earnings from the US technology space.

The 30-share benchmark Sensex soared 535.15 points or 0.74 per cent to close at 73,158.24 points. As many as 22 Sensex constituents closed in the positive territory and the index touched an intra-day high of 73,256.39 points.

The broader Nifty climbed 162.40 points or 0.74 per cent to hit its highest-ever closing level of 22,217.45 points.

During intraday trade, the index touched the peak of 22,252.50 points and 25 Nifty constituents ended the session with gains.

Nifty recorded its previous lifetime peak at 22,196.95 points on



February 20.

“The domestic market staged a recovery from the day’s low, buoyed by positive PMI data from the Eurozone and an impressive earnings report from US tech stocks.

“The broader market showed resilience as India’s economic activity continued to expand in February, with both service and manufacturing PMI improving. Consequently, it resulted in outperformance in discretionary stocks and capital goods,”

Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services, said.

BSE midcap index gained 0.92 per cent, largecap index climbed 0.81 per cent and smallcap index rose 0.54 per cent.

In the Sensex pack, HCLTech rose the maximum by 3.12 per cent, followed by ITC which gained 2.73 per cent and M&M went up 2.61 per cent. TCS climbed 2.44 per cent. Bellwether auto stock Maruti gained 1.79 per cent, while Tata Motors rose

1.20 per cent.

Tech Mahindra, Wipro, L&T and Maruti were among the other major gainers.

“Nifty made a fresh record high on February 22 negating the bearish development of the previous session. It could now proceed towards 22,280 and later 22,810. On falls, it could take support at 22,011. Participants remain unsure about the direction of the market due to sharp intraday movements in the

markets on either side,” Deepak Jasani, Head Retail Research at HDFC Securities, said.

Among sectoral indices, BSE Auto gained the maximum by 1.85 per cent, followed by IT which rose by 1.83 per cent and Capital Goods which went up by 1.80 per cent.

BSE Tech rose 1.59 per cent, while industrials climbed 1.50 per cent and power ended 1.38 per cent higher.

However, stocks of all major banks closed in the red with IndusInd

Bank falling 1.87 per cent, HDFC Bank dropped 1.28 per cent, Kotak Mahindra Bank declined 1.11 per cent and SBI slipped 0.73 per cent. BSE Bankex was the only index that ended with a marginal loss of 0.04 per cent.

“We are witnessing the banks trading at higher valuations than their historical median barring two large banks; HDFC Bank and Kotak Mahindra Bank.

“The sharp correction in these two banks led to valuation comfort and earning upgrades is likely to bring investor sentiment back. Hence, we are optimistic on HDFC Bank with a current valuation of around 2.7x Price to book,” Ajit Kabi, Research Analyst at LKP Securities, said.

In Asian markets, Japan’s Nikkei 225 surged more than 2 per cent to all-time high to hit its 1,989 level. Hang Seng of Hong Kong and China’s Shanghai Composite also ended with sharp gains.

European stocks were also mostly trading in the green.

On Wednesday, US stocks finished mostly higher after minutes of the US Federal Reserve’s January meeting showed most policymakers were concerned about the risks of cutting interest rates early.



Sugar firms stocks settle 3 per cent lower

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Shares of Sugar companies settled 3 per cent lower on Thursday after the government announced a hike in the minimum price that mills have to pay to sugarcane growers for the 2024-25 season starting October.

The scrip of Rana Sugars declined 2.86 per cent to close at Rs 25.44 apiece on the BSE, Mawana Sugars at Rs 102.07, Shree Renuka Sugars at Rs 48.96, Dalmia Bharat Sugar and Industries at Rs 402, EID Parry (India) at Rs 630.60.

Also, Triveni Engineering & Industries went lower by 0.73 per cent to settle at Rs 347.90 apiece, Dhampur Sugar Mills at Rs 248.95 and KCP Sugar & Industries Corp at Rs 41.75 per piece on the exchange.

On the other hand, shares of Rajshree Sugars & Chemicals rallied 8.22 per cent to end at Rs 80.60 apiece, and Balrampur Chini Mills gained 0.45 per cent to finish at Rs 382.45 each on the BSE.

The 30-share BSE Sensex index jumped 535.15 points or 0.74 per cent to close at 73,158.24.

On Wednesday, the government announced a hike in the Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP), the minimum rate that mills need to pay to sugarcane growers. The FRP has been increased by Rs 25 to Rs 340 per quintal for the 2024-25 season starting October.

The decision to increase the FRP was taken at the meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

This is the highest FRP for sugarcane announced by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government since coming to power in 2014.

Dismayed over the decision, Baghat District President of Bharatiya Kisan Union (Bhanu) Pratap Singh Gurjar said the government has forgotten its own promise.



Vodafone Idea board to meet to consider fundraising proposal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Telecom operator Vodafone Idea (VIL) on Thursday said its board will meet on February 27 to consider fundraising proposals.

In a statutory filing, VIL said the board of directors will consider and evaluate all proposals for “raising of funds in one or more tranches by way of a rights issue, further public offer, private placement including preferential allotment, qualified institutions placement or through any other permissible mode and/or combination”.

The fundraising could be through equity or debt instruments, the BSE filing said.

The capital raise could be by way of issue of equity shares or by way of any instruments including “securities convertible into equity shares, Global Depository Receipts, American Depository Receipts or bonds including foreign currency convertible bonds, convertible debentures, warrants, and/or non-convertible debentures including non-convertible debentures along with warrants, which may or may not be listed”.

“... The Board of Directors of Vodafone Idea Limited will be held on Tuesday that is 27 February, 2024, to consider and evaluate any and all proposals for raising of funds in one or more tranches...,” it said.

Earlier today, Billionaire industrialist and Aditya

Birla Group chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla had underlined the Group’s firm commitment to the cash-strapped telco and asserted that efforts are on to rope-in external investors.

