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Maldives suspends Ministers for Modi remark

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Taking exception to disparaging remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi by a Maldives Minister, the Maldivian Government on Sunday suspended three Ministers whose social media posts against India and Modi sparked a massive uproar.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs today issued a statement on the stand of the Government of India in relation to some posts on social media that are insulting to neighbouring India," the Maldives Government said in a statement.

A row erupted after Maldivian politicians, including Mariyam Shiuna, mocked Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to Lakshadweep.

"Those who made such posts on social media while in Government positions have now been suspended from their jobs," the statement said without revealing the names of those who have been suspended. According to local media, Ministers Mariyam Shiuna, Malsha and Hassan Zihan have been suspended.

Soon after India raised the issue with the island country, the Maldives Government distanced itself from the remarks and termed them as "personal opinion" of Minister Mariyam and said they do not represent the



views of the Maldives Government. It suspended the Ministers but not reveal their names.

Indian High Commissioner in Male took up the matter with the authorities there. Incidentally, these remarks came a day before President Mohamed Muizzu leaves for China on an official visit. Moreover, since he assumed the top job, ties between India and Maldives are strained.

As the objectionable remarks led to an uproar, the Maldives Government, in an earlier statement on Sunday, rejected the derogatory remarks made by the country's Minister against Modi stating that they do not represent the views of the Government.

"The Government of Maldives is aware of derogatory remarks on social

media platforms against foreign leaders and high-ranking individuals. These opinions are personal and do not represent the views of the Government of Maldives," the official statement read.

"The Government believes that freedom of expression should be exercised in a democratic and responsible manner, and in ways that do not spread hatred, negativity, and hinder close relationships between the Maldives and its international partners. Moreover, the relevant authorities of the Government will not hesitate to take action against those who make such derogatory remarks," it added.

Shiuna, Deputy Minister of Youth Empowerment in the Maldives, called Modi a 'clown' and 'puppet of Israel' in now-deleted posts on X. The tweets were taken down after backlash on the micro-blogging site. Another Maldivian leader and a member of the Progressive Party of Maldives Senate Zahid Rameez made comments ridiculing the beaches of Lakshadweep and raising doubts about whether the beach tourism services offered by it could compare with those provided the Maldives. "The move is great. However, the idea of competing with us is delusional. How can they provide the service we offer? How can they be so clean?"

Boycott Maldives trends on social media

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI/MUMBAI

Boycott Maldives started trending on several social media platforms on Sunday, with social media influencers and netizens joining an online campaign calling for a boycott of the Maldives and its tourist spots following certain disparaging remarks by a Maldivian Minister against India. In response, Indian celebrities, including budding legend Sachin Tendulkar and superstars Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, John Abraham, Shradha Kapoor, and Madhur Bhandarkar, have come forward to champion the cause of Lakshadweep. They urged fellow citizens to visit the islands and showcased the diverse and enchanting beauty of the Indian Islands.

The diplomatic row ignited when a Maldives Minister accused India of targeting the nation, claiming that India faced challenges in competing with the Maldives in beach tourism. In social media posts, Akshay, cricketer Hardik Pandya and veteran player

Venkatesh Prasad also urged people to support the Indian tourism sector as they condemned the comments by Maldivian Ministers on social media that have triggered a row with internet users pitting Lakshadweep and Maldives as rival tourist destinations. Filmmaker Madhur Bhandarkar and actors John Abraham, Kangana Ranaut, and Randeep Hooda were also among some of the Indian film personalities to promote Lakshadweep through social media. Ranaut called Lakshadweep an "almost untouched, unexplored and unexploited natural island". Tendulkar also joined the campaign, reminiscing about his recent experience in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg. "250+ days since we rang in my 50th birthday in Sindhudurg! The coastal town offered everything we wanted, and more. Gorgeous locations combined with wonderful hospitality left us with a treasure trove of memories. India is blessed with beautiful coastlines and pristine islands."

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Maldives former President condemns

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Former President of Maldives Mohamed Nasheed slammed the Maldives Government official Mariyam Shiuna for her derogatory comments against Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his visit to Lakshadweep.

Nasheed termed the remarks as "appalling." Condemning Shiuna's remarks, Nasheed asked



President Mohamed Muizzu to tell the world that the comments by the Ministers "do not reflect Government policy".

"What appalling language by Maldives Government official Mariyam towards the leader of a key ally, that is instrumental for Maldives' security and prosperity."

"The Mohamed Muizzu Government must distance itself from these

comments and give clear assurance to India they do not reflect Gov policy," Nasheed said in a post on X. He was elected President in 2008, but resigned in 2012 after what he called a coup engineered by his rivals.

The Minister's social media posts about Modi's recent visit to Lakshadweep Islands, India's smallest Union Territory, aimed at promoting tourism on the island, triggered an uproar in India.

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Counting begins as Opposition boycotts polls in Bangladesh

PTI ■ DHAKA

Counting of votes started on Sunday after the polling ended in Bangladesh's general elections marred by sporadic violence and a boycott by the main Opposition BNP and its allies, paving the way for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to secure a record fourth straight term.

According to the initial estimates, the voter turnout was around 40 per cent but the figure could change after the final count, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibur Awal said.

An hour before the voting ended, the election commission had said that the voter turnout was 27.15 per cent at 3 pm. The 2018 general election recorded an overall turnout of more than 80 per cent.

"The voting ended at 4 pm and the counting has started," an election commission spokesman said, adding that the results were expected by early Monday.

He said other than some sporadic incidents of violence, the voting was largely peaceful in 299 of the 300 constituencies. The Commission suspended polling in one seat because of the death of a candidate.

The early results show that Awami League is leading the electoral race. So far, unofficially, Awami League has won in 10 constituencies, the Dhaka Tribune newspaper reported.

Bengal cops file FIR against ED officers attacked by TMC goons

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In a classic example of the 'persecuted being prosecuted' and in apparent eagerness to please its Trinamool Congress masters, the Bengal Police has filed First Information Reports against the Enforcement Directorate officials. These officials were probing the multi-crore ration scam and had, on Friday, raided the premises of TMC strongman Sahjehan Sheikh being attacked, injured, and chased away by more than a thousand of his supporters. The FIRs were filed on the basis of complaints of alleged "criminal trespass" lodged by the TMC leader's supporters against the ED officials and the Central armed police force personnel escorting them. In all three FIRs have been lodged. While the first one has been lodged against the ED-CAPF officials two other FIRs have been lodged against unknown persons, police officials said.

It has been alleged in the complaint that the ED officials "attempted to force their way" into Sahjehan's residence "without showing any search warrant and in violation of the law", said police sources. The FIR was registered under Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections 441 (criminal trespass), 379 (intention to commit theft) and 354 (outraging a woman's modesty).

The other two FIRs were filed under IPC sections 147, 148, 149 (rioting) and 353 (assault on public servants). However none has been named in the two other FIRs.

The Friday's attack on on-duty ED had created national headlines when about one thousand five hundred



people armed with sticks, bamboos and brickbats and other deadly weapons attacked the ED men when they were conducting raids at the Sandeshkhali residence of TMC district board member Sahjehan.

In a first of its kind attack on ED officials in the country their vehicles and those of the media men were badly damaged while the raiding officials, including the CAPF men, were badly beaten up by the TMC goons.

