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Congress Faces Himachal Freeze

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

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



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

PTI

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

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

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

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

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BJP in Election Mode, Selects 100 Candidates

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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NEWS BREAK

CBI summons Akhilesh

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

Manipur commandos hold arms down stir

IMPHAL: Manipur Police commandos on Wednesday laid down their arms in protest against the abduction of Additional Superintendent Amit Kumar Moirangthem and demanded they be allowed to retaliate when attacked. The commandos of all districts put down their arms asking for action against Metei radical group Arambai Tenggol.

Two hit by train in Jharkhand

JAMTARA: At least two persons were run over and killed by a train in Jharkhand’s Jamtara district on Wednesday evening, police said. Jamtara sub-division police officer (SDPO) M Rahman told PTI that the accident took place near Kaljharia area in Jamtara district when some passengers got down from the train from the wrong side. “A local train coming on another line hit them,” he said. “Bodies of two persons have been recovered so far. Search operation is on and the toll might increase,” he said. Eastern Railway CPRO Kaushik Mitra said, “There is no incident of fire. As of now, two deaths have been confirmed. The deceased are not passengers. They were walking on the track. A 3-member JAG committee has been formed to enquire about the issue.”

Modi slams DMK, Congress for dynastic politics

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■
CHENNAI

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

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



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

PTI

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

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

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Largest ever offshore drug seized



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

PTI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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Unwavering support for Rahul Gandhi in Wayanad

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

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



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

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

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India bears brunt of climate change wrath

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



File Photo

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

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

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PM Modi to launch ₹1.64 lakh crore projects from Begusarai

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In his first visit to Bihar after Chief Minister Nitish Kumar joined hands with the BJP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on March 2 launch nationwide projects worth over Rs 1.64 lakh, nearly Rs 29,000 crore of it focussed on the state. The projects to be launched Begusarai are related to multiple sectors including oil, gas, fertiliser and railways. Official sources said the 39 of these projects, which will be either inaugurated or kick-started with the foundation laying ceremony, are in the oil and gas sector, and 10 in the railways. Six new trains will also be flagged off. Modi will also inaugurate the revived the Barauni fertiliser plant which will not only boost urea's domestic production but also generate employment opportunities, they added. The prime minister has over the past few weeks launched numerous projects, worth lakhs of crores of rupees, in education, health, rail and infra sec-



tors as he seeks to emphasise on his government's pro-development credentials in the run up to the Lok Sabha polls. He has often highlighted that the speed and scale of work the country has been seeing is unprecedented. It also jives with his agenda of making a "Viksit Bharat" (developed India) by 2047 and the assertion that the return of his government to power for a third term is essential for the development journey to continue. The launch of projects from Bihar, with many of them meant for the poor state, is expected to burnish the BJP-

JD(U) alliance's pro-development agenda at a time the opposition bloc led by RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has sought to appropriate the plank. Yadav has claimed that it was his presence as deputy to Nitish Kumar which was responsible for giving employment to tens of thousands of youngsters before the JD(U) joined hands with the BJP, an assertion dismissed contemptuously by the chief minister. The rail projects, an official said, will be mostly focussed on north Bihar, the more densely populated and impoverished

region. However, the rail ministry has more trenches of projects coming up in the state and they will be catering to its other regions. Over Rs 10,000 crore of the rail budget for this year is meant for the state, the official said. In the petroleum sector, officials said, Modi will launch a total of 39 projects costing Rs 1,49,823 crore. He will inaugurate 29 projects with a capex of Rs 89,000 crore and lay the foundation of 10 projects with an outlay of more than Rs 60,000 crore. Modi will dedicate to the nation "first oil" from the KG Basin and flag off first crude oil tanker, Swarna Sindhu, from the ONGC Krishna Godavari deep-water (around 1443 Meter) project to Mangalore, Karnataka, marking a historic achievement, they said. It promises to significantly reduce India's dependency on energy imports. This project is likely to increase ONGC's total oil and gas production by 11 percent and 15 percent respectively, they said.

MNREGA wages not paid for two years, claims Mamata

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Continuing her diatribe against the BJP Government Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has once again brought deprivation charges against the Centre alleging how New Delhi had withheld lawfully earned wages of 59 lakh people of Bengal who would go to vote in the general elections. She said her Government would any way start paying the money to the unpaid workers. Iterating that the people of Bengal were not beggars but "Self-respecting citizens" known for fighting for their rights Banerjee alleged how the Centre had not paid MNREGA wages for more than two years to the workers who gave their labour under the 100-days' work scheme. The Chief Minister was addressing a crowd at Khatra in Bankura district in Jangalmahal mostly inhabited by the tribal people. Attacking the powers

that be for dividing the people in the name of religion and issuing 'food fatwa' on the people, Banerjee said, "they are telling you not to eat fish or meat or egg ... they are closing non-vegetarian shops ... but I want to ask who are they to impose such directions as what a person should eat and what a person should not eat ... food habits go with culture." Alleging that the Government was trying to convert the character of tribal lands she vowed not to allow anyone to usurp or change the character of tribal holdings. "There is an effort to change the character of tribal lands which is illegal ... but I will never allow the tribal land to be changed," Banerjee said accusing the BJP of taking votes of the tribal people but doing nothing for them. She also alleged how the Centre had stopped the OBC scholarship adding her Government was giving scholarships to all the sections of people irrespective of their castes.

ECI to deploy CAPF in strife torn Bengal from March 1

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

As though the Sandeshkhali turmoil was not enough; there is more 'bad' news for the Mamata Banerjee Government. The Election Commission of India is sending some advance battalions of central forces to Bengal well before the declaration of the general elections. According to ECI sources 100 companies of Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) will be sent to the State on March 1. This is two days ahead of the visit of the full bench of the ECI. The forces will comprise 20 companies of CRPF, 50 companies of BSF and 10 companies each from ITBP, SSB and CISF. Further on March 7, a day ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tour of Bengal the ECI will send another 50 companies of central forces, sources said. Out of these 50 companies 30 companies will come from BSF, whereas 10 will come from CRPF and 5 each

from SSB and RPF, sources said. The forces will not only start area domination but also get and understanding of the geographical and administrative area of the places they will so be deployed, sources said adding this will reduce dependence on the local police that often mislead the forces or take meandering routes to reach the places of occurrences, this delaying action. This year, the ECI has decided to deploy the most number of central forces to Bengal which will get 922 companies of CAPF. This, in view of intermittent complaints of political unrests and murders --- particularly during the elections --- for the past several years. Incidentally the Calcutta High Court had during last year's panchayat elections directed a reluctant State Election Commission to seek and deploy 82,000 central force personnel.

Two Muslim Conference factions in JK banned over terror charges

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The government Wednesday banned two factions of the Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir for five years for their anti-India and pro-Pakistan propaganda, and asking people to refrain from taking part in elections. Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is determined to uproot terrorism, and anyone involved in unlawful activities will face dire consequences. "Striking terror networks with undiminished vehemence, the government has declared the Muslim Conference Jammu & Kashmir (Sumji faction) and Muslim Conference Jammu & Kashmir (Bhat faction) as Unlawful Associations. "These outfits have been engaging in activities against the

sovereignty and integrity of the nation," Shah wrote on 'X'. On Tuesday, the government extended the ban imposed on the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jammu Kashmir (JeI), by another five years for continuing activities that pose a threat to the security of the nation. In a notification on Wednesday, the Union Home Ministry said the Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir- Sumji faction (MCJK-S), chaired by Ghulam Nabi Sumji, is known for its anti-India and pro-Pakistan propaganda and its members have been involved in supporting terrorist activities and providing logistical support to terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir. The leaders and members of MCJK-S have been involved in raising funds through various sources including from Pakistan and its proxy organisations for perpetrating unlawful activities, including

supporting terrorist activities and sustained stone-pelting on security forces in Jammu and Kashmir, the notification said. Besides, the home ministry said, the MCJK-S has constantly asked the people of Kashmir to refrain from taking part in elections and thereby targeted and hampered the very basic constitutionally recognised fundamentals of Indian democracy. The MCJK-S and its members by their activities show sheer disrespect towards the constitutional authority and constitutional set up of the country, it said, adding they have been indulging in unlawful activities, which are prejudicial to the integrity, sovereignty, and security of the country. The MCJK-S is also involved in promoting, aiding and abetting secession of Jammu and Kashmir from India by involving in anti-national and sub-



versive activities; sowing seeds of dis-affection amongst people; exhorting people to destabilise law and order; encouraging the use of arms to separate Jammu and Kashmir from the Union of India; and promoting hatred against established government by giving clarion call to boycott elections on multiple occasions in Jammu and

Kashmir. The home ministry said the central government is of the opinion that if there is no immediate curb or control of unlawful activities of the Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir (Sumji faction), it will use this opportunity to continue with the anti-national activities which are detrimen-

tal to the territorial integrity, security and sovereignty of the country. The group will also continue advocating the secession of Jammu and Kashmir while disputing its accession to the Union of India and continue propagating false narrative and anti-national sentiments among the people there with the intention to cause disaffection against India and disrupt public order, the notification said. "Now, therefore, in exercise of the powers conferred by subsection (1) of the section 3 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (37 of 1967), the central government hereby declares the Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir (Sumji faction) (MCJK-S) as an unlawful association," it said. The ban will continue for five years, it said. In a separate notification, the

home ministry said Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir-Bhat faction (MCJK-B), chaired by Abdul Ghani Bhat, have been indulging in unlawful activities, which are prejudicial to the integrity, sovereignty and security of the country. The home ministry said the MCJK-B has linkages with banned terrorist organisations and has supported terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and its members have been indulging in generating feelings of hatred and disaffection against India to separate Jammu and Kashmir from Union of India. The leaders and members of the MCJK-B have been involved in raising funds through various sources including from Pakistan and its proxy organisations for perpetrating unlawful activities, including supporting terrorist activities, sustained stone-pelting on Security

Forces in Jammu and Kashmir. The MCJK-B by giving clarion call to boycott elections on multiple occasions, has also attempted to subvert the will of people and democratic process in Jammu and Kashmir, the notification said. It said the group is also involved in promoting, aiding and abetting the secession of Jammu and Kashmir from India by involving in anti-national and subversive activities; sowing seeds of dis-affection amongst people; exhorting people to destabilise law and order; encouraging the use of armed struggle to separate Jammu and Kashmir; and promoting hatred against established government. Considering these facts, the central government declares the Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir (Bhat faction) (MCJK-B) as an unlawful association for five years, the home ministry said.