On how soon such investors could be onboarded, Birla told PTI “we are making good progress but can’t put in a timeline.”

“We remain very committed to Vodafone Idea, and like we have said in public domain, efforts are on to get outside investors,” he had said speaking at a conference here to mark the launch of the Group’s decorative business.

Vodafone Idea saw its net loss narrow to Rs 6,986 crore for the December 2023 quarter, helped by Rs 755.5 crore one-time exceptional gain, while the average revenue per subscriber improved for the ailing telco.

VIL’s net loss stood at Rs 7,990 crore in the year-ago period.

For the debt-laden telco - which has been struggling to keep up with the larger rivals like Reliance Jio and Bharti Airtel in the hugely competitive Indian telecom market - the revenue from operations remained nearly flat at Rs 10,673.1 crore year-on-year.

During the company’s Q3FY24 results, Vodafone Idea CEO Akshaya Moondra had said: “We remain engaged with various parties for fundraising to make required investments for network expansion, including 5G roll-out.”

Farm community gives mixed response to increase in sugarcane FRP

PTI ■ BAGHPAT/MEERUT (UP)

The farm community in western Uttar Pradesh has given a mixed response to the government’s decision to increase Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) of sugarcane to Rs 340 per quintal.

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday decided to hike the minimum price that mills have to pay to sugarcane growers by Rs 25 to Rs 340 per quintal for the 2024-25 season starting October.

This is the highest FRP for sugarcane announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government since coming to power in 2014.

Dismayed over the decision, Baghat District President of Bharatiya Kisan Union (Bhanu) Pratap Singh Gurjar said the government has forgotten its own promise.

“Prime Minister Narendra Modi had himself promised to give MSP of Rs 450 per quintal to cane during a public rally in Meerut in 2014 elections,” he claimed.

“We (farmers) are also consumers. The government should also remember this. We also have to buy petrol, diesel, fertilizer, seeds etc. All these things are becoming expensive. MSP on sugarcane should be increased on the basis of farmers’ costs. If the allowance of government employees increases on the basis of inflation, then why is it not done for farmers? We urge the central government to reconsider its decision on the price for sugarcane,” Gurjar added.

Gurwant Singh, a sugarcane farmer of Shahjahanpur district, called the FRP rise “meagre.”

“The increase in FRP of sugarcane



by Rs 25 might look like a big decision but is very meagre to what actually is required. The cost of farming has almost doubled in the past few years. The government should at least increase the FRP by Rs 70 per

quintal so that farmers could recover their investment,” he said.

On the other hand, National Secretary of Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) and senior farm leader of West UP, Raj Kumar Sangwan, while talking to PTI in Meerut, said the Centre has taken the decision keeping in mind the plight of the farmers. “This increase will provide relief to farmers.”

He also said that considering the way costs are increasing, the FRP could have been increased further.

Bharat District President of Bharatiya Kisan Union (Arajnaitik) Anurag Chaudhary also welcomed the move.

“The decision of Government of India to increase the FRP of sugarcane by Rs 25 is good. But the central government must ensure that farmers in UP get this benefit.”

Rupee rises 13 paise to close at 82.83 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee appreciated 13 paise to close at 82.83 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, tracking the weakness of the American currency in the overseas market and positive domestic equities.

Forex traders said elevated crude oil prices weighed on the local unit and restricted a sharp uptick.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 82.94 against the greenback. It hit an intraday high of 82.83 during the day.

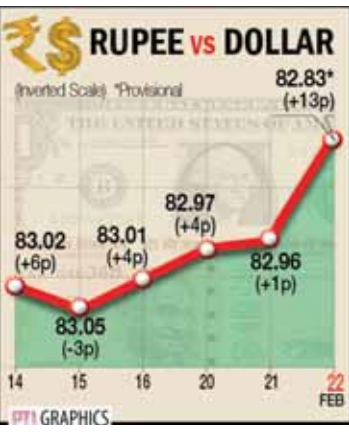
The domestic unit finally settled at 82.83 (provisional) against the dollar,

higher by 13 paise from its previous close of 82.96.

The Indian rupee appreciated on Thursday on weak US dollar and mixed-to-positive domestic markets, said Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas.

However, a surge in crude oil prices capped sharp gains. The US dollar declined on rise in risk appetite in global markets and positive European markets ahead of PMI data from Eurozone and Germany.

Analysts attributed the retreating dollar index to the US Federal Reserve’s minutes that reflected policy makers’ cautious approach, ebbing the possibility of interest rate cuts in



the immediate future.

“The Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) minutes released on Wednesday were slightly hawkish,” Choudhary said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback’s strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.31 per cent lower at 103.68.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.37 per cent to USD 83.34 per barrel.

“We expect the rupee to trade with a slight positive bias on the weak tone in the US dollar and positive global markets. However, rising global crude oil prices and geopolitical tension in the Middle East may limit the gains

in the rupee. “Traders may watch out for manufacturing and services PMI, weekly unemployment claims and existing home sales data from the US.

USDINR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 82.60 to Rs 83.10,” Choudhary added.

On the domestic equity market front, the Sensex advanced 535.15 points, or 0.74 per cent, to 73,158.24. The Nifty rose 162.40 points, or 0.74 per cent, to hit an all-time high of 22,217.45.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net buyers in the capital markets on Wednesday as they purchased shares worth Rs 284.66 crore, according to exchange data.

Solar installations fall 44 per cent in 2023, says report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has reported a 44 per cent fall in solar installations at 7.5 gigawatt in 2023 due to land acquisition-related issues, research firm Mercom Capital said on Thursday.

According to the US-based research firm’s latest report, a total of 13.4 gigawatt (GW) solar capacity was installed in the country in 2022.

As of December 2023, the cumulative installed solar capacity stood at 72 GW. Of which utility-scale projects accounted for 85.4 per cent, and rooftop solar accounted for 14.6 per cent, the report said.