Meanwhile, even as the Centre mounted pressure on the State Government to act against the TMC leader considered a terror in an extensive belt of North and South 24 Parganas adjoining the Sunderbans and the international border with Bangladesh, Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose instructed the State Government and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee whom he referred to as "my constitutional colleague" to do the needful as he might have "crossed the border" by this time.

In an apparent indication of possible line of action of the Centre to the Friday's attack, the Governor also asked the police to find out whether there was any terror link to the attacks.

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Modi set to blow poll bugle in Bihar

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the consecration of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to kick off the BJP's Lok Sabha election campaign from Champaran in Bihar where he is scheduled to address a massive rally at Bada Raman Maidan, Bettiah on January 13.

Sources in the BJP said Bihar emerges as a crucial political battleground for the BJP, with plans for multiple visits by Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and party's national president JP Nadda.

The party aims at victory in all 40 Lok Sabha seats in the State. It has outlined a campaign strategy involving rallies and public engagements. During his visit, Modi would lay the foundation stones for various Government programmes and address the public.

Preparations are in full swing for the proposed rally of Modi at Bada Ramna Maidan, Bettiah.

Prior to his Bihar visit, Modi will visit Gujarat from January 8-10 during which he will hold bilateral meetings with world leaders, CEOs of top global corporations, and inaugurate the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit.

Following the Gujarat visit, Modi would head to Maharashtra on January 12, where he is scheduled to inaugurate the 27th National



Youth Festival, the Mumbai Trans Harbor Link and lay the foundation stone for various development projects in Navi Mumbai, demonstrating the BJP's commitment to infrastructure and youth engagement.

While the dates for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls haven't been announced yet, the ruling BJP has already begun preparations and made some key decisions. The recent Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Telangana, and Mizoram have set the precedent for the Lok Sabha elections.

According to Bihar BJP sources, the main projects to be inaugurated by the PM include NH-131A four lane Narenpur-Purnia, NH 327E four lane Araria-Galgaliya, NH-30 four lane Pararia-Mohaniya etc. Apart from this, the foundation stone laying ceremony of the six-lane bridge on river Ganga parallel to JP Setu, Parasarma-Saharsa-Mahishi, Chakia-Bairginia, Darbhanga-Jayanagar, Jamui, Shekhpura and Banka bypass is included in the projects to be laid.

The PM is scheduled to launch various projects worth ₹5,600

crore during his visit. Additionally, the deadline for completing 10 projects currently under construction in the State is set for this year. These projects consist of nine roads and one bridge, covering a total length of 585.75 km and incurring a cost of about ₹19,756 crore.

Bihar's political scenario has witnessed a shift, with the BJP in the Opposition and the JD(U) forming part of the 'M a h a g a t h b a n d h a n' Government. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has united Opposition leaders with the goal of defeating the BJP in the upcoming elections. The BJP aims to counter the transformed political landscape in Bihar, where the BJP is now in the Opposition. Setting a high target of more than 400 seats in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has decided new slogan, 'Teersi paar Modi Sarkar, ab ki baar 400 paar'.

Claiming that the aim to win over 400 Lok Sabha seats is not unrealistic but rather achievable, a BJP leader said in 2014, the BJP worked on "Mission 273+" and achieved it. Similarly, this time it will also achieve the target of 400 seats.

Among the initiatives, special attention is being given to 160 identified Lok Sabha seats across the country. The target is to strengthen the party at over one lakh polling booths.

India takes first leap into hygiene street food

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tourists and devotees thronging the Ujjain's Mahakaleswar Temple in Madhya Pradesh daily will now have the option to relish convenient and culturally healthy food at 'Prasadam,' the country's first healthy and hygienic food street located adjacent to the much revered Hindu temple.

The temple attracts over 1-1.5 lakh visitors daily from across the country.

The unique food hub at Shri Mahakal Lok was inaugurated on Sunday by the State's new Chief Minister Mohan Yadav at Shri Mahakal Lok in Ujjain. The

inauguration took place in the presence of Union Health and Family Welfare Minister, Dr. Mansukh Mandaviya, along with several officials from the FSSAI and the State Government.

Spread over an area of 939 square meters with a total of 19 shops, vendors at the 'Prasadam' food street will serve Ujjain cuisine to guests, including tourists, while keeping in mind the parameters of 'Eat Right', promoting healthy food.

The use of plastic, along with samosas, kachoris, and junk food, will be completely banned on this street. Among the food stalls open here, tourists will be able to enjoy



Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav at India's first healthy and hygienic food street, Prasadam, in Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh on Sunday

Malwa's famous Dal-Bati and Pohe-Jalebi, along with other local dishes. This area will be entirely plastic-free, and a mobile lab

will be stationed here to ascertain the quality of food items, as mentioned by an official from the Food Safety and Standard Authority of India (FSSAI).

It has been prepared at a cost of ₹1.75 crore and is designed to provide various facilities, including a kids' play area, drinking water facility, CCTV surveillance, parking, public conveniences, and seating spaces.

"Special care will be taken of cleanliness while preparing street food here. A hub of street food will be created in Prasadam, where the devotees coming to visit Lord Mahakaleswar can enjoy the local cuisine of Ujjain."

"Special attention will be given to all the parameters under Eat Right Food here under the supervision of the FSSAI and Ujjain Smart city,"

said the official.

"The Prasadam will start at the premises above the smart vehicle parking located near Neelkanth Forest. Various types of stalls will be set up for Prasadam," he said.

In addition to enhancing Ujjain's tourism appeal and preserving its culinary traditions, the Government feels that the "Prasadam" will also contribute to economic growth and community engagement.

In the coming days, every city will have its own food street ensuring healthy food reaches to all across the nation, said Dr Mandaviya on the occasion.

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Schools vacation extended in Delhi amid chilling weather

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

As a bitter cold continues to grip the National Capital Region, sending shivers down spines and shrouding the cities in dense fog, the Arvind Kejriwal Government on Sunday announced that schools in Delhi will remain closed for the next five days for students from nursery to Class V due to the prevailing cold weather conditions.

The maximum temperature in Delhi was recorded of 18.8 degrees Celsius while the minimum temperature settled at 8.2 degrees Celsius, a notch above the season's average,

and the humidity level recorded at 5.30 pm was 71 per cent, it said.

The maximum temperature was recorded of 15.3 degree Celsius in Jafarpur, 15.5 in CDO Ghaziabad, 15.9 in SPS Mayur Vihar, 16 degree Celsius in Palam, 16.4 in Narela, 16.7 in NCMRWF Noida, 17.6 in Lodhi Road, 17.2 in Ridge and 17.1 in Anaganar.

The whole of North India has been facing severe cold and so is New Delhi; where the maximum and minimum temperatures have plunged way below normal.

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Saree weavers upbeat as Ram Mandir themed sarees orders pour in

PTI ■ VARANASI

Banarasi sarees on the theme of 'Ram Mandir' are set to make a fashion statement with weavers here working on beautiful drapes ahead of the Ram temple consecration ceremony this month.

The weavers have received customised orders for various patterns on the sarees, including Ram Mandir motifs on the pallu, designs detailing life of Lord Ram right from his childhood to killing Ravana, and 'Shree Ram' inscriptions on the border.

The first phase of the temple is nearing completion and Prime Minister Narendra Modi

will take part in the consecration ceremony on January 22. The Supreme Court delivered a historic verdict in 2019, settling a temple-mosque dispute that went over a century back. The court backed the construction of the Ram temple at the disputed site and ruled that an alternative five-acre plot must be found for building a mosque.