Six national parties declare total income of ₹3,077 core in current fiscal: ADR report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The six national parties have declared a total income of nearly Rs 3,077 crore in the 2022-23 fiscal, with the BJP getting the maximum share of around Rs 2,361 crore. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the ruling BJP's income constitutes 76.73 per cent of the total income of the six national parties during FY 2022-23. The Congress declared the second highest income at Rs 452.375 crore, which forms 14.70 per cent of the total income of the six national parties. Besides the BJP and the Congress, BSP, AAP, NPP and CPI-M have declared their income. The BJP, Congress and AAP collected 49.09 per cent or Rs 1,510.61 crore of national parties' total income from donations through electoral bonds for FY 2022-23. The BJP received Rs 1294.15 crore through electoral bonds, while the Congress received Rs 171.02 crore and AAP Rs 45.45 crore. Citing data shared by the SBI in response to its RTI, the ADR said electoral bonds worth Rs 2,797.356 crore were redeemed by parties in FY 2022-23. Fifty-four per cent or Rs 1510.62 crore of this has been redeemed by national parties. Between 2021-22 and 2022-23, the BJP's income increased by 23.15 per cent or Rs 443.724 crore from Rs 1,917.12 crore in to Rs 2,360.84, the ADR said. The income of National People's Party (NPP) -- the only party from the northeast to have the national party status -- increased from Rs 47.20 lakh during FY 2021-22 to Rs 7.562 crore during FY 2022-23, a rise of 1,502.12 per cent or Rs 7.09 crore. The AAP's income increased by 91.23 per cent (Rs 40.631 crore) from Rs 44.539 crore

during FY 2021-22 to Rs 85.17 crore during FY 2022-23. Between the 2021-22 fiscal and 2022-23 fiscal, the income of the Congress, CPI(M) and BSP decreased by 16.42 per cent (Rs 88.90 crore), 12.68 per cent (Rs 20.57 crore) and 33.14 per cent (Rs 14.50 crore) respectively, it noted, citing their records submitted to the Election Commission. It also said the BJP declared a total income of Rs 2360.844 crore during FY 2022-23, but spent only 57.68 per cent, which comes to Rs 1,361.684 crore of the total income. The Congress' total income was Rs 452.375 crore while it spent Rs 467.135 crore, with its expenditure for that year exceeding its total income by 3.26 per cent. The CPI(M)'s total income was Rs 141.661 crore while it spent Rs 106.067 crore - 74.87 per cent of its income. Similarly, the AAP's total income was Rs 85.17 crore while it spent Rs 102.051 crore -- its expenditure for that year exceeding its total income by 19.82 per cent. Given the anonymity provided to donors by the scheme, it was seen that Electoral Bonds emerged as the most popular mode of donations to National Political parties for FY 2021-22 as well. "Only 4 National Parties (BJP, INC, NCP and AITC) have received Donations through Electoral Bonds (Rs 1811.9425 cr), wherein the identity of the donor is not disclosed to the public. Of the Regional parties that have submitted their audit reports, 10 Regional Parties (DMK, BJD, BRS, YSR-Congress, JDU, SP, AAP, SAD, MGP and TDP) have declared receiving donations through Electoral Bonds worth Rs 852.88 cr in FY 2021-22. During 2022-23, out of the 6 National parties, only 2 Parties (INC - Rs 125.7676 cr and CPI(M) - Rs 11.031 cr) declared receiving a total income of Rs 136.7986 cr from Sale of Coupons", it said.

Congress Faces Himachal...

From Page 1

"The Congress party had made promises to the people, and we owe the responsibility to fulfill those promises, and I would decide my future course of action after consulting my supporters," he added. In the Assembly, chaos ensued when the House met in the morning. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Harshwardhan Chauhan moved a motion seeking the suspension of BJP MLAs for allegedly disrespecting the Speaker. The motion was adopted by voice vote, and the Speaker axed 15 MLAs. The BJP members, however, refused to leave. The Speaker then adjourned the House till 12 pm. Meanwhile, a group of six Congress and three Independent MLAs, who had spent Tuesday night at a guesthouse in Panchkula in BJP-run Haryana after voting against the Congress candidate, were back in the House. They were flown back in a helicopter. As these MLAs entered the House, BJP members greeted them by thumping their desks. They also raised the slogan, "Jai Shri Ram, Ban Gaya Kaam". On Tuesday, Sukhu had claimed that the MLAs had been "abducted" by the Haryana Police and the CRPF.

Unwavering support for Rahul...

From Page 1

Another CPI (M) worker pointed out that if the Congress-led Opposition wins the 2024 polls, Rahul would be the automatic choice as the Prime Minister, and Wayanad would have the distinction of being the constituency represented by the Prime Minister. The CPI (M)-led Left Democratic Front had allocated the constituency to the CPI, the poor cousin of the former, since there were no takers from the Marxist party itself. The CPI, described as the ideological giants among the global Communist movements, has fielded Anie Raja, wife of the CPI's all India general secretary D Raja.

India bears brunt...

From Page 1

Of particular concern was the duration of these extreme weather events, with India enduring 123 consecutive days of such conditions between June and September 2023. This prolonged exposure underscores the significant long-term implications for infrastructure, livelihoods, and ecosystem resilience. The detailed analysis provided by the report offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of extreme weather events in India in 2023, emphasising the critical need for proactive measures to address their impacts and build a more resilient society in the face of ongoing climate change. Climate experts warn that it has now been confirmed that global warming exceeded 1.5°C across the 12-month

period between February 2023 and January 2024. This followed 2023 being declared the warmest year on record. The United Nations also sounded an alarm that 2023 is set to be the hottest ever recorded. It demanded urgent action to rein in global warming and stem the havoc following in its wake. The UN's World Meteorological Organisation pointed out that 2023 had shattered a whole host of climate records, with extreme weather leaving "a trail of devastation and despair". "It's a deafening cacophony of broken records," said WMO chief Petteri Taalas. "Greenhouse gas levels are at a record high. Global temperatures are at a record high. Sea level rise is at a record high. Antarctic sea ice is at a record low," he said.

leaders said on Wednesday. The names of External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Housing and Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh Puri and former leader Sushma Swaraj's daughter Bansuri Swaraj were among the probables from the New Delhi seat apart from sitting MP Meenakshi Lekhi, a senior Delhi BJP official said.

Largest ever offshore...

From Page 1

The unregistered fishing boat was intercepted on Tuesday morning in the Arabian Sea, approximately 60 nautical miles from the Indian coast and along the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL). The Navy deployed its P81 long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft and marine commandos onboard a warship and helicopters. Providing details of the operation on Wednesday, the Navy stated, "In a successful coordinated operation at sea, the Indian Navy, in coordination with the Narcotics Control Bureau, apprehended a suspicious dhow carrying almost 3,300 kg of contraband (3,089 kg charas, 158 kg Methamphetamine, 25 kg Morphine) - by far the largest in terms of quantity in recent times." Based on the input from the P-81 long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft on a surveillance mission, Indian Navy mission-deployed ships

were diverted to intercept the suspicious dhow engaged in contraband smuggling, navy officials said. "The seizure of drugs from the dhow, which is by far the largest in terms of quantity, was possible through the collaborative efforts of the Indian Navy's mission-deployed assets with the NCB. The contraband, along with the apprehended boat and crew, has been handed over to the Law Enforcement Agencies at an Indian port, PM 27 Feb 24," they said. "The coordinated response of the Indian Navy with Law Enforcement Agencies is reflective of our resolute stance against narcotics trafficking in India's maritime neighborhood," the Navy statement added. The NCB in Delhi said the joint team of agencies "busted yet another international drug trafficking network and effected the highest-ever offshore seizure (by quantity) in the country". The five people arrested from

the boat are suspected to be either Iranian or Pakistani nationals. No documents of nationality have been recovered from them, a senior NCB officer said. The official did not specify the cost of the contraband. In the international market, one kg of charas is priced at Rs 7 crore. The NCB said in New Delhi almost 3,300 kg of contraband that includes 3,110 kg of charas or hashish, 158.3 kg of crystal Methamphetamine, and 24.6 kg of suspected heroin have been recovered from packets that bore the stamp of 'Ras Awad Goods Co, produce of Pakistan.' The source of the drugs is found to be the Chabahar Port in Iran, the agency said. NCB director-general S N Pradhan told reporters during a Press conference in Delhi that the cache could be estimated to be worth anything between Rs 1,300-Rs 2,000 crore in the international market.

Modi slams DMK, Congress...

From Page 1

About 40 lakh women in Tamil Nadu have got a gas cylinder facility. Whenever India grows, Tamil Nadu grows," said the Prime Minister. He said the DMK was indulging in hate politics. "Some people are politicising Hindi and Tamil languages. However, the Union

Minister of State L Murugan from Tamil Nadu has been elected MP from a Hindi-speaking State," said the Prime Minister. Modi also said the Stalin regime does not work for the State but only took false credit and it affixed its "stickers" on Central schemes. "Now they have crossed all limits. They have pasted the sticker of China to take credit for ISRO launchpad in Tamil Nadu. This is an insult to our country, an insult to our patriotic space scientists. The people of Tamil Nadu will punish the DMK for its treachery," said the Prime Minister.

Deputy Chief Ministers Keshav Prasad Maurya and Brajesh Pathak, and Minister Dharampal Singh, among others. In the 2019 election, the BJP had won 62 of the State's 80 seats. There was also a discussion on the 42 seats of the West Bengal where the BJP is keeping a close eye on 35 out of 42 Lok Sabha seats.

BJP in Election Mode, Selects 100...

From Page 1

Union Minister Smriti Irani from Amethi, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari from Nagpur, Union Minister Rajnath Singh from Lucknow, Parvesh Verma from West Delhi, Manoj Tiwari from North West Delhi, and Ramesh Bidhuri from South Delhi are also set to be named in the first list. Union Ministers

Dharmendra Pradhan, Bhupendra Yadav, Piyush Goyal, Mansukh Mandaviya, Parshottam Rupala, and Rajeev Chandrasekhar may also be featured in the first list. The election committee of Delhi BJP has also submitted a list of 25-30 probables to the national leadership for the seven Lok Sabha seats in the national Capital, party

"The list of probables was discussed in a meeting of the national leaders, including Nadda, Shah and state president Virendra Sachdeva at the party's headquarters on DDU Marg," he said. Modi has set a target of winning 370 seats for the BJP in the Lok Sabha polls, expected to be held in April-May, and of over 400 for the ruling National Democratic

Alliance. For the 2024 polls, the BJP has identified 160 seats that the party deems weak and thus organised early campaigning and public contact programmes over the past one year. The meeting on Uttar Pradesh was attended by Shah and saw the participation of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath,

Youth are biggest natural resources of country: Draupadi Murmu

President of India participates in 3rd Convocation of CUJ

PNS ■ Ranchi

President Draupadi Murmu said on the third convocation of the Central University of Jharkhand that youth are the biggest natural resource of this country. “More than 55 per cent of the population belongs to the youth group. By the year 2030, we are going to become the third largest economy in the world,” she added. The President said that in such a situation, the youth here who have got medals after studies, should not only build a good life for themselves but also play an important role in building the Country and society. On the occasion the President awarded Chancellor's Medal to three CUJ students, Gold Medal to 58 and PhD degree to 29. She congratulated all the students who received their degrees today and their parents, guardians and professors of all the students. Murmu said that the Swarnarekha River flows near the CUJ campus. “It is said that a person attains knowledge just by drinking the water of Swarnarekha River. It is a privilege for you to get education in the proximity of such land and river. The motto of your University is ‘Jnanathi Buddhi Kaushalam’. This means that intelligence and skill develop only through knowledge. I have full confidence that all the students will make meaningful use of the knowledge gained



President Droupadi Murmu distributed degrees at the “Third Convocation” of Jharkhand Central University held at the Auditorium Hall in Ranchi on Wednesday. Governor CP Radhakrishnan, Chief Minister Champa Soren, Union State Education Minister Annapurna Devi are also seen in the picture.

from this institute,” she added. The President said that while presenting the Padma Awards at Rashtrapati Bhavan, in convocation ceremonies of educational institutions, while meeting trainee officers of various services, “I realize that today our women and daughters are performing best in all fields. I am extremely happy to know that today almost 50 per cent of the students receiving gold medals are our daughters.” Murmu said that Jharkhand Central University has adopted the education system based on the National Education Policy 2020. “I am happy to know that this institute has created special centers to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of local language, literature and music. Cheri Manatu Campus has been designed with green architects in mind.