“In 2023, large-scale solar

installations fell 51 per cent to 5.8 GW from 11.7 GW in 2022. Extensions granted to several large-scale projects and delays primarily due to land (acquisition) and transmission (connectivity) issues impacted capacity additions during the year. Large-scale solar accounted for 77.2 per cent of annual solar capacity additions, and rooftop solar contributed 22.8 per cent,” it said.

Rajasthan followed by Karnataka, and Gujarat were the top three states for cumulative large-scale solar capacity, accounting for 54.8 per cent of installations in the country as of December 2023.

India’s large-scale solar project

pipeline stood at 105.3 GW, with another 70.6 GW of projects tendered and pending auction, the report said.

Country’s installed renewable energy capacity, including large hydropower projects, stood at 179.5 GW, accounting for 42 per cent of the overall power mix at the end of December 2023.

Solar energy projects accounted for 48.5 per cent of all new power capacity installed last year.

As of December 2023, solar energy accounted for 16.9 per cent of India’s total installed power capacity and almost 40.1 per cent of the total installed renewable energy capacity.

Bharat Highways InvIT to float ₹2,500 crore IPO on February 28

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Bharat Highways InvIT, an infrastructure investment trust, on Thursday said it will launch its Rs 2,500 crore Initial Public Offering (IPO) on February 28.

The InvIT’s maiden public issue will conclude on March 1 and the price band has been set at Rs 98-100 per unit for the issue, Bharat Highways InvIT said in a statement.

Proceeds from the issue will be utilised to provide loans to the Project SPVs (special purpose vehicles) for repayment of their outstanding loans.

Bharat Highways InvIT is an



infrastructure investment trust established to acquire, manage, and invest in a portfolio of infrastructure assets in India and to carry on the activities of an infrastructure investment trust under Sebi’s InvIT rule. Its initial portfolio consists of seven road assets, all operating on HAM (Hybrid Annuity Model) basis, in Punjab,

Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh consisting of about 497.292 km of constructed and operational roads.

Additionally, the InvIT has entered into an agreement with G R Infraprojects Ltd (GRIL) after which GRIL granted a right of first offer to the InvIT to acquire certain of its road assets.

About 75 per cent of the issue size has been reserved for Qualified Institutional Bidders (QIBs) and 25 per cent for Non-institutional Investors (NIIs). Investors can bid for a minimum of 150 units in one lot and in multiples of 150 units thereof.

Sebi orders attachment of bank, demat accounts of DHFL former promoters

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets regulator Sebi has ordered the attachment of bank accounts as well as shares and mutual fund holdings of Dheeraj Wadhawan and Kapil Wadhawan, the former promoters of Dewan Housing Finance Corp Ltd (DHFL), to recover dues totalling over Rs 22 lakh.

This came after the brothers failed to pay the fine imposed on them by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) in July last year in a case concerning the flouting of disclosure norms.

In two separate attachment notices issued on Tuesday, the markets watchdog has ordered the attachment of bank, demat accounts, and mutual fund

folios of the Wadhawans to recover the pending dues. The pending dues of Rs 10.6 lakh each from Wadhawans comprise the initial penalty amount, interest, and recovery cost, it added.

In July 2023, the regulator imposed a penalty of Rs 10 lakh each on Wadhawans, who were promoters of DHFL (now known as Piramal Finance), for



flouting disclosure norms.

Kapil Wadhawan was the Chairman and MD of DHFL, while Dheeraj Wadhawan was a non-executive director of the company. Both of them were on the board of DHFL.

The order came after Sebi conducted an investigation into the transfer of shares held by DHFL in DHFL Pramerica Life Insurance (erstwhile DLF

Pramerica Life Insurance) to its wholly owned subsidiary DHFL Investments and other related transactions.

The investigation period was from February-March 2017. Sebi observed that the brothers were responsible for providing inadequate information in the postal ballot notice by the firm.

As per the attachment notices,

Sebi said there is sufficient reason to believe that the defaulters may dispose of the amounts in the bank accounts and securities in the demat accounts and “realisation of the amount due under the certificate would, in consequence, be delayed or obstructed”.

Accordingly, the regulator asked all banks, depositories, and mutual funds not to allow

any debit from the account. However, credits have been permitted. In January, Sebi sent demand notices to Dheeraj and Kapil asking them to pay Rs 10.6 lakh each in the case. Also, the regulator warned them of arrest and attachment of assets as well as bank accounts if they fail to make the payment within 15 days.

Mbappé chasing milestones in French league before summer exit

AP ■ PARIS

Kylian Mbappé has 12 matches left to play in the French league. Twelve matches left to set new records in a league he has dominated for years.

The star striker is leaving Paris Saint-Germain at the end of the season when his contract expires. He is widely expected to sign a lucrative deal with Real Madrid, the club he dreamt of playing for when he was a kid.

Since his debut with Monaco at age 16 in December 2015, Mbappé has scored 185 league goals, making him one of the top 10 marksmen in Ligue 1 history. It's impossible for the 2018 World Cup winner to catch Delio Onnis, the league's all-time leader with 299 during the 1970s-80s. But Mbappé, who has 21 goals this season, has a chance to reach 200. At 25, Mbappe is already PSG's all-time best scorer, with 244 in all competitions. He will set another record if he finishes as the league top scorer for a sixth consecutive time. He currently shares the record with Onnis, Carlos Bianchi and Jean-Pierre Papin.

PSG has dominated French football since Qatari owners took over in 2011, and is on track for a record-extending 12th league title. It hosts Rennes on Sunday with a 13-point lead over second-placed Brest.

MOUNIE SUSPENDED: Brest, the surprise of the season, will be without striker Steve Mounié for the next two games.

Mounié was suspended for his red card last week for elbowing a defender during a 1-0 win against



Marseille. He will miss facing Strasbourg on Saturday then Le Havre.