As Ayodhya decks up for the 'pran pratishtha' (consecration) at the Ram Mandir, artisans across the country are expressing their enthusiasm for the temple opening through unique creations.

Anisur Rahman, a weaver from the Mubarakpur area

here said there is huge excitement among Varanasi's weaver community for the grand event.

"Sarees with detailing work and motifs about historical features have always been in great demand but the sentiment towards the Ram temple is completely different," Rahman told PTI.

"We are preparing sarees on the Ram Mandir theme and these will be soon be part of the fashion statement. We have orders from different parts of the country from women who want to celebrate January 22 at their respective places wearing these sarees," he said.

Explaining the types of sarees



being designed on the theme of Ram temple, Rahman said, "One type of sarees have an inscription of Ram temple on

the pallu; these sarees are being made in red and yellow colour and the inscription is in shade of golden. The second kind of sarees are available in multiple colours and they have a border with 'Shree Ram' written throughout."

"The third type of sarees are the most detailed one which depict the different phases of Lord Ram's life right from his childhood to killing of Ravana," he added.

Madan, another weaver from the Peeli Kothi area here, said the sarees with depiction of 'Ram Darbar' on the pallu are also in great demand.

"We have two orders from the US as well for the Ram Mandir-

themed sarees," said Madan. The price of these sarees start from Rs 7,000 and go up to Rs 1 lakh.

Renowned for its exemplary workmanship, Banarasi silk weaves are a treasured handloom for women across all generations. Woven with immaculate artistry and nostalgic narratives, the culture of the land is mirrored in its royal brocades, resplendent motifs and rich hues.

"Over the years, the weaving ecosystem of Banarasi has been subject to the influence of myriad cultures and traditions, and in due course of time developed a unique design language that is admired far and

wide," said Madan. "The brocades of Banarasi revolve around its detailed motifs that define the very essence of this drape. Artisans and weavers draw inspiration from the landscape surrounding them and bring to life motifs synonymous with various themes," he added.

During his visit to Ayodhya on December 30, 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said the whole world is waiting for the historic Ram temple consecration ceremony and appealed to people to light special diyas -- Shri Ram Jyoti -- in their homes to celebrate the day of 'pran pratishtha' at Ram temple.

J&K former deputy CM Baig rejoins PDP

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

In a sudden turn of events which is set to change the power matrix in Jammu and Kashmir in the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls, former Deputy Chief Minister Muzaffar Hussain Baig Sunday rejoined the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) on the occasion of the eighth death anniversary of party founder Mufti Mohd Sayeed.

Baig returned to the party fold along with his wife Safina Baig, former Chairperson of District Development Council, Baramulla in the presence of party Chief and former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti after a gap of more than two years.

Baig left the party as differences grew between him and the PDP Chief after the Abrogation of Article 370. He later joined the bandwagon of Peoples Conference Chief Sajad Lone but was expelled after a gap of a few months.

As per the latest political



grapevine in Kashmir valley, several other PDP leaders are expected to return to the party fold in the coming months. Before Baig's homecoming PDP Chief Mehbooba Mufti reportedly faced tough resistance from within the ranks of the party. A section of the party leadership had openly opposed his reentry into the party fold as they labeled him as an 'opportunist' who jumped the party ship while it was sinking rather than steering it through

still associated with the party. The relation between me and PDP is like a single soul," Baig said.

Replying to a query, he said a person cannot set a house on fire which he had built himself. Paying rich tributes to Late Mufti Mohammad Sayeed on his 8th death anniversary at his grave in Dara Shikoh park, Baig said he is missing the PDP founder like a son misses his father.

When asked about his possible election of Lok Sabha candidate from north Kashmir, Baig replied that it is upon party leadership who will decide and take a call on it.

On the occasion, Party President and former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti urged party workers and supporters not to lose hope in the face of challenges. She emphasized the importance of continuing the struggle for dignified peace through the values and vision set forth by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed.

BJP, TMC two sides of same coin: CPI (M)

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The CPI(M) on Sunday renewed its attack on the BJP and the Trinamool Congress asking the people of Bengal to remain alert against their "joint venture politics."

Addressing a massive rally at the historic Brigade Parade Ground --- organized by the party's youth wing Democratic Youth Federation of India --- in Kolkata CPI(M) politburo member and State secretary Md Salim said that both Mamata Banerjee and Narendra Modi were hands-in-gloves which got exposed when she was "specially invited for dinner by the Centre in the G20 meeting."

The rally apparently considered as a Marxist measure to launch the CPI(M)'s rising face Meenakshi Mukherjee considered a speaker par excellence as the "captain" of the party in the coming elections saw both Salim and



Mukherjee going all guns blazing even as the former referred to a Calcutta High Court judge's recent remarks that TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee's wealth had started increasing post 2013. The rally was held at the end of a 50-day-long Insaaf Yatra covering about 2,900 km by the DYFI workers led by Mukherjee. "Even the High Court observed how the TMC leader's wealth skyrocketed after 2013 ... and remember who has been in power in the

Centre from 2014 till now ... so it is clear that in the patronage of the BJP-led Centre the TMC leader's made their ill-gotten money that runs into thousands of crores in Bengal," Salim said adding how "the tainted TMC leaders like Suwendu Adhikari were taking shelter in the BJP".

Both the TMC and BJP were the two complementary weapons prepared by the RSS, he said.

Laying stress on a "hidden BJP-TMC camaraderie" Salim said how Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee who "...never attends the Niti Ayog meetings rushed to Delhi to attend G20 dinner neither Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge whose name she proposed as PM candidate nor Opposition Leader Adhir Chowdhury were invited by the Government ... and quite coolly only the TMC's disposable leaders are being

arrested and jailed while the Chief Minister's family members are spared by the central agencies."

Attacking the Centre in her part, Meenakshi Mukherjee -- often called by critics as Left's answer to Mamata Banerjee --- said, "this is a government which is silently selling out the BSNL, the Indian Railways ... water bodies, lands and many other government industries painstakingly created for years by public money ... they promised job but failed to create them and crores of youth are unemployed

"The TMC here is looting the common people through its scams ... they are stealing land, stone, sand, coal, cattle and even teachers' jobs ... and when it comes to elections these two parties try to communally polarize the atmosphere by playing religion card ... the youth will have to be cautious about their game-plan."

Disrupted sleep in 30s, 40s can cause memory, thinking problems decade later: Study

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

People who have more disrupted sleep in their 30s and 40s may be more likely to have memory and thinking problems a decade later, according to new research published in the online issue of Neurology, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

The study, however, does not prove that sleep quality causes cognitive decline. It only shows an association.

"Given that signs of Alzheimer's disease start to accumulate in the brain several decades before symptoms begin, understanding the connection between sleep and cognition earlier in life is critical for understanding the role of sleep problems as a risk factor for the disease," said study author Yue Leng, from the University of California, San Francisco.

"Our findings indicate that the quality rather than the quantity of sleep matters most for cognitive health in middle age."

The study involved 526 people with an average age of 40. They were followed for 11 years.

Researchers looked at participants' sleep duration and quality. Participants wore a wrist activity monitor for



three consecutive days on two occasions approximately one year apart to calculate their averages. Participants slept for an average of six hours.

Participants also reported bedtimes and wake times in a sleep diary and completed a sleep quality survey with scores ranging from zero to 21, with higher scores indicating poorer sleep quality. A total of 239 people, or 46%, reported poor sleep with a score greater than five. Participants also completed a series of memory and thinking tests.