The Brambe campus of this institute also shows its proximity to nature. It has been made eco-friendly without cutting trees. This is a good effort for environmental protection. We have to be eco-friendly,” she added. Murmu said that after coming to Jharkhand, she feels as if she has returned to her home. “Here, in the past, as a Governor, he has done public service on the land of Aba Birsa Munda. There is a connection with the tribal brothers and sisters here. Not because they are tribals. Just as we pay more attention to those who are physically and mentally backward in the family, we should think about the people left behind in the race of development in the same spirit,” he added. President Murmu gave Chancellor

Medal to three students in the convocation ceremony. Students who received the Chancellor's Medal include Shubham Bhattacharya of Integrated M.Tech., Utpal of M.Tech. and Abhijeet Ganguly of MSc. The President awarded 67 medals at the convocation, in which 58 students received gold medals while 29 were awarded PhD degrees. After becoming the President has reached Ranchi for the second time. Earlier on May 24, she had reached Ranchi on a three-day visit. She had come to attend the inauguration of the newly constructed building of Jharkhand High Court, a function organized for women at Birsa College campus by the Union Tribal Ministry in Khunti and the convocation ceremony of Triple IT in Ranchi.

State Govt committed to take higher & technical education to new heights: CM

‘National Education Policy has been implemented in State’

PNS ■ Ranchi

President Draupadi Murmu today participated as the Chief Guest in the third Convocation of Jharkhand Central University held here on Wednesday. On this occasion, Governor CP Radhakrishnan, Chief Minister Champai Soren and Union Minister of State for Education Annapurna Devi and other dignitaries were present. Addressing the gathering Chief Minister Champai Soren said, “It is a moment of special pride for me to be present among you all at the third convocation of the only Central University of Jharkhand. First of all, I would like to congratulate the total 800 graduates, masters and research scholars who have successfully completed the course and are getting degrees and give special congratulations to the students who are getting Chancellor Medal, Gold Medal and PhD degrees.” “This convocation ceremony is an important milestone in your educational development. This degree received by you after the education you have acquired is the result of your hard work and intense dedication. As important as this occasion is



President Droupadi Murmu being welcomed by Chief Minister Champai Soren on her arrival for the convocation ceremony of CUJ University at Birsa Munda airport in Ranchi on Wednesday. Governor CP Radhakrishnan is also seen in the picture. PNS

for all of you, it is also a moment of pride for your teachers, guides, and parents. With pride and joy it is also time to get ready for the challenges that will shape your happy future. As you all know that there is no greater wealth than knowledge and cannot be. Only through this knowledge can you travel from material happiness to spiritual satisfaction. The Jharkhand state government is determined to take the level of higher and technical education in the state to the pinnacle,” he said. “I am happy to inform you that the National Education Policy 2020 has been implemented in the state of Jharkhand and four-year undergraduate courses have been adopted in all

the universities and colleges of the state and work is being done to promote multidisciplinary and employment-oriented education. Compliance with various aspects of the National Education Policy like Multiple Entry-Multiple Exit, Academic Bank of Credits etc. has been ensured. Enrollment in higher educational institutions of the state C.U.E.T. Is being taken through. Many schemes are being implemented in the state to develop infrastructure for high level research work, promote innovation and start-ups and gradually increase the quality of teachers and students,” said the CM “The Central University of Jharkhand, which came into existence

on March 1, 2009 under the Central Universities Act, 2009, is a matter of pride for the people of Jharkhand. I am aware that the University is presently functioning in two campuses. The temporary campus is located at Brambe, Ranchi and the permanent campus is located at Cherry-Manatu village. In the first phase, 319 acres of non-cultivated land was transferred by the state government for the permanent campus. Apart from this, the state government has decided to acquire 139 acres of tenant land and give it to the Central University, Jharkhand. Out of this, an amount of approximately Rs 100 crore has been allocated for the acquisition of 15 acres,” he added.



President Droupadi Murmu, Governor CP Radhakrishnan, Chief Minister Champai Soren, Union State Education Minister Annapurna Devi and other dignitaries pose for a group photo during the “Third Convocation” of Jharkhand Central University held at the Auditorium Hall Cherry, Manattu in Ranchi on Wednesday. PNS

Union Fisheries Secy visits Getalsud Dam to boost fish farming



PNS ■ Ranchi

In bid to boost fish farming in the State, Secretary, Department of Fisheries, Government of India, Abhilaksh Likhvi visited Getalsud Dam in Ranchi, Jharkhand, to review the progress of cage farming on Wednesday. This initiative was undertaken in collaboration with the Government of Jharkhand, Department of Fisheries. Likhvi visited the getalsud cage and pen and held interaction with the displaced beneficiary of the dam and got all information about cage and pen culture. Likhvi advised to prepare an integrated project for the reservoir from hatchery,

fish feed, fish production, processing and marketing. He also visited the training centre. He appreciated the cage and pen culture of Jharkhand, training centre and modern training program. Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Co-operatives, Government of Jharkhand, Abu Baqr also with him. During his visit the Secretary interacted with cage fish farmers to understand their issues and challenges. He highlighted the immense potential of India's vast reservoir resources, estimated at 32 lakh hectares that is currently underutilized for fish production. Under the CSS on Blue Revolution: Integrated Development and Management of Fisheries Scheme launched by the

Department of Fisheries, during 2015-16 to 2019-20 approved a total of 14,022 cages. At a total project cost of Rs. 420 crores and 44,908 units of cages have been approved under Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) with a total project cost of Rs.1292.53 crore. Getalsud Reservoir located in Ranchi, Jharkhand is a hub for cage culture for Pangasius and Tilapia fish species. Fish farmers practising cage culture from sixteen surrounding villages are members of fisheries cooperative societies. They use GI pipes or modular cages. Their Average production per cage is 3-4 tons and overall profit is more than Rs.4 lakhs per annum with reservoir cage culture. Cage culture, initiated in 2012-13, has seen significant success with 365 cages installed under the Blue Revolution, RKVY and PMMSY. These cages cultivate Tilapia, Pangasius and the critical activity of reservoir stocking with 25 lakh fingerlings annually was accomplished to enhance fish population. The market linkage is already established as the locally produced fish is sold in the nearby market. The fishermen sold it at an average price of Rs. 120.00 per kilo gram, contributing to the economic well-being of the region.

Train runs over passengers in Jamtara, several feared dead

2 bodies recovered search and rescue operation continues

PNS ■ Ranchi

More than a dozen people have been feared dead at Kaljharia station, few kilometres away from Vidyasagar station of Jamtara district as they came under a train after coming out of the train they were travelling due to fear of fire late on Wednesday evening. Search and rescue operations are continuing at the accident site, where two bodies were recovered till time of filing of the report. The tragic incident took place when passengers of Ang Express, upon hearing about a fire in their train, which was crossing the Kaljharia station, jumped out of the train and stood in the middle of the railway tracks. The Jharkha-Asansol EMU train coming on the other track did not give time to the passengers to respond and ran over them. According to local sources several people were run over by the train and a large number of people were also reported injured. Locals said that upon receiving information

about a fire in Ang Express, the train stopped, while frightened with the news of fire, the passengers jumped out of the train. Meanwhile, the Jharkha-Asansol EMU coming on the track ran over the passengers. Jamtara SP Animesh Naithany said, “Two bodies have been recovered so far. A search is still being conducted near the railway track. Due to darkness in the area it is being difficult for the police to conduct search operations. Three ambulances have been roped in to take the injured passengers to hospital. Till now no missing report has been registered,” said the SP. CPRO, Eastern Railway, Kaushik Mitra, released a statement on behalf of the railways and said, “Two persons walking on the track were run over by the train at least 2 km away from train no. 12254 passing from Vidyasagar Kasitar. There is no incident of fire. As of now, two deaths have been confirmed. The deceased are not passengers, they are walking on the track. A 3-member JAG committee has been formed to inquire about the issue.” Jamtara MLA Irfan Ansari, who was on way to his constituency, said that three people are said to be dead in the accident but the death toll may rise further.

HC rejects Hemant’s plea to attend budget session

PNS ■ Ranchi

The Jharkhand High Court son Wednesday rejected former chief minister Hemant Soren's petition seeking permission to attend the ongoing budget session of the assembly. A bench of Justice Sujit Narayan Prasad had reserved its verdict in the matter on February 26 after hearing Senior Counsel Kapil Sibal (appearing for Soren) and Addl. Solicitor General of India SV Raju [for the Enforcement Directorate (ED)] at length. The court had earlier allowed Soren, the ruling JMM's executive president, to participate in the trust vote in the assembly on February 5. The session started on February 23, and will conclude on March 2. Soren, who was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in a money laundering case last month, had filed an application before the high court on Friday, seeking permission to participate in the budget session. Appearing for Soren, Senior Counsel Sibal primarily argued that he was not charge-sheeted in the case, he has been the CM of the State, and nothing stops the High Court from allowing him to go and participate in the Budget session of the State Assembly. The vote on the Budget session will take place in the state assembly on March 1.



Sibal, during the hearing, also cited the Supreme Court's decisions in which jailed MLAs were given relief to participate in their respective legislative assemblies. On the other hand, opposing his plea, the Addl. Solicitor General of India SV Raju [for ED] argued that it doesn't matter if he is charge-sheeted, or is in Judicial custody or police remand in connection with the alleged scam and that it was sufficient for the Court to refuse him permission to participate in the budget session on the ground that it was admitted by Sr. Counsel Sibal that Soren doesn't have a fundamental right to participate in the budget session. He also contended that generally, in such cases, a whip is issued for voting in the assembly (in this case, a money bill), and the members vote and since Soren's party has the strength in the house, the money bill will get passed and that no irreparable loss would be caused to him (Soren) if he isn't allowed to participate in the budget session.

BUDGET SESSION

Discussion on Rs 1.28 lakh crore Budget amidst Oppn protest

PNS ■ Ranchi

The Jharkhand Assembly's budget session, on the fourth day, had a detailed discussion on the budget for the next financial year, amidst a backdrop of questions from MLAs and protests. Minister Rameshwar Oraon's presentation of a Rs 1 lakh 28 thousand 900 crore budget sets the stage for today's proceedings, which began amidst uproar and demonstrations by BJP MLAs outside the House. Outside the house the BJP MLAs created ruckus over playing with the future of the youth. Before the commencement of the House proceedings, BJP MLAs demonstrated outside the Assembly. Holding banners and placards, BJP MLAs demanded a high-level probe into the illegal activities of Dumka DIG and former Dhanbad SSP Sanjeev Kumar. Especially MLA Dhulu Mahato said that the exploits of the former SSP of Dhanbad should be investigated by CBI. MLA Anant Ojha said that the present government is playing with the future of the youth of the state. In the government that came to power with the promise of abolishing the word contract, not only the word contract, not only the contract but now the third party is being reinstated. Biranchi Narayan and other MLAs also surrounded the government regarding this. BJP MLA Neelkanth Singh Munda cornered the government in the House regarding municipal elections. He said that when the tenure of



Opposition party leaders protest outside assembly during ongoing Budget session, in Ranchi on Wednesday. PNS

municipal bodies in Jharkhand was ending in 2023, why did the government not make preparations for holding elections earlier? Why was the Backward Classes Commission not formed earlier? He said that the government is also misleading the High Court. The government has given an affidavit in the court 4 months ago that the civic elections will be held within 6 months. But there was so much delay in forming the Backward Commission for Triple Test. Now how will the government conduct elections in 2 months? On this, Minister Satyanand Bhokta said that not even 6 months have passed. After the commission's report comes, the government will take a decision and conduct elections on time. The session, slated to continue until March 2, promises rigorous scrutiny and debate over the financial blueprint for the coming year. MLA Pradeep Yadav high-

lighted a contentious point, accusing the Centre of undermining the rights of the state's backward communities by questioning the constitutionality of a 77 per cent reservation. This accusation sparked a heated exchange and led to BJP MLAs approaching the Well of the House in protest, further amplifying the day's tumultuous start. This act by the opposition members showed the session's charged atmosphere, with political tensions manifesting in vocal demonstrations and procedural disruptions. On Tuesday, the Jharkhand Government tabled a Rs 1.28 lakh crore budget for the 2024-25 fiscal in the Assembly. The budgetary estimates for FY'25 were up by over 10% from the previous annual financial statement. The JMM-led coalition government had presented a budget of Rs 1.16 lakh crore for the current financial year 2023-24.