Since coming back from two goals down to stun last season's runner-up Lens on the opening day of the season, Brest has been living a fairy tale and has dreams of qualifying for the Champions League for the first time. Brest has the best league finish of eighth.

NURSING MORALE WOUNDS: With Gennaro Gattuso gone, Marseille takes on Montpellier under new coach Jean-Louis Gasset. Some might say it's good timing, since Gasset is a former Montpellier player and coach. He was born there and knows the club inside out.

Stuck in ninth place, Marseille needs to win to avoid getting distanced in the race for European spots. Gasset said his first task was to give players their confidence back to ensure the team stops conceding from individual errors.

"The mind is 80% of the performance," Gasset said. "They're professionals, they need to do a bit more. When you take goals like that, it's not because of the tactical systems. We have to reassure the players. That's how I started to work with them."

The 70-year-old Gasset was appointed less than a month after getting fired by Ivory Coast. He faced questions about his age during his inaugural news conference in Marseille this week. "Speaking of the greats," Gasset said, "do people ask the question about (Arsene) Wenger, (Alex) Ferguson, (Raymond) Goethals? I'm not comparing myself to them. But age is the age in your head."



Gauff beats Pliskova to reach Dubai quarterfinals

Swiatek, Rybakina also advance

AP ■ DUBAI

Coco Gauff rallied from a slow start and a second-set argument with the chair umpire to beat Karolina Pliskova 2-6, 6-4, 6-3 and reach the quarterfinals of the Dubai Championships.

The third-seeded Gauff ended Pliskova's 11-match winning streak.

The 19-year-old American built a 4-2 lead in the second set before a lengthy back-and-forth with chair umpire Pierre Bacchi. Gauff complained to Bacchi that he called her serve at deuce out only after Pliskova returned it into the net.

Gauff had to repeat her first serve and went on to hold for a 5-2 lead.

The U.S. Open champion said the argument "fueled" her.

"It's OK. It's just one point. That happens in tennis. Players make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes," Gauff said in

her on-court interview. "It kind of went upward from there for me."

Gauff will next face Anna Kalinskaya after the Russian beat ninth-seeded Jelena Ostapenko 6-4, 7-5.

Top-ranked Iga Swiatek advanced to the last eight by beating two-time Dubai champion Elina Svitolina 6-1, 6-4.

Fourth-seeded Elena Rybakina had a tougher time reaching the quarterfinals. She outlasted Magdalena Frech 7-6 (5), 3-6, 6-4.

Swiatek will next play sixth-seeded Qinwen Zheng, who eliminated Anastasia Potapova 6-3, 6-2. Rybakina has a quarterfinal match against Jasmine Paolini. The Italian defeated eighth-seeded Maria Sakkari 6-4, 6-2.

The other quarterfinal match is seventh-seeded Marketa Vondrousova against Sorana Cirstea.

Abhay, Ramit move up in style in premier PSA events



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Rising Indian squash player Abhay Singh stormed into the quarterfinals of the Goodfellow Classic, a USD 9000 Challenger Tour event in Toronto.

The top-seeded Abhay, a former national champion and ranked No 66. In the world, beat Canadian wild card Elliott Hunt 11-6, 11-3, 11-9 in the second round on Wednesday, following a bye in the first.

Elsewhere, India's top-ranked player Saurav Ghosal lost in the opening round of the World Tour Platinum Windy City Open in Chicago, going down to home favourite Timothy Brownell 11-13, 2-11, 11-3, 14-12.

However, Ramit Tandon carried forward the Indian challenge with a 11-7, 8-11, 11-1, 11-7 win over Hungarian Farkas Balazs in the first round.



Brazil's Fonseca becomes 1st player born in 2006 to win ATP tour match in Rio

AP ■ RIO DE JANEIRO

João Fonseca became the first player born in 2006 to win an ATP tour-level match when the 17-year-old Brazilian beat seventh-seeded Arthur Fils 6-0, 6-4 at the Rio Open.

Fonseca defeated the No. 36-ranked Frenchman in front of raucous fans at the clay court tournament in Rio de Janeiro. He knelt on the court in tears to celebrate.

"This is where I belong. I want to be in these huge stadiums," said Fonseca, who won the U.S. Open boys singles title last year. "Now it is all about focusing on the process."

The Brazilian, currently ranked No. 655, is expected to jump about 200 positions after beating Fils. Fonseca said he is yet to decide whether he will play tennis for an American university later this year.

"For now I am very focused in the pro-tour, I want to get to the top," said Fonseca. "That is

going to be a personal decision with my family, I won't make it public now."

His opponent in the round of 16 will be Christian Garin of Chile. Fonseca's victory brought some new energy for local fans, who saw three of the title favorites crash out Tuesday.

Carlos Alcaraz abandoned his match against Brazil's Thiago Monteiro due to an ankle injury; three-time major winner Stan Wawrinka lost to Argentina's Facundo Diaz Acosta in straight sets; and Chile's Nicolás Jarry was knocked out by Germany's Yannick Hanfmann in three sets.

Fourth-seeded Francisco Cerúndolo of Argentina advanced to the quarterfinals by beating Spain's Albert Ramos-Viñolas 6-2, 6-1. Rain later postponed to Thursday the match between second-seeded and defending champion Cameron Norrie against Chile's Tomás Barrios Vera for a place among the last eight.

Squad woes continue for Real Madrid

AP ■ MADRID

Coach Carlo Ancelotti has to deal with two more absences to an already depleted squad when Spanish league leader Real Madrid hosts Sevilla this weekend.

Ancelotti won't be able to count on suspended midfielder Eduardo Camavinga and defender Dani Carvajal on Sunday.

Carvajal was sent off last Sunday at the end of the team's 1-1 draw at Rayo Vallecano, while Camavinga received his fifth yellow card to prompt an automatic suspension.