Researchers also looked at sleep fragmentation, which measures repetitive short interruptions of sleep. They looked at both the percentage of time spent moving and the percentage of time spent not moving for one minute or less during sleep. After adding these two percentages together, researchers found that participants had an average sleep fragmentation of 19%.

Urine test after inhaling nano sensors could diagnose lung cancer

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Diagnosing lung cancer could become as easy as inhaling nanoparticle sensors and then taking a urine test that reveals whether a tumor is present, according to an Indian-origin engineer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US.

The new diagnostic is based on nanosensors that can be delivered by an inhaler or a nebulizer. If the sensors encounter cancer-linked proteins in the lungs, they produce a signal that accumulates in the urine, where it can be detected with

a simple paper test strip. This approach could potentially replace or supplement the current gold standard for diagnosing lung cancer, low-dose computed tomography (CT). It could have an especially significant impact in low- and middle-income countries that don't have widespread availability of CT scanners, according to the research published in the journal Science Advances.

"Around the world, cancer is going to become more and more prevalent in low- and middle-income countries. The epidemiology of lung cancer globally is that it's driven by pollution and smoking, so we



know that those are settings where accessibility to this kind of technology could have a big impact," said Sangeeta Bhatia, Professor of Health Sciences and Technology of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at MIT. "We were pushing this assay to be point-of-care available in a

low-resource setting, so the idea was to not do any sample processing, not do any amplification, just to be able to put the sample right on the paper and read it out in 20 minutes," Bhatia said.

The researchers tested their diagnostic system in mice that are genetically engineered to develop lung tumors similar to those seen in humans.

The sensors were administered 7.5 weeks after the tumors started to form, a time point that would likely correlate with stage 1 or 2 cancer in humans. In their first set of experiments in the mice, the researchers measured the levels of 20 dif-

ferent sensors designed to detect different proteases. Using a machine learning algorithm to analyse those results, the researchers identified a combination of just four sensors that were predicted to give accurate diagnostic results. They then tested that combination in the mouse model and found that it could accurately detect early-stage lung tumors.

For use in humans, more sensors might be needed to make an accurate diagnosis, but that could be achieved by using multiple paper strips, each of which detects four different DNA barcodes, the researchers said.

Modi rule better than past Governments, says former editor of Malayalam daily

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

A highly venerated former editor of a Malayalam newspaper, who has been a known critic of Sangh Parivar and the BJP has waxed eloquent on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

P Rajan, the octogenarian journalist and former editor of Mathrubhumi has said that the last nine years of Modi rule has been far better than any other governments which had ruled the country since independence.

"Even if someone complains that the reigning government has close affinity with Hindutva, there is nothing abnormal in it. It is quite natural for the Government at Centre to have its mirror image. This government will have same image as that of Hindutva," Rajan told C K Anandan Pillai, chief editor,

Sahitya Vimarsam, a widely respected literary journal in Malayalam language.

Rajan termed the allegations made by some section that the media is under censorship as hogwash. "During the Internal Emergency of 1975-77, the then Government had annulled and cancelled the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. Since those opposing Modi do not have anything to point out against him, they allege that there is an undeclared emergency in the country. This allegation is also non-sense. The media is publishing charges and allegations against the government without any fear," said Rajan, who was the first journalist in the State to be arrested for criticizing Indira Gandhi when she declared the internal emergency.

Maldives suspends...

From Page 1

The permanent smell in the rooms will be the biggest downfall," Rameez wrote on X.

These comments led to a furore with several social media posts claiming that over 8,000 hotel bookings, as well as 2,500 flight tickets to the Maldives were cancelled. India-Maldives ties in the past few months have been strained, after President Mohamed Muizzu came to power. Muizzu took over as President in November 2023. In his election pledge, he said he would remove a small contingent of some 75 Indian military personnel in his island nation and change Maldives' "India first" policy. Seen as a pro-China politician, Muizzu had defeated his India-friendly predecessor Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the presidential run-off held in September.

Muizzu is scheduled to visit China on Monday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement. Chinese President Xi Jinping invited him, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said on Friday.

"China and the Maldives boast time-honoured friendship. In the past 52 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties, the two countries have treated each other with respect and supported each other, setting a fine example of equality and mutual benefits between countries of different sizes," said Wang Wenbin, another spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry, according to news agency PTI.

Schools vacation extended...

From Page 1

The difference between the maximum and the minimum temperature was over 10 degree Celsius, which led to bitter cold in the national capital.

Delhi Education Minister Atishi made the announcement. This decision comes hours after the Delhi Government retracted an order on the extension of winter vacation in schools within the national Capital.

The Directorate of Education acknowledged the mistake in issuing the directive and promptly withdrew it. The department clarified that a decision on the matter would be made the following morning.

Taking note of biting cold conditions, Atishi announced that schools in Delhi will remain closed for the next five days for students from nursery to Class 5. "Winter vacation in city schools has been extended till January 12 for primary class students in view of cold wave conditions, Delhi Education Minister Atishi said on Sunday. Schools were earlier slated to resume on Monday after the winter break.

"Schools in Delhi will remain closed for the next 5 days due to the prevailing cold weather conditions, for students from Nursery to Class 5," Atishi said on X. Earlier on Saturday, the directorate stated that the winter vacation in all government and private schools in the national capital has been extended till January 10 due to cold weather conditions.

Bengal cops file FIR against...

From Page 1

His statement tended to be in sync with Bengal Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari who earlier demanded a probe by National Investigation Agency.

A Raj Bhavaan statement said "on receipt of a complaint in the Peace Room of Raj Bhavan that Shahjehan Sheikh is supported by some political leaders with the connivance of some police officers, Hon'ble Governor instructed the Police chief to arrest the culprit forthwith and report compliance."

The TMC however sharply criticized the Governor's remarks saying Sahjehan was a politician and not a terrorist. Reacting to Bose's

statements TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh wondered "how and on what basis he can make such statements ... the Governor should work in consultation with the State Government. So how can he make such remarks without any concrete report or evidence? Should we assume that he running a parallel government?"

Meanwhile, the police tended to have no clue on the whereabouts of Sahjehan while local sources from the Sandeshkhali said that the TMC strongman might not have been able to cross over to Bangladesh because the border was presently sealed because of the general elections being conducted in that country. "He tried to cross over to

Bangladesh but failed to do so and so he presently shuttling between North and South 24 Parganas with four private armed security men ... perhaps a boat has been kept ready for him to move into the deeper areas of the Sunderbans," a villager at Sarberia said while Sahjehan's brother Alamgir said that his brother was a law abiding citizen and would "definitely act as per law".

He also said that "my brother is being falsely fabricated in this case ... he was nowhere in the scene ... there is no photograph or any other proof of who or whether Sahjehan's men were attacking the ED vehicles ... this is a simple torture on the opposition politicians."

Boycott Maldives trend...

From Page 1

"With our 'Atithi Devo Bhava' philosophy, we have so much to explore, so many memories waiting to be created," Tendulkar wrote.

In a social media post, Salman Khan said it was "cool" to see Modi enjoy the clean and stunning beaches of Lakshadweep. "... And the best part is that yeh hamare India mein hain," the "Tiger 3" star wrote.

Cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar said he rang in his 50th birthday in Sindhudurg and the coastal town in Maharashtra offered everything "we wanted, and more".

India takes first leap into...