इंडियन बैंक



Indian Bank

इलाहाबाद

ALLAHABAD

SENADONI BRANCH GIRIDIH
DIST.- GIRIDIH (JHARKHAND)

POSSESSION NOTICE
(FOR IMMOVABLE PROPERTY)

APPENDIX - IV
Rule 8 (1)

Where as

The undersigned being the Authorized Officer of the Indian Bank under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under Section 13 (12) read with rule 8 and 9 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a demand notice dated 29.11.2023 Calling upon the borrower **Mrs. Anju Sharma (Borrower)** with our **SENADONI BRANCH** to repay the amount mentioned in the notice being **₹24,99,817.00 (Rupees Twenty Four Lakh Ninety Nine Thousand Eight Hundred Seventeen Only)** within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice.

The borrower having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him/ her under Section 13 (4) of the said Act read with rule 8 and 9 of the said rules on this **23rd day of February of the year 2024.**

The borrower in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of the Indian Bank for an amount of **₹24,99,817.00 (Rupees Twenty Four Lakh Ninety Nine Thousand Eight Hundred Seventeen Only)** and interest thereon with other expenses.

"We draw attention to the provisions of Section 13(8) of the SARFAESI Act and the Rules framed there under which deals with your rights of redemption over the securities"

DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMOVABLE PROPERTY

All that part and parcel of the property consisting:

Property in the name of Smt. Anju Sharma W/o Shri Deo Narayan Sharma situated at Mouza- Makatpur known as Barganda Asram Road Giridih, Thana- Giridih Town, Thana No.- 95, Thoka No.- 314, Plot No.- 737 Part Ward No.- 1 under Giridih Municipality Holding No. 216 'B' Part, Measuring area 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ Decimal Or 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ Kattha; conveyed vide Sale Deed No. 5108/5005 dated 11.11.1999.

Boundary:

North – Land of Vendor proposed to be sold to Smt. Parmila Devi

South – Rasta then after House of Bhagirath Ray & others

East – Nagar Palika Road

West – Nij Mokir

Date : 23.02.2024

Place : Giridih

Sd./-Authorized Officer
Indian Bank

Videograph LS voting process, BJP urges EC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Wednesday urged the Election Commission to videograph the voting process at all polling stations during the upcoming Lok Sabha elections and set up booths in complexes housing high-rise buildings.

In a memorandum, the BJP also urged the poll panel to consider reforming the

approval process for political parties' media content to make it faster, allowing them adequate time to plan their campaign.

It also requested the Election Commission to ensure there is no ambiguity in the rule pertaining to putting flags and making wall paintings by party workers at their homes during polls. "There should be clarity on this," they demanded.

A BJP delegation comprising

Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and party national general secretary Arun Singh met the poll panel with the demands.

"The BJP keeps making efforts to see how the entire poll process could be made more and more transparent and the voters' involvement in the elections be further increased.

Our delegation made some requests to the EC (in this regard)," Vaishnaw told



reporters after the meeting at the Election Commission. He said the BJP delegation urged the poll panel to set up booths at high-rise apartment complexes in urban areas as much as possible so that maximum eligible voters at such residential buildings could exercise their franchise. "Our second request was that video recordings be done at 100 per cent polling booths (during the elections)," Vaishnaw said.

At present, videography is done at 50 per cent polling booths only, he said, adding that 100 percent coverage of the polling booths will ensure proper documentation of everything happening there and it will increase people's faith in the country's vibrant democracy.

Over 12 lakh polling stations will be set up across the country for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, according to the Election Commission.

Vaishnaw said the BJP delegation also made some request with regards to operational issues.

"We requested for beginning reforms in the process of granting approval to the media content of political parties.

The approval process should be made faster so that every political party gets enough time to present their views and mould their campaign," he told reporters.

BJP led NDA likely to get RS majority in April

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is likely to get a majority in the Rajya Sabha in April this year once the remaining six vacancies under the nominated category are filled and those newly elected take oath.

According to data available with the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, the BJP, which currently has 94 members, gained two seats in the Upper House in the just concluded elections, pushing its own strength to 96.

The strength of NDA, which at present has 113 members, will cross the half-way mark of 123 in the 245-member House in April this year once all nominated members take oath.

At present, there are only six MPs who have been nominated by the President of India as members in the Rajya



Sabha, with some having joined the BJP later. There are a total of 12 nominated members in the House.

The data shows that with the support of some independents and nominated members, the NDA which did not have a majority in the Upper House so far will finally achieve the magic figure this April, helping it get crucial legislations passed in the Council of States. Elections were held on 56 Rajya Sabha seats in 15 states,

in which the BJP won 30 seats, the Congress nine, SP 2, TMC 4, YSRCP 3, RJD 2, BJD 2, and NCP, Shiv Sena, BRS, and JD(U) one seat each. With the Congress strength going down to 30 seats, the joint Opposition has less than 100 MPs in the Upper House. Having a majority in the Upper House is very crucial for the ruling dispensation as several key legislations have been stuck in the past due to lack of strength.

Nationwide free genetic testing announced

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In a groundbreaking move to tackle rare diseases, India's ICMR-National Institute for Research in Reproductive and Child Health (ICMR-NIR-RCH) on Wednesday announced free genetic testing and counselling services nationwide.

The new Genetic Research Centre (GRC) will assess clinically abnormal cases of rare paediatric diseases as well as track origins of undiagnosed genetic disorders. It also aims to facilitate timely therapeutic interventions and provide critical support for both patients and their families.

Rare diseases are typically chronic and progressive medical conditions that pose life-threatening risks to those affected. Out of the 350 million patients suffering from rare disease globally, India alone is home to approximately 72-96 million patients, according to the data Ministry of Health and



Family Welfare (MoHFW).

In India's urban areas, congenital malformations and genetic disorders are the third most common cause of mortality in newborns. With a very large population and high birth rate, and consanguineous marriage favored in many communities, the prevalence of genetic disorders is high in India. The Department of Biotechnology had launched in 2019, the UMMID initiative with an aim to establish NIDAN Kendras to provide counselling, prenatal testing and diagnosis, man-

agement, and multidisciplinary care in Government Hospitals wherein the influx of patients is more, to produce skilled clinicians in human genetics, and to undertake screening of pregnant women and newborn babies for inherited genetic diseases in hospitals at aspirational districts.

Under the ICMR project, NIR-RCH centre with approval under the PCPNDT Act based in Maharashtra, plans nationwide services.

Dr. Geetanjali Sachdeva, Director, highlights the trans-

formative impact on vulnerable sections of society. Dr. Shailesh Pande, Head of GRC, stresses raising awareness and enhancing testing accessibility to alleviate the societal burden of rare diseases, aligning with the national goal of universal healthcare access.

While the GRC is currently offering its services in Maharashtra, people with rare diseases from other parts of the country can avail the services, ICMR-NIRRCH said.

"Strengthening access to genetic testing and counselling for rare diseases will pave the way for their early diagnosis and timely intervention, helping improve the health and well-being of some of the most vulnerable sections of society. This is a revolutionary step that can transform several lives, especially young lives in the country," said Dr. Geetanjali Sachdeva, Director, ICMR-NIRRCH, in a statement.

With no approved treatment for 95 per cent of rare diseases, the diagnosis of rare diseases is

challenging. While early genetic testing is key, diagnosis is conducted through a distinctive blend of clinical and laboratory methods, including cytogenetic, biochemical, and molecular approaches.

At present, the centre is providing its services to around 570 families yearly, covering genetic conditions during infancy, childhood, and adolescence, as well as for reproductive difficulties faced by couples.

"Our centre is working to address a critical public health concern. By reaching out to special schools, hospitals and the public, we are striving to raise awareness around rare diseases and enhance uptake of essential testing and counselling. In doing so, we aim to mitigate the societal burden of these diseases and realise the national goal of a healthy society, with universal access to healthcare services," said Dr. Shailesh Pande, Medical Geneticist and Head GRC, in the statement.

Law panel may propose simultaneous polls in 2029

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Law Commission is likely to recommend adding a new chapter to the Constitution on 'one nation, one election' and holding the gigantic democratic exercise of simultaneous polls for Lok Sabha, State Assemblies and local bodies across the country by mid-2029, sources said on Wednesday.

The Commission, under Justice (ret'd) Ritu Raj Awasthi, would recommend an amendment to the Constitution to add the "new chapter or part" on simultaneous elections, the sources said.

The panel would also recommend synchronising the terms of legislative assemblies in "three phases" in the next five years so that the first simultaneous polls could be held in May-June 2029 when elections for the 19th Lok



Sabha are due.

The new chapter in the Constitution would include issues related to "simultaneous election," "sustainability of simultaneous elections" and "common electoral roll" for Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, panchayats and municipalities so that the three-tier simultaneous polls could be held together "in one go," they explained. The new

chapter being recommended will have power of non-extant" to override other provisions in the Constitution dealing with terms of assemblies.

The five-year period in which the terms of assemblies will be synchronised will be spread over three phases. The Commission would recommend that the first phase may deal with state assemblies

whose period will have to be curtailed by a few months -- three or six months.

In case a government falls due to no confidence or if there is a hung House, the Commission would recommend constitution of a "unity government" with representatives from various political parties. In case the unity government formula does not work, the law panel would recommend holding fresh elections for the remainder of the term of the House. "Suppose fresh elections are called for and the government still has three years, then polls should be for the remainder of the term -- three years -- to ensure sustainability," a source explained.

Besides the Law Commission, a high-level committee under former president Ram Nath Kovind is also working on a report on how simultaneous polls to

the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, municipalities and panchayats can be held by tweaking the Constitution and the existing legal framework. Along with the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, expected in April-May this year, elections for at least five assemblies are likely to take place, while state polls for Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand are expected later this year.

Bihar and Delhi are scheduled for assembly polls next year, while Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Kerala are scheduled for 2026, and Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Manipur in 2027. As many as nine states may have assembly polls scheduled for 2028 - Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Karnataka, Mizoram, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Telangana.

India, Germany to cooperate on high technology for military use

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

India and Germany have resolved to closely collaborate on high-technology for military use in line with a broader aim to develop defence cooperation as a key pillar of the bilateral strategic partnership.

Besides this issue, ways to further bolster strategic cooperation figured prominently at a meeting of the India-Germany high defence committee that was held in Berlin on Tuesday, defence ministry said here on Wednesday.

Giving details, officials said both the countries are set to carry out joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific, in reflection of their growing defence ties.

The Indian delegation at the talks was headed by Defence



Secretary Giridhar Aramane while the German side was led by State Secretary at German defence ministry Benedikt Zimmer.

"Both sides discussed a range of bilateral security and defence issues, with a focus on developing defence cooperation as a key pillar of the strategic partnership between India and Germany," the defence ministry said.