Madrid has a six-point lead over second-placed Girona, which hosts Rayo on Monday. Madrid is eight points ahead of third-placed Barcelona and 11 points ahead of fourth-placed Atletico Madrid.

Five Madrid players remain out injured, including Jude Bellingham with a sprained ankle and defender Antonio Rüdiger because of a thigh injury.

Nursing long-term knee ligament injuries are goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and central defenders David Alaba and Éder Militão.

Ancelotti has been improvising using midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni as a



central defender in recent matches. Lucas Vazquez is expected to replace

Carvajal on Sunday, and Luka Modric will likely play in Camavinga's place in the midfield.

Madrid chose not to add any defenders during the winter transfer window. Ancelotti said the players he had were enough to make up for the absence of the injured players.

The good news for Ancelotti is left back Ferland Mendy will be back from suspension at Santiago Bernabeu Stadium.

Sevilla, sitting in 15th place, drew at Valencia 0-0 in the previous round after two consecutive victories helped it move away from the relegation zone.

Grateful and proud, says Anush after claiming Olympic quota

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



Netherlands (74.4 per cent), Frankfurt, Germany (72.9 per cent), and Mechelen, Belgium (74.2 per cent).

The quota belongs to country and a final decision on who will represent India will be taken after trials.

"I feel very grateful and proud of this achievement. Being the first Indian ever to secure an

individual quota in dressage at the Olympic Games is very special," Agarwalla told PTI Video.

The celebrated Fouaad Mirza had represented India at the 2020 Tokyo Games and before him, Intiaaz Anees (Sydney 2000), Indrajit Lamba (Atlanta 1996), Jitendrajit Singh Ahluwalia, Hussain Singh, Mohammed Khan and Darya Singh (all Moscow 1980) competed at the Summer Games.

However, they all participated in eventing and Agarwalla will compete in dressage, in which the horse and rider perform a series of movements in a bordered arena. The horse is required to remain within the enclosed area while performing.

AP ■ LONDON

First it was Jurgen Klopp making the bombshell announcement he is leaving Liverpool. Then it was an exhausted Xavi Hernandez declaring his intention to quit his beloved Barcelona. This week, Bayern Munich and Thomas Tuchel made it known they'll be parting ways.

That's three of Europe's iconic soccer clubs needing a new coach at the end of the season. And that's three high-profile soccer strategists soon to be joining the ever-growing list of acclaimed, title-winning managers out of work.

Forget the upcoming summer transfer window, when Kylian Mbappe will likely be making his move to Real Madrid and Manchester United might be initiating a squad overhaul under its new soccer leadership.

The biggest offseason intrigue might just center around the movements of a bunch of unemployed super-coaches in an unusually turbulent period at the top end of the European game.

Indeed, it's not just Klopp, Xavi and Tuchel who'll be without a job. The past month also saw Jose Mourinho fired by Roma, which hired an interim coach

High profile coaching departures leave three iconic clubs scrambling for replacements

in Daniele De Rossi on a six-month deal and is expected to appoint a more experienced leader in the summer.

Zinedine Zidane is waiting for the right job to tempt him back into the game, nearly three years after the end of his second spell at Madrid. Antonio Conte, a league title winner in England and his native Italy, is plotting a comeback in the summer after more than a year away from the dugout. Former Bayern coach Hansi Flick has been out of work since getting fired by Germany in September. Julian Nagelsmann, Flick's replacement on the national team, only has a deal through this year's European Championship so will also be on the market.

Just imagine the chaos if Pep Guardiola announces he is done after eight years at Manchester City. Who knows, if City successfully defends the Champions League and wins an unprecedented fourth straight English Premier League, Guardiola might think



he has little more to achieve. Meanwhile, spicing things up even further is the growing status and reputation of Xabi Alonso, widely regarded as the next big thing in soccer coaching.

Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen team has been a revelation this season and appears ready to wrest the German title from Bayern, which has won the Bundesliga for 11 straight years. That's made him a wanted man, with Liverpool, Barca and Bayern all

reportedly interested in his services. One thing's for sure - it's highly unlikely Leverkusen will be able to keep hold of him.

It appears to be just happenstance that three of Europe's leading teams find themselves in the same predicament with their coaches, with three months still to play this season. The pressures of the job have taken their tolls on both Klopp and Xavi, but in different ways. Klopp said he was worn out

after such a long time (nine years) in the role - he compared himself to a sports car whose tank needle has gone down - while Xavi, who has been in charge at Barca for only a little over two years, cited mental fatigue and an "unpleasant" atmosphere at a club that has been weighed down by financial turmoil.

Tuchel is less than a year into his time at Bayern and his departure seems to be mostly down to bad results, which have raised the prospect of the club's first season without a trophy in 12 years.

Klopp, the oldest of the trio at age 56, is the only one leaving fully on his own terms and says he won't return to soccer management for at least a year. That would be the same length of sabbatical taken by Guardiola after leaving Barcelona in 2012.

"Sometimes you feel you need to breathe," Guardiola said. "You need to take a break, take a step back."

The City manager knows exactly what Xavi is going

through. "We cannot compare the pressure in England to Spain, in my experience. It's a thousand times higher and tougher there than here," he said.

"Here, for the managers, it's a real place to be, of course. A lot of games, six press conferences a week, every three days you have a game, it's a lot. But the pressure you feel in Barcelona is not comparable to another club."

Given the financial situation at the Camp Nou and Bayern's struggles this season, Liverpool might be the most alluring destination.

Klopp is bequeathing a deep and richly talented squad, with a number of youngsters starting to blossom. He could yet leave Liverpool as the Premier League champion, which would be some way to go out. As it stands, Xavi and Tuchel are unlikely to be departing with such a flourish and they'll be eager to make amends at new clubs to repair their slightly damaged reputations - unless, of course, one of them wins the Champions League.

Where they wind up is anyone's guess, with the competition for the biggest coaching jobs in European soccer having rarely been so fierce.