From Page 1

He also commended the development of infrastructure and facilities near food streets including training and capacity building of street food vendors on food safety and hygiene. Dr Mohan Yadav said that "the Food Street will serve to ensure that healthy and clean food will be available to all in an engaging manner contributing to a healthy nation."

The opening of 'Prasadam Street' is part of the Union Ministries of Health and Housing and Urban Affairs project aiming to encourage safe and healthy practices among food businesses and reducing foodborne illnesses

and improving overall health outcomes.

Last April, the Ministries had jointly written to the States and Union Territories to develop 100 food streets in 100 districts across the country as it has been felt that with rapid urbanisation, while these hubs have led to easy access to food, it has aggravated food contamination and associated health issues due to unhygienic and unsafe practices.

But it was also considered that these hubs not only provide a daily diet at affordable prices to millions but also direct employment to a large number of people while supporting the tourism

industry. On the occasion, the Union Health Minister also launched the official website for the Healthy and Hygienic Food Street Initiative and released a brochure outlining the Standard Operating Procedure for Healthy & Hygienic Food Streets.

The FSSAI, on its part, to empower consumers to tackle food adulteration released "The DART Book" to check common food adulterations at home with simple tests. Additionally, a mobile food testing van called Food Safety on Wheels (FSW) was launched to reach remote areas and conduct training and awareness activities, traveling from city to village to promote awareness

campaigns and adulteration testing," said the official.

Earlier on the occasion, Dr Yadav and Dr Mandaviya along with other public representatives performed bhoomi pujan and inaugurated a string of works, 187 works to be precise worth Rs 218.76 crore. This included the foundation laying ceremony of 36 health projects such as two Public Health Unit blocks, 54 Sanjeevani health clinics, and three integrated public health labs, an emergency Covid response package including 30 beds and wards, three community health centers among others envisaging Rs 118.07 crore project cost among others.

Ram temple consecration to be broadcast live in city temples: BJP

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The live broadcast of the January 22 consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya will be screened at around 14,000 temples across the national capital, the Delhi BJP's temple cell chairman Karnail Singh said on Sunday. Singh said that around 200 people will be present at each temple to watch the ceremony live. Nearly 30 lakh people in total are expected to attend the screening across the temples in the city, he added. The BJP leader said 1.08 lakh diyas will be lit at the Khatu Shyam temple on the Delhi-Karnal road on January 20 and a bike rally taken out by temple priests on January 17 as part of celebrations to mark the historic event of 'praan pratishtha' at the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Over 14,000 temple priests are



visiting households across Delhi to distribute 'akshata' (uncooked grains of rice) to people and invite them to

watch the consecration ceremony live at nearby temples on January 22. Also, around 1,000 unipole

hoardings have been booked to spread awareness about the 'praan pratishtha' ceremony, the BJP leader said.

Rise in per capita income: CM lauds efforts of Delhiites, city Government

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday credited the increase in Delhi's per capita income to the hard work and joint efforts of two crore Delhiites and the city government.

Delhi's per capita income increased from Rs 3,89,529 to Rs 4,44,768 in the current financial year, which is 158 per cent higher than the national average, the Kejriwal government said on the release of its Statistical Handbook-2023 on Saturday. The handbook containing data on socio-economic parameters of the national capital was released by the Economic and Statistics department of the Delhi government.

Kejriwal said much more needs to be done by the government.

"This is a huge increase in per capita income in any state in any single year. It has been achieved by the hard work of



2 cr Delhiites and Del govt working together day and night. Many innovative and forward looking steps have been taken in last nine years. But much more needs to be done. Miles to go before I sleep!" he said in a post on X.

Despite various obstacles, the Kejriwal government has established new benchmarks in the public services sector in 2023, Planning Department Minister Atishi said on the release of the statistical handbook.

ANKIT MURDER CASE

Court convicts friend parents, maternal uncle

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Nearly six years after the murder of 23-year-old photographer Ankit Saxena in the Khyala area here, a court has convicted three people, including the parents and maternal uncle of Saxena's female friend, in the case.

The court posted the matter for hearing the arguments on sentencing on January 15.

In the sensational case that shook the national capital on February 1, 2018, Saxena was stabbed to death in broad daylight by the family members of his woman friend with whom he was in a relationship for three years. The woman's family had opposed her relationship with Ankit as the two belonged to different communities. Additional Sessions Judge Sunil Kumar Sharma convicted the

parents Akbar Ali and Shahna Begum and the maternal uncle Mohammad Salim of the offences under Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections 302 (murder) and 34 (common intention). Begum was also convicted of the charge of voluntarily causing hurt.

"It can be safely concluded that the prosecution has proved its case beyond reasonable doubts against all the accused persons that (they) in furtherance of their common intention had committed the murder of deceased Ankit Saxena. Therefore, all the accused persons stand convicted for the charge of the offence punishable under Section 302 and 34 of the IPC," the court said. In a 121-page judgement pronounced on December 23, the court also convicted Begum for the charge of voluntarily causing hurt, saying the prosecution established that the accused assaulted the deceased's mother, when she tried to protect her son. It also accepted the prosecution's version regarding motive for the murder that the family members were "unhappy with the friendship or relationship between their daughter and the deceased".

The court said it was established that because of the friendship, the family members changed their residence but when that also failed to end their relationship, "on February 1, 2018, all the accused persons in furtherance of their common intention slit the throat of the deceased with a knife".

22 Delhi bound trains delayed due to weather



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Twenty-two Delhi-bound trains were delayed by up to six hours on Sunday due to weather-related conditions in the national Capital, which recorded a minimum temperature of 8.2 degrees Celsius, one notch above the season's average. According to the India Meteorological Department, humidity level recorded at 8.30 am was 79 per cent. The IMD said there will be shallow to moderate fog in the coming week, with the possibility of a cloudy sky and light rains on January 9. According to the railways, 22

Delhi-bound trains were delayed by one to six hours due to weather-related conditions in Delhi and different states.

The IMD has forecast a mainly clear sky on Sunday with shallow fog in the morning.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) was recorded at 341 'very poor' at 10 am, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

An AQI between zero and 50 is considered 'good', 51 and 100 'satisfactory', 101 and 200 'moderate', 201 and 300 'poor', 301 and 400 'very poor', and 401 and 500 'severe'.

Health experts warn against rising heart attacks, eye related complications in winter

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

As winter tightens its grip, health experts have expressed concerns about heightened risks of heart attacks and also stressed the importance of preventive eye care during the colder months. With recent studies too showing a notable rise in heart attack rates during the winter season, the experts said chilling temperatures and unique seasonal factors contribute to an increased susceptibility to cardiovascular issues and eye-related complications.

Cold weather constricts blood vessels and increases blood pressure, potentially triggering heart attacks, particularly in people with pre-existing cardiovascular conditions, the doctors said. They advised the public to remain vigilant about heart health during the winter by maintaining regular exercise, a heart-healthy diet and staying adequately warm. Senior consultant interventional cardiologist at the Ujala Cygnus Group of Hospitals Dr Vijay Kumar said, "It is imperative to address the heightened risk of heart attacks during the



winter season, a phenomenon attributed to a confluence of environmental factors." "The surge in pollution levels during this time not only triggers inflammation but also intensifies respiratory challenges for those with pre-existing conditions such as asthma and smokers," he added. Additionally, Dr Kumar said, the plummeting temperatures burden the heart, necessitating increased effort and making

individuals more susceptible to cardiac events. Consultant cardiologist at Kanpur's Regency Hospital Dr Abhinav Gupta said the constriction of blood vessels in colder weather poses a significant threat particularly for hypertensive patients, amplifying the likelihood of debilitating brain strokes. "Disturbingly, data reveals a higher mortality rate post heart attacks in winters as compared

to those occurring in the summer months," he said. "However, there is hope in adopting proactive lifestyle measures to counteract these risks. Regular exercise, moderate eating habits and proper hydration with lukewarm water can play a pivotal role in mitigating the vulnerabilities associated with winter-induced heart attacks," Dr Gupta added. "As we navigate the colder

months, individuals must prioritise their cardiovascular health through these practical steps, empowering themselves to weather the seasonal challenges with resilience and well-being," he further said.