"They exchanged views on the

regional security situation, discussed likely joint exercises with Germany in the Indo-Pacific, and deliberated on potential defence industrial projects and proposals.

It said both sides emphasised on the need for a closer defence partnership and connecting the defence industries from both sides together.

"Of particular focus was the collaboration in high technology in defence," the ministry said in a statement. The high defence committee meeting follows the visit of German Federal Minister of Defence Boris Pistorius to India last year.

Aramane also interacted with prominent think tank German Institute of International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) in Berlin.

Authorities to comply with guidelines on not requisitioning forest staff for election duty: NGT

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has observed that it expects the authorities to comply with instructions regarding not requisitioning forest officers or vehicles for election duty during the Lok Sabha polls.

The green panel was hearing a plea seeking directions to all states and Union Territories for implementing the instructions issued by the Election Commission of India, exempting territorial staff of the Forest department and forest vehicles from being requisitioned in the elections. Noting the government-issued documents, a bench of National Green Tribunal Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava said, "We find that the circulars in regards to the relief claimed have already been issued by the competent authorities and, unless something contrary exists, these circulars need to be complied with by the concerned authorities."

The bench, also comprising Expert Member A Senthil Vel, underlined that the tribunal's jurisdiction is limited to civil cases raising a substantial question about environmental issues and those for implementing the National Green Tribunal's scheduled acts. The National Green Tribunal Act provides jurisdiction to



the body over several acts, including the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Cess Act, Forest (Conservation) Act, Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, Environment (Protection) Act, Public Liability Insurance Act, and the Biological Diversity Act. "Since requisite instructions and guidelines have already been issued and concerned authorities are expected to comply with the same while ensuring the smooth holding of the election..." the tribunal said in an order passed on Tuesday.

"Hence, we are of the view that, at this stage, no further direction by the tribunal is required," it added.

The plea, filed by advocate Gaurav Bansal, underlined that a shortage of manpower could destroy the "precious natural resources" of forests. The Election Commission of

India had issued circulars dated February 8 and June 7 last year that exempted certain categories of vehicles, including forest vehicles, and some categories of personnel, including senior forest officials and territorial staff of the Forest department, from being requisitioned for election duty, respectively, the tribunal noted.

It also noted a circular of the Central Empowered Committee dated February 2 that requested all chief secretaries not to requisition for election duty vehicles of wildlife sanctuaries, national sanctuaries and national games parks. Additionally, a communication was issued by the Uttarakhand government the following day, exempting from the Lok Sabha elections duty Forest department vehicles allotted in various circles and personnel posted at the field level because of forest fires, the bench noted.

Heed WHO warning, Mothers against vaping group urges nations to act

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Mothers Against Vaping, a coalition of proactive and concerned mothers, has issued a call to action for South-East Asian nations to heed the World Health Organization's (WHO) warning regarding the rising use of new-age gateway devices like e-cigarettes and vapes, especially among children and youth.

This collective effort aims to combat what they describe as the "escalating vaping crisis" affecting young people.

The WHO's caution against the proliferation of vaping in the region underscores the urgent need to control the spread of e-cigarettes and similar products. Notably, India has taken a proactive stance by enacting the PECA 2019 legislation, which bans all aspects of electronic cigarette products, including production, manufacturing, import, export, transport, sale, distribution, storage, and advertisement, deeming them illegal within the country.

Dr. Rajesh Gupta, additional director of Pulmonology and Critical Care at Fortis Healthcare, emphasized that claiming e-cigarettes can eliminate nicotine addiction is scientifically inaccurate, given their nicotine content. Furthermore, the use of e-cigarettes can deliver higher doses of nicotine and other



harmful chemicals, posing additional risks to users, especially young people.

Dr. Bhavna Barmi, a Clinical Psychologist and Founder of Happiness Studio, highlights the mental health impacts associated with vaping, including mood and anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts, and depressive symptoms. Mothers Against Vaping also drew attention to a survey conducted by the American Heart Association, presented in February 2023.

The findings of the survey revealed a concerning correlation between vaping nicotine and THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the psychoactive component in marijuana and self-reported symptoms of depression and anxiety.

"The long-term consequences of e-cigarettes remain unknown, but studies have already demonstrated serious lung injuries and adverse health effects associated with

their use. Without effective control measures, the widespread prevalence of these new-age devices poses a genuine risk, potentially leaving our future generation with lasting health impairments.

"From causing chemical poisoning in users to jeopardising maternal and foetal health, vaping presents a myriad of physical health risks," said Dr Varuna Pathak, former Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Gandhi Medical College. According to a new study, vapers are susceptible to infection by SARS-CoV-2, the virus that spreads COVID-19 and continues to infect people around the world. The researchers from University of California, Riverside said the liquid used in electronic cigarettes, called e-liquid, typically contains nicotine, propylene glycol, vegetable glycerin, and flavor chemicals.

India, Nepal foreign secretaries hold talks, review bilateral ties



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra and his Nepalese counterpart Sewa Lamsal on Wednesday reviewed various key aspects of India-Nepal bilateral ties.

Lamsal is in India in his first foreign visit after assuming charge as Nepal's foreign secretary recently.

"The two foreign secretaries held discussions on the entire range of multifaceted cooperation between India and Nepal and also followed up on the seventh-India-Nepal joint commission meeting," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said. The joint commission meeting was co-chaired by the External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and his Nepalese counterpart N P Saud in Kathmandu last month. "The visit is in keeping with the tradition of regular high-level exchanges

between the two countries and the priority India attaches to its relations with Nepal under its 'Neighbourhood First' policy, and provides an opportunity to further advance our bilateral ties," the MEA said on Lamsal's visit. Foreign Secretary Lamsal is visiting India to participate in the eighth Asia Economic Dialogue being jointly convened by the MEA and Pune International Centre on Thursday in Pune.

Nepal is important for India in the context of its overall strategic interests in the region, and the leaders of the two countries have often noted the age-old "Roti Beti" relationship. The country shares a border of over 1,850 km with five Indian states -- Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Landlocked Nepal relies heavily on India for the transportation of goods and services.

Rajnath lauds Modi, highlights defence exports rise

PTI ■ SITAMARHI (BIHAR)

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Wednesday claimed that the country's military exports rose by more than 20 years in the last five years, which was proof of India's "self-reliance" under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. Addressing a gathering of local intelligentsia in north Bihar's Sitamarhi town, Singh said defence exports were worth "about Rs 1,000 crore, when I took over, and it has soared to worth over Rs 20 lakh crore". "Our total defence manufacture stands at a monumental one lakh crore. Try figuring it out by scribbling the number, in digits, on a piece of paper. This shows India is becoming self-reliant (atma nirbhar) and leaders across the world acknowledge that 21st century shall belong to India", said the Defence minister, who was on a day-long trip of Bihar. The former BJP president asserted that his party was characterised by "no difference between words and deeds", and disclosed "I had been entrusted



with preparing the manifesto for elections in 2014 and again five years later. On both occasions, Narendra Modi had insisted that we do not make any promise that we could not fulfil". Singh said abrogation of Article 370, scrapping of triple talaq and construction of Ram temple at Ayodhya showed "we always walk the talk (Jo kahte hain Kar ke dikhate hain)". Going down the memory lane, he recalled having gone to jail at the height of the Ayodhya movement in 1990s "when, I headed the BJP's youth wing".

The Union minister also highlighted "India's jump from the 11th spot to the fifth" in terms of the size of the economy and expressed confidence "We will be among the top three in the world soon and by 2047 we shall be a developed economy". He also credited the prime minister's intervention for the recent release from Qatar of former Indian Navy officials whom a court in the West Asian country had awarded death sentence. He also recalled Russia and Ukraine "halting their war for

a few hours, upon Modi's request, to facilitate return of our students" a year ago. "In contrast, governments formed by the Congress in the past were known for empty promises of eradicating poverty and corruption scandals that saw even Union ministers landing in jail", said the senior BJP leader. Singh, who is on a day-long tour of Bihar, had earlier paid obeisance at the nearby Punaura Dham, a shrine situated at the spot where Goddess Sita is believed to have been discovered by King Janaka. "The way Prime Minister Narendra Modi's credibility has been rising, there will be no area left where the lotus would not bloom", Singh had told reporters on the occasion. He was also asked whether the lotus would bloom "for the first time" in Sitamarhi, a Lok Sabha seat the BJP has never seen. He replied "With the blessings of Mother Janaki, the lotus would bloom in Sitamarhi, too", but hastened to add, with a ghost of smile on his lips, saying "there is a pond nearby

with lots of lotuses. So there is no problem". Notably, the party has not fielded its own candidate in Sitamarhi after the 1998 Lok Sabha polls, leaving it for allies like Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U) or, in 2014 when he fought separately, for the now defunct RLSP. The JD(U) had won the seat in 2019, when it fielded Sunil Kumar Pintu, a BJP man who chipped in after the official candidate of the Chief Minister's party returned his ticket. It is being understood that the JD(U) wants to contest the seat again and Nitish Kumar, who is now the party president, has assured state legislative council Chairman Devesh Chandra Thakur that he will be the candidate this time. This has met with resentment from Pintu while the BJP has been maintaining a studied silence over the issue. The Union minister declined to take questions on development of Sitamarhi, which is not a patch on Ayodhya in terms of infrastructure, despite being a part of the "Ramayana Circuit".

Mizoram adopts resolution against India, Myanmar border fencing

PTI ■ AIZAWL

The Mizoram Assembly on Wednesday adopted a resolution opposing the Centre's decision to fence the India-Myanmar border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with the neighbouring country. The resolution, moved by Home Minister K Sapdanga, urged the Centre to reconsider its decision. It urged the Union government to instead take steps to ensure that Zo ethnic people, "who have been divided in different countries, are unified under one administrative unit". While moving the resolution, Sapdanga said the Zo ethnic people, who have inhabited Mizoram and the Chin hills of Myanmar for centuries and once lived together under their own administration, have been geographically divided when the British occupied the region. He said the British demarcated the India-Myanmar border and divided the Zo ethnic people's land into two countries. "The Zo ethnic people can't accept the India-Myanmar border, which has been imposed on them by the British. They have been dreaming of reunification under one administrative unit someday," the home minister said. He said fencing the India-Myanmar border or scrapping the FMR, which will mandate the approval of the imposed boundary, is unacceptable for the Zo ethnic people. Although the Mizoram government is yet to receive official intimation about the Centre's plan, it is evident from media reports and statements of Union ministers that the Centre is planning to fence the India-Myanmar border and suspend the existing FMR with



Myanmar, he said. Union Home Minister Amit Shah had on February 6 announced that the entire India-Myanmar border would be fenced. Two days later, on February 8, he said that the Centre has decided to scrap the India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) to maintain the country's internal security and demographic structure of the northeastern states. Sapdanga alleged that the recent decisions were motivated mainly by the demands of the Manipur government. The idea of fencing the India-Myanmar border and lifting the FMR, as reported in a section of media, stemmed out of some reasons, including national security, smuggling of contraband items, illegal immigration and movement of insurgents, he said. Sapdanga said national security "can't be an excuse" for fencing the India-Myanmar border and lifting the FMR. "If the Centre is so concerned about national security, it should also fence all the international borders that the country shares with neighbouring countries," he said. It should also abolish the mechanism India has with Nepal and Bhutan, under which people of these

countries can visit each other's territory without a visa, he said. He said that even during the peak period of insurgency in the northeastern states, the FMR with Myanmar was never questioned. He said that fencing the international border and lifting the FMR will severely affect people living along the border on either side. "I urge the Centre to consider the hardships that will be faced by the Zo ethnic people if the India-Myanmar border is fenced and the FMR is scrapped," Sapdanga said. After a prolonged discussion, the assembly unanimously adopted the resolution. Chief Minister Lalduhoma and Leader of the Opposition, Lalchhandama Ralte of the Mizo National Front (MNF), were present. Four Indian states — Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh — share a 1,643-km-long international border with Myanmar. Mizoram shares a 510-km-long border with Myanmar's Chin state and the Mizos share ethnic ties with the Chin people. Mizoram's civil society organisations and student bodies also strongly opposed the Centre's decision to fence the border and lift the FMR.