Porto beats Arsenal 1-0 with stoppage time goal

AP ■ PORTO

Wenderson Galeno came through for Porto with the final whistle about to blow. Now, Arsenal needs to rally to return to the Champions League quarterfinals for the first time since 2010.

Galeno scored deep into stoppage time to give Porto a 1-0 win in the first leg of the round of 16 on Wednesday. The English team will need a victory in the return leg in London on March 12 to make it back to the last eight of Europe's elite club competition.

Galeno broke the deadlock with a right-footed shot into the far corner four minutes into added time. His strike from outside the area came in what was supposed to be the final minute of stoppage time at the Estadio do Dragao.

"I think the credit for that goal goes to the whole team, for what they did in the 90 minutes," Galeno said. "We played well, we defended well, we left all our energy on the pitch. We will try to replicate in London what we achieved here. We will try to stay solid and give our best, as we always do." The Brazilian forward, who had hit the post in the first half, was named the man of the match.

"When it's 0-0, you look up at the clock and it's 93 minutes gone, if you aren't going to win the game then don't lose it," Arsenal midfielder Declan Rice said. "Maybe have the bit of savviness about us to stay in and get a draw in a tough

stadium against a tough opponent. They caught us on the counter and he's stuck one in the top corner which is really disappointing."

Porto was mostly in control and kept Arsenal from having any attempts on target. The English side was coming off five consecutive wins in which it scored 21 goals in total.

"A lot to play for in the second leg," Rice said. "We're really positive as a group, we've had such a good start to 2024 that we're not going to let this get us down."

"We have to change our approach in the home leg and give it absolutely everything," he added. "Even though we're a goal down, it's a nice goal to aim for when we can change it around in the home leg."

Porto was eliminated in the round of 16 last season. The Portuguese team is trying to reach the quarterfinals for the first time since 2021.

"It was a good game, a Champions League game," Porto coach Sérgio Conceição said. "Our opponents had more of the ball, but Porto were always more dangerous." Arsenal, making its first Champions League appearance since 2016-17, failed to get past the round of 16 in seven consecutive tries from 2011-17. It has lost its last seven first-leg matches in the last 16.

Arsenal beat Porto at this stage when it last advanced in 2010. Porto was without Iranian striker Mehdi Taremi because of a right thigh injury.

INDIA EYE 17TH SERIES WIN ON TROT AT HOME

PTI ■ RANCHI

pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah's absence is a concern but an assertive and adaptive India will have the edge against England's seemingly depth-less 'Bazball' approach when the two sides clash in the potentially series-deciding fourth Test beginning here on Friday.

From the dry heat of Rajkot to the much cooler confines of Ranchi, the temperature shift would be the only soothing factor for the Englishmen who have let it slip against the resilient hosts and are trailing 1-2.

Eying a 17th series win on the trot at home, India have been near invincible since the shock defeat to Alastair Cook's England in 2012. After that, India have won a staggering 38 out of 47 Tests, and have lost just thrice (two each versus Australia and England) when challenges on home turf.

Captaining a depleted batting line-up in the absence of Virat Kohli, KL Rahul and an out-of-form Shreyas Iyer, Rohit Sharma has found answers from the young guns, whose performance has been the biggest takeaway from the series so far.

Whether it is Yashasvi Jaiswal, who has maintained an impressive average of 109 with a total of 545 runs, or Sarfaraz Khan, who ended his prolonged wait for a Test debut with a blazing 66-ball 62 in Rajkot, or Shubman Gill, gradually settling in at No.3, India's next generation of batters are showcasing how a seamless transition happens.

As for replacing Bumrah, who has been the top wicket-taker (17) of the series which was expected to be dominated by spinners, it could well be India's Achilles' heel in Ranchi. Bumrah has been rested after bowling a little more than 80 overs in the three gone-by Tests.

His reverse-swing mastery on day two of the Vizag Test during a six-wicket burst, was the biggest contributing factor in the 106-run win that levelled the series 1-1.

On a docile Rajkot wicket too, Bumrah made in-roads giving India crucial breakthroughs. Keeping in mind the seaming conditions in Dharamsala for the fifth Test and the hectic IPL season ahead, Bumrah has been given a break, making Mohammed Siraj the sole experienced pacer in the line-up. It will be a toss-up between

ENGLAND AIM FOR REDEMPTION IN 4TH TEST



Bengal duo of Mukesh Kumar and an uncapped Akash Deep for the second pacer's slot in Ranchi.

Fresh from his career-best 10-wicket haul in Ranji Trophy, Mukesh is not only more experienced but also partnered Bumrah in the Vizag Test. He, however, bowled just 12 overs taking one wicket across both

innings. It remains to be seen whether the Indian think-tank will take the gamble of giving another debut cap or persist with Mukesh, who has been average at best.

History suggests that the JSCA Stadium pitch will suit a plan featuring two seamers and three spinners.

But England's assessment of

the conditions has been that four spinners and one seamer attack would be ideal.

"It's an interesting pitch...There are a few cracks, very playe and looked a bit crusty, the top layer, One half is good, and the other has a lot of platye cracks," England vice-captain Ollie Pope had said after the team checked in here on Thursday.

That may bring Shoaib Bashir into the picture to go alongside Tom Hartley, Rehan Ahmed and part-timer Joe Root. Root has more overs (107) under his belt than runs (77) in this series.

India, on the other hand, have preferred the conventional two-pacer-three-spinner combination and it's unlikely

that Axar Patel would be recalled. The team is expected to stick to Ravichandran Ashwin, Kuldeep Yadav and Ravindra Jadeja.

Historically, the Ranchi pitch has proven deceptive for the visiting teams.

In the last Test here in 2019, South Africa were blown away by the duo of Mohammed Shami and Umesh Yadav, who shared 10 wickets between them, as against the eight by the spin trio of Ashwin, Jadeja and Shahbaz Nadeem.