Global non-profit organisation Orbis International's country director Dr Rishi Raj Borah emphasised the significance of eye care during winter. Orbis is dedicated to preventing and treating avoidable blindness. The winter months present distinctive challenges to maintaining optimal eye health as dry air, indoor heating and exposure to harsh winds can lead to dry eyes, irritation, and even more severe conditions, he said.

"Preventive measures such as staying hydrated, using artificial tears and protecting the eyes from harsh weather conditions are crucial to preserving optimal eye health during this season," Dr Borah added. According to the experts, regular health check-ups, adherence to a heart-healthy lifestyle and proactive eye care can make a significant difference in preventing health complications associated with the winter season.

Pathak, Atishi, Bharadwaj to represent AAP in seat sharing talks of INDIA Bloc

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak and Delhi cabinet ministers Atishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj will participate in the INDIA bloc meeting on Monday to discuss seat sharing, party sources said.

According to party sources, the INDIA bloc will meet in Delhi on Monday to discuss seat sharing. "Pathak, Atishi and Bharadwaj will attend the meeting on behalf of

AAP," the source said. The AAP and Congress have to work out a seat-sharing formula in Delhi and Punjab where the Arvind Kejriwal-led party is in power.

In Punjab, the state units of both AAP and Congress are confident of their victory and do not wish to hold any arrangement.

AAP sources had earlier ruled out the possibility of an alliance with Congress in Punjab. After extensive internal con-

sultations, the Congress has begun seat-sharing talks in some states with like-minded parties of the INDIA bloc for Lok Sabha elections.

Formal negotiations for seat-sharing with Aam Aadmi Party in Punjab and Delhi will begin on Monday, sources said.

The seat-sharing talks with other parties come after the 28-party opposition INDIA grouping decided to unitedly take on the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Atishi, Bharadwaj doing no administrative work: Sachdeva



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva said that Ministers Saurabh Bhardwaj & Atishi are doing no administrative work and have become spokesperson for defending corruption & scams of Arvind Kejriwal government. Sachdeva has said that Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj's allegation that Delhi government officials are not working under the pressure of Centre Government is just a part of his every day diatribe against the Centre Government. Delhi BJP President said that the Kejriwal government expects the officials to accept their unlawful diktats and allow corruption as they managed to do between 2015 to 2021.

After the revelation of Kejriwal Government's scams & other corruption deeds the officials of Delhi Government want to run the administration & take every administrative as per the framed rules & regulations which does not suit the Chief Minister & Ministers and so they keep accusing the officials of being under Centre or Lt. Governor's pressure.

Woman kills husband with hammer in Noida



PTI ■ NOIDA

A woman, accused of bludgeoning her husband to death, was arrested near Noida on Sunday, police said. The incident took place in Roza Jalapur village under the Bisrakh police station area, they said.

Accused Parvati is in her early 20s while her husband, who worked as a mason, was in his late 20s, officials said. "On Sunday, a relative of the couple alerted the local police about the incident after which the accused was taken into custody," a police spokesperson said.

"The couple had a heated argument and a fight over their personal issues after which the accused hit her husband with a hammer on his head. He was taken to a local hospital but did not survive," the spokesperson said.

The police said they have recovered the hammer and an FIR has been lodged at the local Bisrakh police station. Further legal proceedings in the case are underway, the police added.

NDMC to hire advisor for development of parking areas

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The New Delhi Municipal Council is looking to hire a financial advisor for assessment in the development of parking facilities in the Lutyens' Delhi on a public-private partnership basis, the civic body said in a statement. The NDMC has floated a proposal for the exercise and has identified 51 locations for development of parking facilities.

The places include the Rail Museum, Claridges Hotel, Thapar House, Yashwant Place, Palika Place, Khan Market.

"There are several problem areas in manually-managed parking facilities that are direct consequences of poor permit management. Using smart parking solutions promises to optimise permit management for NDMC which is a highly sensitive area," an official said.

Smart Parking solves inconsistencies in parking collection, improper usage of all parking spaces, overcrowding and chaos in public places, poor handling of overtime parking and other violations, he said.

"Since this is affecting revenue of NDMC, so, a proper survey of the area on in-coming and out-going of vehicles for the purpose of providing parking facilities to commuters by keeping an eye on security of the area vis-a-vis various advisories issued by authorities, advice of good qualified, technically sound and experienced advisors or advisory firms are required," he added.

The NDMC will contribute land and the cost of development will have to be borne by the concessionaire.



According to the release, the concessionaire will also be responsible for O & M of projects during the concession period. The revenue from the parking facilities would be shared between concessionaire and NDMC in a predefined manner, the person said.

Explaining the job of the consultant, the official said that the consultant will be required to visit these sites to consolidate details on shortlisted parameters for the parking facilities developed by NDMC. The job will also entail assessment of the current parking inventory - public on-street and off-street parking locations, typically places afflicted with unauthorised parking and violation by all types of vehicles.

According to the documents, the consultant will have to "assess current parking demand, with appropriate surveys including peak hour occupancy, willingness to pay and parking capacity."

"Surveys should cover parameters such as type, location, timing, turn-around, user charges etc," the document said. The transaction advisor will also undertake studies with respect to parking technology and PPP models to suggest NDMC with innovative measures for the monetisation of parking facilities.

"Undertake gap assessment to quantify the shortage in parking facilities basis demand and supply. Assess future parking demand considering multiple factors of transition in the city. Support NDMC with identification of additional land parcels suitable for development of parking facilities to meet the parking demand," read the document.

The consultant would also have to suggest feasible technological interventions to improve user experience and maximise revenue. Subsequently, the consultant will prepare the Bid Documentation for selection of the Developer/Concessionaire for the project on selected PPP mode.

CP smog tower shut again, this time over non payment of salaries

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The staff operating the smog tower at Connaught Place here shut it down on Sunday over alleged non-payment of their salaries, according to sources.

However, an official of the Delhi government said that the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) in December sanctioned funds to the project management consultant, NBCC (India) Limited, for the payment of salaries to the staff of Tata Projects Limited (TPL), who operate the smog tower.

"The staff of Tata Projects Limited raised concerns about delayed salary payments, and the Delhi government cleared the dues in December. The NBCC, responsible for disbursing funds to Tata Projects Limited, failed to do so due to non-submission of utilisation certificates," the source said. Sources said the DPCC will hold a meeting with the NBCC

and TPL regarding the issue on Wednesday.

In 2021, two smog towers were installed in Delhi - one at Connaught Place under the DPCC and another at Anand Vihar under the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) - following directives from the Supreme Court. The smog tower at Connaught Place was temporarily shut down based on unilateral directions from the chairman of the DPCC, Delhi Environment Minister Gopal Rai had claimed earlier. It was restarted in November following orders from the apex court.