Had health issues: BJP MLA who skipped RS polls voting

PTI ■ KARWAR (KARNATAKA)

BJP MLA Arabail Shivaram Hebbar on Wednesday cited health issues as the grounds for abstaining from voting in the Rajya Sabha elections. He said there was no link between his abstention and his disgruntlement with the district unit of the party. The Yellapur MLA did not turn up for the voting despite a party whip, while Yeshwanthpur MLA S T Somashekhar voted in favour of Congress in the name of "conscience", during the polls to four seats of Rajya Sabha from Karnataka on Tuesday, in an embarrassment to the BJP. Somashekhar on Wednesday participated in the Assembly session, and was seen in his designated seat on the opposition side, among other BJP MLAs. Both Somashekhar and Hebbar were earlier in the Congress. They were among 17 Congress-JD(S) legislators, who had quit from their parties, which ultimately led to the collapse of H D Kumaraswamy-led coalition government in July, 2019. They had subsequently won the bypolls on BJP ticket and served as Ministers in the previous saffron party government.

"My health was not good in the morning (on Tuesday), I had planned to go (for voting), on Doctor's advice after 6 PM I had to come back, for this reason I could not vote. Nothing else. I could have gone for voting and could have done cross voting or could have come without voting for anyone," Hebbar said in response to a question. Speaking to reporters here, he said, he was not a person who would abstain from voting out of any fear, and has been in politics for four decades. "I was told by my personal assistant the whip was issued to me after 1 PM (on Tuesday). When the whip should be issued, how...Law will take its course," he further said. Hebbar said, there was no "relationship" between him abstaining from voting and his unhappiness with the party, and there are forums to express disgruntlement. Asked whether he was giving any warning to the party by abstaining, he said, "I have not given any warning, I had some (health) issues, so could not go." Hebbar said: "my disgruntlement is only at the district level. I have no disgruntlement at the state or national level. I have said this earlier too, I am saying it again now".

Tipra Motha team in Delhi for MHA meeting

PTI ■ AGARTALA

A three-member delegation of Tipra Motha, led by its chief Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma, arrived in New Delhi on Wednesday evening to attend a meeting called by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), a senior leader of the party said. Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha and his Assam counterpart Himanta Biswa Sarma, who are currently camping in the nation-

al capital, are expected to attend the MHA meeting, Tipra Motha leader Animesh Debbarma said. Earlier in the day, leaders of Tripura's main opposition party launched a fast-unto-death at Hatai Katat in West Tripura district demanding a constitutional solution to the issue of Tiprasa people. Animesh Debbarma said Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma, party president BK Hrangkhawli, and ex-MLA Rajeswar Debbarma are slated to attend the meeting, the agen-

da of which has not been revealed. "Our movement is continuing at Hatai Katat seeking a permanent constitutional solution to the problem of Tiprasa people. The party is determined to find a solution to the vexed problem", he said. "There has been no law and order problem at Hatai Katat. Adequate security personnel have been deployed in the area as a preventive measure", said AIG (Law & Order) Jyotishman Das Chowdhury.

Assam Congress working president Goswami resigns, likely to join BJP

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Assam Congress working president Rana Goswami resigned from the party on Wednesday and headed to New Delhi where he is likely to join the BJP. Goswami had on Sunday resigned as the party's organisational in-charge of Upper Assam citing "various political reasons". "I beg to state that I am tendering my resignation as the working President of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee and as an active

member of Indian National Congress," he said in the resignation letter addressed to Congress general secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal. Soon after resigning, he went to New Delhi where he is likely to meet BJP president JP Nadda in the presence of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, sources in the state's ruling party said. Leader of opposition Debabrata Saikia of the Congress told reporters that Goswami has not given any reason for quitting the party.



"He has not given any reason for quitting the party. If it is given, we can analyse and take suitable action to rectify the situation," Saikia said. "The party had some inkling about Goswami's decision as he was absent from several political programmes, but he should have discussed his grievances with the Congress state president," he added. Saikia said Goswami's resignation would affect the Congress. "I will not deny it, but we will continue with our efforts to strengthen the party," he said.

Shinde Government distributing funds to BJP, Shiv Sena only: MLC

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Shiv Sena (UBT) legislator Anil Parab on Wednesday alleged in the Maharashtra legislative council that the state government was distributing funds meant for development works to the lawmakers of the BJP and ruling Shiv Sena only, and said it was an "injustice" to common people. He made the allegation in the House citing a detailed response availed under the

Right to Information (RTI) Act. "I have detailed information obtained under the RTI Act, which states that development funds are disbursed to the legislators belonging to either BJP or Shiv Sena. Even BMC commissioner (I S Chahal) told me that he cannot release funds without the chief minister's approval. Why do you have to stoop low in the name of development work? People are suffering due to it,"



Parab said. He also asked the government to clarify under what provisions the guardian ministers of Mumbai city and

Mumbai suburban district can dictate the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to release and utilise its funds. "The BMC is an independent body," the leader of the Uddhav Thackeray-led Sena said. Road construction tenders are flawed, he alleged, and claimed that releasing funds early to the contractors would now result in more chaotic roads as the work will stretch for a long period. "The BMC has guidelines for construction of

cement roads. However, the Eknath Shinde government ignored it completely and proceeded to issue the work orders rampantly," he added. "Construction of roads is going on, but it will not be completed in time as the civic body imposed a fine on contractors after we complained to the BMC administration. There is no information available whether the fine was paid. In many cases, the work is not moving ahead," he said.



Arunachal Governor receives voter card

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

Arunachal Pradesh Governor At Gen (Retd) KT Parnaik on Wednesday received his Elector's Photo Identity Card (EPIC) from State election officials here. After receiving the card, the governor said voting is a fundamental right which must be exercised by all responsible citizens. "It is a way to safeguard people's rights and freedom by ensuring that everyone has a voice in the political process," he said. Parnaik said voting is the cornerstone of democracy and it is essential for ensuring that governments are accountable, responsive, and reflective of the will of the people. "It is a way for citizens to have a say in shaping the laws and regulations that govern society. Moreover, it is a way for people to feel connected to their communities and have a sense of ownership over the decisions that affect their lives," he added.

Stalin inaugurates infra projects in Tamil Nadu

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin on Tuesday inaugurated several infrastructure projects and also felicitated a couple who prevented a train accident in the state's Tenkasi district. Stalin inaugurated electricity infrastructure projects established jointly by the Tamil Nadu Transmission Corporation Limited and the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited at a cost of Rs 7,305.49 crore. He also threw open office buildings and quarters for revenue divisional officers and tehsildars and office buildings for revenue inspectors and village administrative officers, built at a cost of Rs 12.27 crore. A pedestrian subway constructed by the Chennai Metro Rail Limited under the Central Square Project at a cost of Rs 9.75 crore was also



inaugurated through videoconferencing. The chief minister later felicitated farm workers Vadakkithiammal who ran on railway tracks and prevented an express train from colliding into a truck that had rolled over from and fallen on the track at Puliyur village on February 25. He presented them with a

cheque for Rs 5 lakh as a token of appreciation for risking their lives in averting a major accident. The chief minister also provided a Startup Innovation Grant of Rs 50,000 and a commendation certificate to twins Raman and Lakshmanan of Backyard Creators, dedicated to affordable healthcare solutions.

Trader loses ₹3.61 crore in cyber fraud; one held

PTI ■ MUMBAI

A garment unit owner has been arrested after a 73-year-old businessman from Mumbai fell prey to an online investment fraud and ended up losing Rs 3.61 crore, police said on Wednesday. The Cyber Police have so far frozen an amount of Rs 2.20 crore and 330 bank accounts, an official said. The alleged transactions took place between May 20 and October 7 last year after the businessman was contacted by three persons, including two women, online who lured him into investing in a scheme by promising hefty returns, the official said. "They also created a WhatsApp group, made an online agreement with the businessman, and sent it to his email ID. The agreement mentioning the returns on the investments was shared in the group to gain the trust of the businessman," he said.



The victim invested Rs 3.61 crore. As he didn't get any returns on his investment, he approached the West Region Cyber Police Station in Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) and lodged a complaint. The name of the garment unit owner, Ketab Ali Kabil Biswas, came to the fore during the investigation and he was arrested on charges of cheating and forgery under the Indian Penal Code and the Information Technology Act on Monday. "During the investigation, the cyber police froze Rs 2.20 crore which had been diverted into two bank accounts. Prima facie, as many as 330 bank accounts used by fraudsters have also been frozen," the official added.

Jagan disburses ₹1,294 crore under YSR Rythu Bharosa PM Kisan scheme

PTI ■ AMARAVATI

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy on Wednesday disbursed Rs 1,294 crore under YSR Rythu Bharosa - PM Kisan scheme for the fifth year, including interest subvention for the fourth year under YSR Sunna Vaddi Panta Runalu scheme. Out of Rs 1,294 crore, Rs 1,078 crore funds have been disbursed to more than 53 lakh farmers at the rate of Rs 2,000, while Rs 216 crore will go in the form of interest subvention for timely repayment of interest on crop loans taken during Rabi-2021 and Kharif-2022 seasons to 11 lakh farmers. "State welfare depends on farmers' welfare and keeping that in mind, the government has taken several steps for the welfare of farmers in the last 57 months," said Reddy, in a virtual address to officials and



beneficiaries from his camp office. According to the CM, the YSRCP government paid Rs 67,500 to each farmer under the Rythu Bharosa scheme in the past 57 months, which is Rs 17,500 more than the Rs 50,000 promised in five years. The state government has been implementing various welfare schemes with commitment for the benefit of farmers and hand holding them at every step, unlike the previous TDP regime that ditched the

farming community by defaulting on the Rs. 87,612 crore loan waiver promise, he said. Until now, Reddy said, Rs 34,288 crore has been disbursed under YSR Rythu Bharosa - PM Kisan and Rs 2,050 crore via YSR Sunna Vaddi Panta Runalu schemes, benefiting 85 lakh farmers. He highlighted that both the schemes are helpful to small and marginal farmers by meeting 80 percent of their cultivation expenses.