"It has never been a rank-turner. The pitch would be beautiful for batting for first two days and would assist spin from day three. History should repeat itself," the local groundsman told PTI.

For the 'Bazball' inspired England, the win in Hyderabad has become a distant memory and a repeat of 2021 looks likely when India bounced back to win the four-Test series 3-1.

The record 434-run thrashing in Rajkot has triggered criticism of England's so-called aggressive 'Bazball' approach. It seems to have found a match in India after tasting success against New Zealand, South Africa and Pakistan and Australia to an extent.

The go-for-strokes style might have helped the likes of Zak Crawley and Ben Duckett, who swung his bat around for a stunning 153 in Rajkot, but it has also doomed the likes of Joe Root and Jonny Bairstow. Root was seen as their main batter to cope with the spin challenge but the way he reverse scooped to Bumrah at Rajkot summed up the disarray he is in.

The desperation to find a way out can be judged from skipper Ben Stokes expediting his rehab from a knee injury by opting to bowl at the nets ahead of the fourth Test.

SQUADS:

INDIA: Rohit Sharma (C), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Rajat Patidar, Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel (WK), KS Bharat (WK), Devdutt Padikkal, R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohd. Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Akash Deep.

ENGLAND: Ben Stokes (C), Rehan Ahmed, James Anderson, Gus Atkinson, Jonny Bairstow, Shoaib Bashir, Harry Brook, Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Ben Foakes, Tom Hartley, Jack Leach, Ollie Pope, Ollie Robinson, Joe Root, Mark Wood.



Rathour praises Indian young guns

PTI ■ RANCHI

The astonishing, inspiring and quick success of youngsters like Yashasvi Jaiswal and Sarfaraz Khan at the highest level is a good advertisement for the country's robust domestic circuit which has made them "cricket smart" who can handle Test match pressure, reckons India's batting coach Vikram Rathour.

Jaiswal is just six-Test old but the 22-year-old Mumbaikar already has two double hundreds under his belt. His expressive and fearless batting against a strong England side has earned him praise from the pundits of the game and fans alike.

His Ranji teammate Sarfaraz too has made a confident start to his Test career, scoring pacy half-centuries in both his innings in Rajkot on debut. Sarfaraz had scored a monumental 439-run knock as a 12-year-old in a 2009 Harris Shield match, hinting at a bright future.

"It is good for the team but it's better for them. Once you get to this level and start playing Test cricket, everything said and done, there are nerves, there is some pressure, but if

you get a good start, nothing better than that," Rathour said on the eve of the fourth Test against England.

"And the young players who have come in the team have got a good start and it feels good. They have cricket intelligence in them, which is again a great sign. It's a great message, coming from Indian domestic cricket, that the new players are cricket smart."

Their performances have come at a time when Virat Kohli is not part of the gruelling five-match home series, KL Rahul could play only one game and Shreyas Iyer has been dropped for lack of form.

"It is tough to miss key players, it's better for the team if everyone is available but a series like this is a good opportunity for the young players, who have played on these wickets to establish themselves."

"There is always belief that our domestic cricket is so strong, you are pretty assured that whoever comes has come through after doing good. We don't know what is going to happen when KL Rahul, Virat Kohli come back in. That is not a concern at the moment."

PTI ■ RANCHI

Bowling full tilt at nets raised hopes of Ben Stokes rolling his arms over in the fourth Test against India but the England captain on Thursday preferred to keep the suspense over his availability as a bowler here.

Due to issues with his knee, Stokes has been playing only as a batter since the second Ashes Test last June. However, he was seen bowling extensively at the nets on the eve of the fourth Test.

Asked about the possibility of him bowling in the match, Stokes said, "Nah, I think it's maybe, maybe not."

Stokes said going in with two pacers is the best option for England, forcing them to include the tall Ollie Robinson in the playing XI, even though the Ranchi track is likely to

assist the spinners.

"Bringing Robbo (Robinson) in gives us good options, especially looking at this wicket," Stokes said at the pre-match media interaction.

"I feel like the spin will be assisted, but I also feel having two seamers gives us a good chance purely because of Ollie Robinson's release height and his relentlessness with his areas."

The 30-year-old Robinson, who last played in the Ashes, has come at the expense of Mark Wood, while Shoaib Bashir replaced leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed. "You look at the player Mark is, especially with the ball, you want someone like that operating at 100 per cent."

"His number one skill is how fast he bowls and the effort he put in last week was monumental. You want to be able to keep players like that on the



field operating at that level. "We do like to look at the pitch two days out and one day out, because that's how we like to pick our XIs. You want to give yourself some idea or some indication about what XI you think is going to give you the best chance."

"Looking at that, I think there is going to be assistance for spin, but I think also it looks like someone like Bash (Bashir), who releases the ball from such a high release point, the extra bounce that he gets, we feel, is going to bring us more into the game."

'DON'T PREJUDGE THE PITCH TOO MUCH': Stokes added spice to the talks on Ranchi pitch, saying he has not seen anything remotely like the 22-yard strip here in the past. But he also stated that it's not fair to have "preconceived ideas" about the pitch.

"We get asked about the pitch and we

give our opinion, but that doesn't mean we are going in with too many preconceived ideas. The pitch could be as flat as a pancake, who knows.

"If it is, we will adapt to that. If it does more than we think it will, we will adapt to that as well. We won't let those conversations seep into what we do."

England have retained old warhorse James Anderson who is seven shy of reaching the landmark 700 wickets and become the first pacer to achieve the feat.

The 41-year-old has bowled 73 overs in two matches in the series and taken six wickets.

"If you're a young fast bowler, Jimmy Anderson is the one person who you want as your role model. Not only the amount of wickets he's got but the fact that he can keep going at his age."