According to the CPCB data, during the 2021-22 winter season, the smog tower at Anand Vihar reduced PM2.5 concentration by up to 17 per cent and PM10 levels by up to 27 per cent within a 100-metre radius. Last year, the Delhi government said that the Connaught Place smog tower could

decrease air pollution by 70 to 80 per cent within a 50-metre radius and by 15 to 20 per cent up to 300-metre radius. In November, the DPCC informed the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that the two experimental smog towers in the city were ineffective in reducing air pollution. The operation of these costly giant air purifiers lacks merit, according to a report submitted to the NGT by the pollution control body. Nadita Moitra, a senior scientist at the DPCC, said in the report that the Rs 25-crore smog tower at Connaught Place, operational for two years, can only mitigate air pollution by up to 17 per cent within a 100-metre radius. Considering Delhi's vast area of 1,483 square kilometres, the pollution control body highlighted the need for more than 47,000 such towers, each costing Rs 25 crore for installation and requiring Rs 15 lakh monthly for operation and maintenance.

India records 756 new Covid cases

PNS ■ NEW DELHI
India has recorded 756 new cases of Covid, while the number of active cases of the infection stood at 4,049, the health ministry said on Sunday. Five deaths -- two each from Kerala and Maharashtra and one from Jammu and Kashmir -- have been reported in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8 am. The number of daily cases had dropped to double-digits till December 5, 2023 but cases began to again increase after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions. After December 5, a maximum increase in single day cases was reported on December 31, 2023 when 841 cases were reported, official sources said. Of the total active cases, a large majority of these (around 92 per cent) are recovering under home isolation.



"The currently available data suggests that the JN.1 variant is neither leading to an exponential rise in the new cases nor a surge in hospitalisation and mortality," the sources stated. India has witnessed three waves of COVID-19 in the past with the peak incidence of daily new cases and deaths being reported during the Delta wave in April-June 2021. At its peak, 4,14,188 new cases and 3,915 deaths were reported

PMO IMPOSTER CASE CBI files chargesheet against Ahmedabad based person

PNS ■ NEW DELHI
The CBI has filed a charge sheet against Ahmedabad-based Maayank Tiwari who allegedly posed as a high-ranking official of the Prime Minister's Office to force an eye hospital chain to forfeit more than Rs 16 crore owed to it by an Indore-based hospital under a legal dispute, according to officials. After a nearly three-month-long probe, the CBI filed the first charge sheet in the case in a special CBI court here. In October, the agency had carried out searches at several locations, including Ahmedabad and Indore, during which a number of documents were seized. Tiwari had allegedly called and sent messages from his mobile phone, asking the promoters of Dr Agarwal's - a chain of eye hospitals - to settle a dispute with the hospital in Indore, which allegedly had to return Rs 16 crore to the hospital chain, according to the charge sheet. It is alleged that Dr Agarwal had entered



an agreement with two doctors who ran the Indore-based hospital to join the franchise for which over Rs 16 crore was paid, the officials said. The Indore hospital allegedly started violating the terms of the agreement which resulted in a dispute, and Dr Agarwal wanted their money back and the termination of the agreement, they said. The matter went to the High Court which appointed an arbitrator to negotiate. The arbitrator, in an interim injunction, asked the Indore hospital to deposit Rs 16.43 crore within four weeks. During the dispute, the promoters of Dr Agarwal's allegedly started getting messages and calls from Tiwari to forget the alleged dues and settle the matter with the doctors running the Indore hospital. When the Prime Minister's Office came to know, it immediately asked the CBI to probe the alleged impersonation of a PMO official. "Prima facie, this is a case of impersonation of a PMO official and misuse of the name of the PMO, since neither this individual nor the professed designation exists in this office," the PMO had said in a complaint to the CBI.

Amit Shah to visit Jammu on January 9 Will take part in development programmes

PNS ■ NEW DELHI
The Union Home Minister will visit Jammu on Tuesday during which he will attend a number of development-related programmes and flag off an e-bus service in the city, officials said. This will be Shah's first visit to Jammu and Kashmir after terrorists ambushed two army vehicles, killing five soldiers and injuring two others at Poonch on December 21. A day later bodies of three civilians were found in the Poonch district, not far from the spot of the day before the incident, sparking outrage. The home minister will visit Jammu on January 9 during which he will chair a review meeting on comprehensive development of Jammu and Kashmir, a home ministry official said. Besides, Shah will launch the 'Vikas Bharat Sankalp Yatra', a central government initiative, flag off an e-bus service and inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of various development works. The home minister will also distribute appointment letters



to the youths selected for different government jobs, the official said. Shah reviewed the security situation of Jammu and Kashmir with top functionaries of the central government and Jammu and Kashmir administration on January 2 in New Delhi. In that meeting, he had instructed the strengthening of the counter-terrorism operations in Jammu and Kashmir and stressed on complete elimination of the terror ecosystem. While advising the security agencies for appropriate deployment in vulnerable areas in the Union Territory, Shah stressed that all due procedures should be adopted while dealing with counter-terror operations.

India, UK to review ties during Rajnath visit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
India and United Kingdom will review the entire spectrum of their bilateral defence ties during Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's two-day visit there beginning Monday. He is also likely to meet Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Foreign Minister David Cameron there. During his visit, Rajnath and his British counterpart Grant Shapps will explore ways to further strengthen and rejuvenate strategic and security ties between the two countries, including possible collaboration to jointly develop fighter jets and other military platforms. The defence ministry, announcing the visit on Sunday here, said Rajnath and Shapps are expected to discuss a wide range of issues in the spheres of defence, security and industrial cooperation. The defence minister will be accompanied by a high-level



delegation comprising senior officials from the three services, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and department of defence production. "He will also interact with CEOs and industry leaders of UK Defence Industry and meet with the Indian community there," the ministry said in a statement. Rajnath's talks with Defence Secretary Shapps will largely focus on sharing of critical

technology and expanding bilateral industrial defence cooperation, people familiar with the matter said. The two sides are expected to discuss collaboration in joint development of fighter aircraft and other military platforms, they said. Rajnath and Shapps are also expected to delve into the situation in the Indo-Pacific, West Asia and Ukraine, the people said. In April 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his then British counterpart Boris Johnson had agreed on a new and expanded India-UK defence partnership. During his visit to India, Johnson had announced that the UK is creating an Open General Export Licence (OGEL) for India to "reduce bureaucracy and slashing delivery times for defence procurement. The British prime minister also said that the UK will help India in the co-development of military hardware, including indigenous production of fighter jets. A statement issued after the talks between Modi and Johnson had said the two leaders reiterated their commitment to "transform" defence and security cooperation as a key pillar of the India-UK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The India-UK relationship was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during the India-UK virtual summit

IAF aircraft carries out first ever night landing at Kargil

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
In an effort to enhance its operational capabilities in forward areas in tough mountain terrain, a C-130 J Super Hercules transport aircraft of IAF for the first time carried out a night landing at the high-altitude Kargil advanced landing ground near the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan. The night landing of the tactical lift aircraft with the elite Garud commandos on board at the Kargil airstrip at 15,000 feet demonstrated the IAF's operational capabilities in the strategically crucial sector, sources said here on Sunday. The night landing was carried out recently. While IAF aircraft have operated from the advanced landing ground before, it was the first time that a transport plane made a night landing. "In a first, an IAF C-130 J aircraft recently carried out a



night landing at the Kargil airstrip. Employing terrain masking enroute, the exercise also dovetailed a training mission of the Garuds," the IAF said on 'X'. The defence ministry has also been focusing on enhancing infrastructure at almost all airfields along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) facing China, including the Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) as per operational requirements. It is especially boosting infra-

structure at the Daulat Beg Oldi Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) as well as the Nyoma airstrip. The Daulat Beg Oldi ALG is located close to the LAC at an altitude of 16,700 feet and is known as the highest airfield in the world. Temperatures in Daulat Beg Oldi drop up to minus 40 degrees Celsius during harsh winter months. The Nyoma airfield is located at a height of around 13,000 feet.