Upper hand

Showing astute political strategy in RS polls, BJP seems all set for Lok Sabha elections

Even before the Lok Sabha elections, whose dates are yet to be confirmed, the BJP is busy securing one political citadel after another. Beyond the mathematical calculation of winning eight Rajya Sabha seats of the 15 available in three States, it has managed to bag two extra seats — the lone seat in Himachal Pradesh and one in Uttar Pradesh, dealing another body blow to the INDIA bloc, an Opposition alliance. Worse, the upset in Himachal would likely embolden the saffron party to demand a trust vote against the Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu Government. Already, the Congress Government is seeing a fresh scramble for power amid abandonment by its own members, the latest being the announcement of resignation by State PWD Minister Vikramaditya Singh. Trouble has been mounting for the Congress since Tuesday, when it lost the sole Rajya Sabha seat to the BJP with six of its members cross-voting in the poll. The RS elections are often seen as a litmus test of political equations with-



in States and among parties. They reflect the ability of political parties to rally support and secure positions of influence in the Upper House of Parliament. However, the cross-voting has added a new dimension to the political landscape, indicating possible shifts in alliances and loyalties. The INDIA bloc, comprising 28 Opposition parties, had hoped to consolidate its position in the Rajya Sabha. However, this setback has raised questions about the cohesion and effectiveness of the Opposition alliance, even in States where the Congress is in power. These instances of brazen cross-voting have not only raised eyebrows but also sparked speculation about its potential implications for the Lok Sabha elections. The BJP's success in securing additional seats through cross-voting underscores its growing clout and organisational strength, especially in key battleground States. For the Opposition, the Rajya Sabha poll results serve as a wake-up call, highlighting the need for greater unity and coordination. The failure to prevent cross-voting not only reflects internal fissures but also raises questions about the effectiveness of their electoral strategy. As the Lok Sabha elections draw near, the Opposition parties must regroup and realign their priorities to present a formidable challenge to the BJP. At the same time, the BJP's latest triumph should not be viewed in isolation. It reflects the party's relentless pursuit of expanding its footprint across regions and States. The BJP's ability to capitalise on opportunities, whether through defections, alliances or cross-voting, underscores its status as a formidable political force. Looking ahead, the Rajya Sabha poll results indicate a shifting landscape where traditional alliances may no longer hold sway, and parties must adapt to changing realities to stay relevant. The BJP's latest success is a testament to its adaptability and astute political strategy. In modern times, political expediency is everything; moral values, ideologies and loyalties can be taken up later.



Visitors during the Bharat Tex 2024, a global textile expo, in New Delhi

PTI

Dropshipping: The human touch in a digital era

With its low-risk, high-reward approach, dropshipping offers a gateway to success, empowering ventures to thrive in the competitive arena

As technology has become more accessible to billions of individuals, the e-commerce sector has emerged as a dominating force in today's complex and global marketplace. According to Mordor Intelligence, India's e-commerce market size is expected to skyrocket to \$299.01 billion by 2029, with a CAGR of 21.50%, and is estimated to be \$112.93 billion in 2024. While it might seem easy to others, the truth is that succeeding in e-commerce requires significant effort. This is where to establish a trustworthy reputation in today's competitive era, dropshipping has emerged as a viable option for entrepreneurs and small businesses. The importance of Dropshipping: Dropshipping has revolutionised the e-commerce landscape, providing an entry point for entrepreneurs and small businesses with low investment and risk. Unlike traditional retail models that necessitate inventory and logistics management, dropshipping enables businesses to collaborate with reliable suppliers, allowing them to



focus on marketing and customer service, ultimately creating a unique brand identity that appeals to their target audience. Furthermore, this personal touch in the digital age sets them apart from their competitors and helps establish trust and loyalty among customers. As online shopping continues to grow, dropshipping will become a critical tool for staying competitive in the ever-changing e-commerce market. Plus, according to IMARC, the global dropshipping market is expected to reach \$1,787.4 billion by 2032, with a growth rate (CAGR) of 23.46% from 2024-2032. How to craft a unique brand identity with dropshipping: In an era where having a

unique brand identity is imperative, dropshipping offers a convenient and cost-effective way to achieve this. With dropshipping, companies can customise their brand image and choose unique products to appeal to particular clientele groups. Through dependable supplier partnerships and efficient marketing techniques, entrepreneurs can also establish a distinctive brand identity that appeals to their intended market. This uniqueness helps firms stand out from the competition in the digital era and draws in customers while also encouraging brand loyalty. Empowering businesses to succeed! While dropshipping uses technology and automation to streamline operations, it is ultimately the human touch that sets businesses apart in the digital age. Thus, by embracing the human touch and prioritising meaningful interactions, small businesses and entrepreneurs can differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace and build a loyal customer base that transcends transactions. Furthermore, when business-

es dropship and focus their operations, a plethora of opportunities arise that empower them to succeed in today's ever-evolving era. In conclusion, as technology continues to democratise commerce, the e-commerce sector thrives, with India's market poised for exponential growth. Amidst this landscape, dropshipping emerges as a vital strategy for entrepreneurs and small businesses to navigate the competitive realm. By leveraging reliable suppliers and focusing on branding, dropshipping facilitates unique market positioning, crucial for sustained success. As the global dropshipping market burgeons, embracing this model empowers businesses to craft distinctive identities, fostering customer loyalty and longevity. Ultimately, while technology drives efficiency, it's the human touch that propels businesses forward, ensuring relevance and resilience in the dynamic e-commerce sphere. (The writer is prominent player in the Indian eCommerce industry and domain expert of dropshipping; views are personal)



PARAS THAKKAR

The US presidential election: Trump redux

Former US President Donald Trump's recent victory over his challenger, Nikki Haley, in South Carolina has injected fresh energy into the American presidential election race

On Saturday, former US President Donald Trump's win over his challenger, Nikki Haley, intensified the American presidential election race. With this win, Trump is moving toward a clear path to the Republican nomination. He dominated the primaries so far, in which voters select a party's nominee who will compete in the general election. "On November 5, we'll get up here and say, 'Joe, you're fired! You're fired! Get out!'" Trump said after his South Carolina win. According to polls, the next presidential election on November 5 is expected to be close. It will be a replay between the current President, Joe Biden, and the former President, Donald Trump, just like in 2020. Additionally, there will be third-party candidates in the upcoming election. Both presidential candidates are old. American media reports suggest that some people prefer a third option. They believe there is little difference between them. Fewer Americans are interested in a potential rematch between these two candidates. Biden wants to finish the work he started in his first term. He believes winning a second term is crucial to preserving America's democratic traditions. However, some people worry about his age and the reported memory loss, while others support him. Republicans have criticised him for this. Historically, since 1944, no US President has lost an election without a recession during the election cycle or just before. Being the incumbent President is in Biden's favour. He has no serious challengers in his party. Though Biden's poll numbers are low, the Democrats do not have an alternative plan. The two presumptive presidential candidates must complete several steps before the November elections. From January 15 to June 4, 2024, states will hold caucuses and primary elections to choose their preferred candidates. The two candidates with the most support from their party members will officially become the nominees during the conventions. The Republican National Convention will occur from July 15 to July 18



in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. From August 19 to August 22, the National Convention of the Democrats will be held in Chicago, Illinois, Democrats and Independents prioritise preserving democracy and concerns about inflation and immigration. The campaign will focus on essential topics such as reproductive rights, climate change, democracy in America, and US support for Ukraine. Suppose President Trump is re-elected for a second term; he may seek retribution against his adversaries. There are concerns about whether Trump intends to decrease the number of federal civil service employees, tighten immigration regulations, and terminate the Affordable Care Act. Trump has also vowed to make trade with China more challenging, hinting that he may not defend all NATO partners. Biden's low approval ratings and reported memory issues made it necessary to impress his supporters that he has the energy and ability to serve another four years as President. He will be 81 when elections take place on November 5. Trump will be 77. Biden is confident that he is the only Democratic candidate capable

AMERICANS TEND TO VOTE FOR THE PARTY THAT BEST SERVES THEIR ECONOMIC INTERESTS. HISTORICALLY, THEY HAVE TENDED TO SUPPORT THE GOVERNING PARTY DURING GOOD TIMES, WHILE IN BAD TIMES, THEY PREFER THE OPPOSITION

of defeating Trump. He has emphasised his role in protecting democracy overseas. In the campaign, he's been focusing on the threat to democracy within the USA. United States. As for his performance, Biden fulfilled vital campaign promises, like creating jobs and restoring normalcy after COVID. Americans tend to vote for the party that best serves their economic interests. Historically, they have tended to support the governing party during good times, while in bad times, they prefer the opposition. In 1992, Bill Clinton used the campaign slogan "It's the economy, stupid" to emphasise the significance of the economy in politics. Trump faces 91 criminal charges under four indictments. They are: For falsifying his business records in New York; For withholding classified federal government documents in Florida; And for attempts to overturn the 2020 election in two separate cases in Washington and the state of Georgia. Despite these serious allegations, a significant number of members of the Republican party continue to show support for him. He has the support of those who believe in

"White supremacy." It remains to be seen how Trump's potential convictions will impact his popularity. The next President will also have to deal with the unexpected and the crises. The international community closely monitors the situation, anticipating the outcome of the country's next major democratic test. The world wants to know how well the country will fare in its next big democratic test, as President Biden and Democrats project Trump as a threat to democracy. While the November election will be closely contested, independent voters, especially in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Georgia, will decide the outcome of the polls. America values youth, but how they will compromise with Trump or Biden is still being determined. The country has seen their performance. They have no choice except to choose one or the other. Trump hopes that a second term could deliver vindication for him, who has pushed baseless claims that the 2020 election was stolen. For Biden, it would be a chance for continuity. (The writer is a popular columnist, views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DIDI'S HOLLOW SLOGAN

Sir — The horrific events that have unfolded in Sandeshkhali have paid to Mamata Didi's vaunted slogan of Maa, Mati, and Manush. The political slogan coined by Mamata herself has turned out to be a grim joke on the state's people. Murder, Mayhem, and Molestation have usurped Maa, Mati, and Manush, going by the horror stories coming out of Sandeshkhali. The deliberate misreading of the Calcutta HC stay order on the formation of an SIT and CM Mamata Banerjee's stock response to the horrific incidents at Sandeshkhali - outsiders and BJP/ RSS people are involved - leaves nobody in doubt that the main accused, Shahjahan Sheikh, enjoys the protection and patronage of Didi. Now that the HC has rapped the West Bengal government on the knuckles, it has promised to arrest Sheikh within a week. This sudden volte-face indicates that Sheikh is within earshot. Didi has now no option left but to arrest Sandeshkhali's bête noire and her party's henchman, Shahjahan Sheikh. Here's hoping Didi will show some spine. Avinash Godbole | Dewas

SPENT FORCE

Sir — In the never-ending battle between the police and the Maoists, either in Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand, the former has almost decimated the latter. The latest was the killing of three Maoists in the Koyalibeda forest area of the Kanker district in Chhattisgarh on Sunday. Significantly, Home Minister Amit Shah in a series of posts on X on Friday had said that the Centre's holistic approach, contributing to health and educational upliftment in the tribal areas dominated by the naxals, resulted in curbing naxalism to a great extent. Familiarity with the surroundings and rapport with the locals have acted as weapons for the police. Intelligence gathering has been a Maoist forte; the police have succeeded in beating the opponents at their own

Poverty on decline



Niti Aayog has recently made an important claim about poverty in the country citing the Consumer Expenditure Survey. Poverty in the country has been reduced by five per cent. Just read the news that the National Sample Survey Office conducted the survey. For this, about one lakh seven thousand families in urban areas and one lakh fifty-five thousand families in rural areas were selected. Along with this reduction in poverty, per capita monthly expenditure has doubled compared to 2011-2012. It has been men-

tioned in the report that the per capita monthly expenditure in the urban section is 6459 rupees and the expenditure in the rural section is 3773 rupees. People in both urban and rural areas have achieved economic progress. Due to this, the race for development is going on. Compared to 2011-2012, the gap has reduced now. It has now come to 71 per cent from 84 per cent. Especially in the year 2004, this difference was almost 91 per cent. There have been changes in lifestyle in both these areas. As the purchasing power of both regions increases, they seem to be spending more on milk, fruits, and vegetables. Overall, this survey has brought out a big issue regarding the reduction of poverty. This is the result of the economic progress that has been going on under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi in the last ten years. Shantaram Wagh | Pune

game. Counselling the local tribals against giving in to the Maoist demands figures right on top of the agenda. Over the years, many Naxals have given up their violent ways, and the credit should go to the concerted effort of the security forces. A combination of a humanitarian touch and taking the fight into the Maoist camps has paid rich dividends. According to Home Ministry data, in the last nine years, there has been a significant decline in left-wing extremism-related violence and deaths. Fatalities among both security forces and civilians have drastically reduced, by 72 and 68 per cent respectively, and these are exceptional numbers that we can see and it shows a positive figure. Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

CRUELTY ON ANIMALS

Sir — The circus, often seen as a place of amusement and wonder, hides a darker truth behind its colourful curtains. Behind the spectacle, lies a world of suffering, as animals endure brutal

training methods including deprivation and beatings, to perform unnatural tricks. Tigers forced to jump through fiery hoops and elephants forced to balance on small platforms are emblematic of this exploitation. The mental and physical well-being of the animal worsens as a result of this wrongdoing. Many suffer from injuries while others endure psychological distress from social deprivation and incarceration. Despite increased cognisance, the circus industry continues to prioritise profit over animal welfare. It's time to acknowledge the pain and suffering foisted upon circus animals in the name of entertainment. By boycotting animal-centric circuses and supporting cruelty-free entertainment, we can help end the exploitation of circus animals and create a world where laughter does not come at the expense of sentient beings. Tanisha Gupta | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

BUILDING BRIDGES WITH EMPATHY




SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Nawaz Sharif's strategic move or military script?