Focus on young Indian stars as WPL 2nd edition starts with Mumbai, Delhi face off

PTI ■ BENGALURU

The second edition of the Women's Premier League, beginning here on Friday with a high-profile match between defending champions Mumbai Indians and runners-up Delhi Capitals, will be optimistic about meeting its existential purpose of giving a wider platform to promising home-grown talents.

The foreign stars glittered brightly in the inaugural edition held in Mumbai, and the Indians will be hoping to hog some of the limelight this year as the tournament takes a multi-city format shape with New Delhi being the other host city.

While Capitals' skipper Meg Lanning, who has now retired from international cricket, took the Orange Cap last year for the highest run-getter, the Purple Cap went to Hayley Matthews of Mumbai for taking 16 wickets.

Amid this surge of overseas players, the Indian



cricketers generally struggled for consistency and impact in the previous year, but now some of the young domestic stars will eye this WPL with genuine hope.

Let's take Shreyanka Patil of Royal Challengers Bangalore as a case in point. During WPL 2023, she was a wide-eyed young cricketer who was awestruck to rub shoulders with some of the finest names in women's cricket.

She played seven matches, but the spotlight was understandably on players such as Smriti Mandhana or Ellyse Perry or Sophie Devine. But in the last 10 months or so, Patil has built a place of her own. She earned her maiden India cap in both Test and ODIs in December last year, besides making her mark in the Caribbean Premier League for the Guyana Amazon Warriors.

In this interim, the 21-year-old has also added more arrows to her quiver in the form of power-hitting at the death overs.

Shami ruled out of IPL, to undergo ankle surgery

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Senior pacer Mohammed Shami has been ruled out of next month's Indian Premier League owing to a left ankle injury, for which he will undergo a surgery in the UK, a BCCI source told PTI on Thursday.

The 33-year-old, who is not part of the ongoing Test series against England, last played for India in the ODI World Cup final against Australia in November.

"Shami was in London in last week of January to take special ankle injections and he was told that after three weeks, he can start light running and take it from thereon."

"But the injection hasn't worked and now the only option left is surgery. He will shortly leave for UK for



surgery. IPL seems out of question," a senior BCCI source said on the condition of anonymity.

Shami, who was one of the architects of India's stupendous World Cup campaign with 24 wickets, played through pain as he had problems with his landing but didn't let it affect his performance.

Shami, who was recently conferred with the Arjuna Award, has 229 Test, 195 ODI and 24 T20 wickets in his decade-long career.



Kaun hai tumhara bowler? Tendulkar plays gully cricket in Kashmir

PTI ■ SRINAGAR

He aptly called it a "match made in heaven" as Sachin Tendulkar pleasantly surprised a bunch of youngsters playing gully cricket in Uri, turning his bat upside down at one point just to give the boys a shot at dismissing him.

On his maiden trip to Jammu and Kashmir, Tendulkar got down from his SUV when he saw some young boys playing cricket on the road with a cardboard carton and an empty oil can as their stumps.

"Cricket and Kashmir: Match made in heaven," posted Tendulkar on X along with a short video in which he can be seen facing nine balls, watched in awe by the locals.

His wife Anjali can also be seen smiling in the clip which starts with Tendulkar asking the boys, "Hum Khelein? (Shall we play?)"

"Kaun hai tumhara bowler (Who is your bowler)?" he probed further as he gripped a bat.

Dressed in a brown jacket Tendulkar, who retired from cricket in 2013, played nine deliveries, hitting straight drives and also a scoop shot. There was also an attempted paddle sweep before he turned the bat upside down and jokingly stated, "Ye out karna padega (you will have to dismiss me)."

Holdovers CSK to take on RCB in IPL opener on March 22

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Defending champions Chennai Super Kings will take on Royal Challengers Bangalore in the 2024 IPL season-opener in Chennai on March 22, the BCCI announced Thursday while unveiling the schedule for the first 17 days of the popular T20 league.

The roster for the remaining matches will be announced once the dates for the upcoming general elections are announced early next month.

During the period from March 22 to April 7, a total of 21 matches will be played across 10 cities, with each team playing a minimum of three matches and a maximum of five.

As in the past, the BCCI will work closely with government and security agencies, following all

necessary protocols and advisories related to the upcoming Lok Sabha Elections in India, the apex cricket body said in a statement.

"Once the dates for the 18th Lok Sabha elections are announced, the Board will review and address any issues pertaining to the schedule of the first two weeks."

"Subsequently, the BCCI will work in tandem with local authorities to finalise the schedule for the remainder of the season, taking into account the polling dates," the BCCI said.

The general elections are expected to be held in April-May.

Only in 2009, the IPL, in its entirety, was held overseas (South Africa) while the 2014 edition was partially held in the UAE due to the general elections.

However, in 2019, the



tournament was held in India despite the elections.

The first weekend will feature two double headers, beginning with the Punjab Kings hosting the Delhi Capitals on March 23, followed by the Kolkata Knight Riders hosting the Sunrisers Hyderabad in the day's second game.

On March 24, the action will shift to Jaipur, where the home team Rajasthan Royals will face the Lucknow Super Giants. Sunday evening will witness the home team Gujarat Titans, the 2022 champions and finalists of the last season going head-to-head with five-time winners Mumbai Indians.

Having chosen to play their first two home matches in Visakhapatnam, the Delhi Capitals will host the Chennai Super Kings on March 31 in the port city and will then face the Kolkata

Knight Riders at the same venue on April 3.

As per the format, 10 teams are divided into two groups of five.

In the group stage, each team plays 14 games facing the other four sides in their group two times each (home and away basis, four teams in the other group once, and the remaining team two times).

Hardik Pandya will be leading Mumbai Indians for the first time, having replaced Team India's all-format skipper Rohit Sharma.

New Zealand's young sensation Rachin Ravindra will be participating in his maiden IPL following his grand success in the ODI World Cup last year.

CSK talisman Mahendra Singh Dhoni, who has led his team to five IPL titles, has not played any competitive cricket since their triumphant campaign last year.