KS TOMAR

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

It was meant to pave the way for the return of his elder brother to resume his political activities in Pakistan.4th, Nawaz's critics allege that the stage was set for "mass scale rigging" to help him to become PM but the game plan went haywire as independents supported by IMRAN FROM JAIL WON A MAJORITY OF THE SEATS AND NAWAZ'S PARTY PML-N COULD NOT GET EVEN A SIMPLE MAJORITY, WHICH SHATTERED THE DREAM OF NAWAZ

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

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

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

China has treaded cautiously and did not touch the sensitive issue of rigging whereas the United States and EU demanded an investigation into the allegations. China has come to the rescue of Pakistan several times but the cost has been beyond the imagination of this poor country. China's debt policy has entrapped Pakistan which has procured a heavy loan and the Chinese

investment has risen \$65 billion in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by 2022. China has already acquired control of Gwadar Port on 16 May 2013 which may be retained instead of a lease guarantee in future.

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

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

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

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

A roadmap for comprehensive socio-economic inclusion

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

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

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



NAGHMA MULLA

lowers the rate of economic growth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trump defeats Nikki in Michigan primary

Biden wins Democratic primary

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"I can tell you this

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Turkish drones kill three in Syria

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

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

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

of North and East Syria.

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

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

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

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

AP ■ JERUSALEM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Houthi rebels suspected in new rocket attack off Yemen coast

AP ■ DUBAI

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

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

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

The private security firm Ambrey reported that the ves-

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

The Associated Press could not immediately identify the vessels involved.

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

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

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

Since November, the rebels

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

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

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

Wildfires scorch Texas Panhandle and briefly shut down nukes facility

AP ■ CANADIAN

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

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

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



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

Agencies

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

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

The Smokehouse Creek Fire in Hutchinson County burned

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

AP ■ LONDON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prince Harry loses legal challenge over security level in UK

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

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

South Korean, US troops to begin major exercises next week

AP ■ SEOUL

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

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

with South Korea.

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

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

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

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

Bharti Enterprises chief Sunil Bharti Mittal knighted by King Charles III

PTI ■ LONDON

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

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

"The UK and India have historical relations, which are

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

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

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

AP ■ ISLAMABAD/LAHORE

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

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

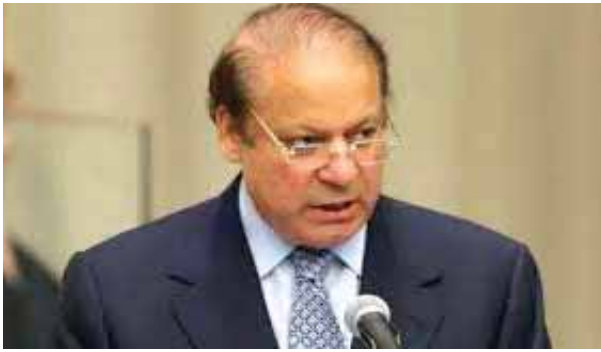
Sharif, who surprisingly nominated his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif to be the prime minister of a coalition government, also said that he wishes every National Assembly, Senate and Prime Minister to complete their constitutional term.

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

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

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

NAWAZ NOMINATES



SHEHBAZ FOR PM’S POST

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

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

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

The President is of the

view that Parliament is not complete because the Election Com-m-ission of Pakistan (ECP) is yet to clear the air over the allocation of reserved seats to the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), following the PTI-SIC ‘merger’ for this very purpose. Khan’s PTI-backed independents have emerged as the largest number of winners followed by PML-N and PPP. However, Khan has alleged that the February 8 elections were the most controversial and rigged polls in the country’s history.

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

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

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

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

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

‘Pakistan Prez may face legal consequences’

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

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

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

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

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

‘Navalny’s funeral on Friday’

AP ■ MOSCOW

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



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

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

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

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

Wickremesinghe stresses reconciliation issues under 13th Amendemnt

PTI ■ COLOMBO

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

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

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

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

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

political challenge for reconciliation.

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

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

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

In late 2022, Wickremesinghe initiated a

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

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

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

Small drone flies into Fukushima N-reactor

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

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

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

TEPCO plans to probe a new area Thursday.

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

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

‘Chinese research ship departs from Maldives’

PTI ■ MALE

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

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

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



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

The vessel can also be used for studies on salinity,

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

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

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

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

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

Ukraine President co-hosts summit in Albania

AP ■ TIRANA

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Eleven countries from southeastern Europe, including some of Ukraine’s neighbours, attended the Albania summit, three of them with online messages, along with officials from the European Union and other international institutions. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Albania earlier this month.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY
HARBOUR WORKS DIVISION NO.1
e-TENDER CALL NOTICE

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

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निविदा शुद्धि-पत्र

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

पत्रांक: 3937 / कर0अनु० / 2023-24
दिनांक : 28.02.2024

सहायक नगर आयुक्त
नगर निगम, ऋषिकेश

Semiconductor manufacturing in India next big space: MeitY Secy

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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



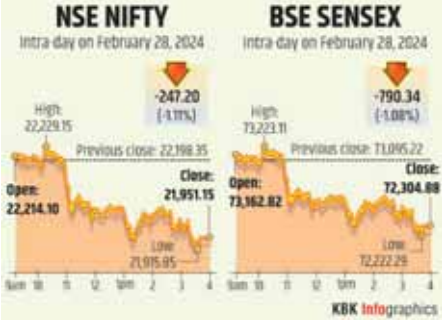
economy to really grow at an increasing pace in the next few years. A USD 2 billion digital economy is what India seriously needs,” Krishnan said. When asked about governance, hygiene and compliance with law for digital economies, Krishnan pointed out that regulators, much like the public, recognized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

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

Markets tumble due to selling in Reliance, banks

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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



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



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

Bengaluru tax payers are giving us buoyancy: FM

PTI ■ BENGALURU

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

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



Vodafone Idea shares tumble 14 per cent

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

AI Express aims 40 per cent increase in flights

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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



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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

Airtel switches to recycled PVC SIM cards

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

Tata firm Agratas to set up UK biggest EV battery factory

PTI ■ LONDON

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



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

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

Disney, Reliance to merge India media operations

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

Turmoil in Indian hockey

HI head Tirkey, secretary Bhola deny rift in joint statement

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



Logan heads into 2nd F1 season stronger

AP ■ BAHRAIN

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

Sargeant delivered on Vowles' ask by adding a little more than 11 pounds to his frame during the offseason - muscle that should help the Floridian with car handling a year after he was consistently outperformed by teammate Alex Albon. Sargeant scored just one point all of last year and it didn't come until the U.S. Grand Prix, five races before the end of the season. Albon, meanwhile, scored 27 points across the season and was ranked 13th in the final driver standings.

"I wasn't physically in the place I need to be and I've done everything I can to get on top of that. For example, I'm five kilos heavier than I was at the end of last year, and I feel much more healthy and much more ready to go," Sargeant said. "I feel like a different man, I feel like physically I am in the best shape I've ever been. And I believe in the condition I'm in now, and will continue to get to, will be simply just helping me feel more comfortable in the car and extract performance."

Sargeant is the first American to race in F1 since Alexander Rossi in 2015 and his underwhelming rookie season did little to build a fanbase in the lucrative United States market that hosted a series-high three races last year. But Williams last year had a car that was difficult to drive and both he and Albon were forced to adapt. Albon believes this year's FW46 will be easier for Sargeant to handle. "Logan will have that experience now into this year, I don't think it'll be so much of a learning curve for him," Albon said. "I personally believe that the car's going to be a bit easier to drive. Our car was very unique. I spent two years refining a very strange driving style, which for someone coming into the car for the first time, without any prior F1 experience, is difficult. "It was very easy to overdrive the car. I think naturally the car's going to go towards him as in a bit less on a knife edge and more usable," Albon continued. "So I think what you're going to see is a guy with a lot more experience and a car that should be more usable and that will in itself bring performance." Vowles agreed that this year's car should help both Albon and Sargeant as Williams tries to become competitive again. "We should have a car that is more suiting to both drivers," Vowles said. "I'm hoping that we've got rid of some of these really nasty effects from last year, but that will also make a platform for him where he should be able to grow much quicker than he did in 2023." Vowles has also tried to relieve some of the pressure on Sargeant by telling him to follow the same guidelines that helped him earn a second season with Williams. "What I've asked him to do is to approach the first few days of driving the car with caution again, the same way he did at the end of last year, build up into it and don't try and rush into success," Vowles said. "That's the confidence I placed in him. That's why he's back in the car. I need him now to not go back to his old ways of trying to extract too much from himself and from the car too quickly, but rather approach things progressively." Sargeant goes into this year much more confident after a season that he admitted took a physical toll on him. He needed the extra work as F1 prepares for a record 24 races this year. "The offseason has been such a good opportunity for me to take a step back and look at myself from mental, emotional and physical standpoint where I need to do improve, where I need to get better," Sargeant said. "I learned that I need to manage myself much better. I let myself get very drained throughout the season and I let that affect me off the track, which ultimately brings it onto the track."



Altmaier stuns Zverev

AP ■ ACAPULCO (MEXICO)

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

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

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

OLYMPICS

Anju says Parul among ones to watch out for

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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

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

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



AP ■ SAN DIEGO

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

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

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

Liverpool injury list worsens

AP ■ LIVERPOOL (ENGLAND)

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

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

Haaland scores five goals in Man City 6-2 rout

AP ■ MANCHESTER

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

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



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

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

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

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

NEWCASTLE SURVIVES

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

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

LEICESTER ADVANCES

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

“There is so much competition coming his way -- IPL, he could also be in the T20 World Cup mix. Then we have some important Test series against New Zealand, and Australia later in the year.

UNLIKELY FOR DHARAMSALA TEST

The image consists of two side-by-side photographs. The left photograph shows a coach in an orange long-sleeved shirt and black pants with white stripes on the side, using a blue resistance band to assist a player in a lunge stretch. The player is wearing an orange long-sleeved shirt with 'DREAM' written on it, black shorts, and an orange cap. The right photograph shows a player in a white cricket uniform with blue accents, clapping his hands. The player has a beard and is looking towards the left.

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

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