LS polls 2024: Congress begins seat sharing talks with INDIA Bloc parties

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
In the run-up to the Lok Sabha election 2024, Congress has begun seat-sharing talks in some states with like-minded parties of the INDIA bloc for Lok Sabha elections. Sources said senior leaders of the party have been told to reach out to other leaders of the alliance and talks with some parties have begun. The Congress National Alliance Committee on Sunday discussed the seat-sharing formula for Bihar with the RJD. Raja Sabha MP Manoj Jha represented his party in a meeting held at residence of Congress leader and convener of the Congress National Alliance Committee Mukul Wasnik in the national capital where NAC members Ashok Gehlot and Salman Khurshid were also present. Congress leaders also held a meeting with functionaries of the JMM's Odisha unit and discussed the sharing of seats for the Lok Sabha elections and assembly polls, which are held simultaneously in the state. Sources said it was the preliminary round of meeting and exchange of views on strengths and weaknesses of the both the parties as well as major stakeholders like JDU and other INDIA bloc partners in the State. "It was a meeting between the Congress and RJD and similar was a state meetings will be held between the Congress and JDU and Left partners. Reaching a consensus on such aspects takes time as it is too tedious due keeping mind the minutest of electoral factors," a Congress office bearer said.



The closed-door meeting in Bhubaneswar was attended by JMM's state president Anjani Soren, its Odisha unit in charge Shivaji Moulik, Congress general secretary in charge of Odisha Ajoy Kumar and state Congress president Sarat Pattanayak, among others. Formal negotiations for seat-sharing with Aam Aadmi Party in Punjab and Delhi will begin on Monday, the sources added. The Congress' five-member committee on seat-sharing - which has Mukul Wasnik as convener and senior leaders Ashok Gehlot and Bhupesh Baghel among members - has already held internal consultations with state Congress chiefs and handed over its findings to party chief Mallikarjun Kharge. The seat-sharing talks with other parties come after the 28-party opposition grouping decided to untidely take on the BJP in upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The INDIA bloc has agreed to have a single opposition candidate in Lok Sabha election seats against the BJP in a bid to defeat it in 2024. The sources said Congress president Kharge has entrusted the responsibility to senior

leaders, which also include members of the seat-sharing committee, to work on seat distribution with other parties. The Congress has pre-poll alliances with parties like the DMK in Tamil Nadu, RJD and JDU in Bihar, JMM in Jharkhand and others in Assam, but has no tie-up with some main parties in key states. The most contentious of these include Kerala, West Bengal, Delhi and Punjab, where the difficulty of having seat-sharing arrangements with INDIA bloc partners is well acknowledged by party insiders. In West Bengal, the TMC and Left, despite being part of the opposition alliance, do not want any arrangement with each other and the Congress will have to select any one of them. The recent statements of TMC leaders and Congress PCC chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury also do not bode well for the possible partnership between TMC and Congress in the state. In Kerala, the Congress has 19 of the 20 MPs from the state and having an arrangement with CPI-M seems bleak as it would have to rest its sitting MPs. In Punjab, the state units of

Shrikant, Sukanta among five MPs selected for Sansad Ratna Awards

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI
Parliamentary Affairs, and T S Krishnamurthy, former chief election commissioner of India. The performance data is sourced from the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha websites and the PRS Legislative Research. This is the only award presented by civil society to honour top-performing parliamentarians in India. Sansad Ratna Awards committee chairperson and Prime Point Foundation's trustee secretary Priyadarshini Rahul said N K Premachandran (RSP, Kerala), Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury (Indian National Congress, West Bengal), Bidyut Baran Mahato (BJP, Jharkhand), and Heena Vijayakumar Gavit (BJP, Maharashtra) have been selected for the Sansad Maha Ratna Awards for the entire 17th Lok Sabha. "Recognising the continued consistent top performance of Supriya Sule (NCP, Maharashtra), Shirangappa Barne (Shiv Sena, Maharashtra) and Bharturhari Mahtab (BJD, Odisha), the Sansad Maha Ratna Awardees of the previous 16th Lok Sabha, the jury committee has decided to honour them for their exemplary performance in the 17th Lok Sabha as well and these three MPs would be honoured with the Sansad Utkrishi Mana Ratna Award," she added.

SC asks CPCB to conduct scientific studies on pollution caused by stone crushing units

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Supreme Court has asked the Central Pollution Control Board to conduct scientific studies and obtain data on the pollution caused by stone crushing units and state if they require prior environmental clearance to operate. A bench of justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta also kept in abeyance till the next date of hearing a May 1, 2023, direction of the National Green Tribunal, Eastern Zone, that had said prospective stone crushing units in West Bengal need prior environmental clearance from the State Level Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA). The bench asked the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to file its report on the pollution caused by stone crushing units and give its opinion on whether they should be brought under the Schedule of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2006 dated September 14, 2006, under which prior environmental clearance is required for certain projects and activities. "The CPCB will obtain necessary data and conduct scientific studies on the aforesaid aspect(s) and file a report before this court within a period of eight weeks from today," the bench ordered on January 3. It said that in case environment clearance is required by stone crushing units, the CPCB, notwithstanding the present order, would issue directions as may be required by law. The bench said that its attention has been drawn to the environmental guidelines for stone crushing units issued by the CPCB in July 2023 on reducing emissions and pollution caused by crushers. "The CPCB will place on record necessary scientific data pursuant to which the said guidelines have been issued, and whether they had examined and decided that environment clearance is not required," it added. The top court passed the order on an appeal filed by the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change against the May 1, 2023, order of the NGT, Eastern Zone. The green tribunal had passed the order on a plea by Biplab Kumar Chowdhury, who alleged that stone crushing units have been operating in the river bed of Raidhak-II River in West Bengal's Alipurduar district, extracting big stones and boulders, crushing them into small cubicles and selling the same for commercial gain without obtaining necessary permissions. The petitioner also alleged that during inspections, none of the units could produce environmental clearance though they had consent to establish the setup and had applied for renewal of consent to operate. The tribunal passed a slew of directions after noting that stone-crushing activity was not listed in the Schedule of EIA Notification, 2006, and the July 19, 2017, order of the NGT, Principal Bench, which directed that no stone crusher would be permitted to operate unless they obtain consent from the state pollution control board, no-objection certificate from the authorities concerned and environmental clearance from the competent authority. The tribunal had ordered and directed the prospective stone-crushing units to obtain Environmental Clearance from SEIAA, West Bengal, for their operation in the state.

Shinde dubs Uddhav as anti development

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde on Sunday criticised Shiv Sena (UBT) head and former CM Uddhav Thackeray saying he is "anti-development". He (Thackeray) was sitting at home for two-and-a-half years and did only show off, Shinde told reporters without taking his predecessor's name while replying to a question. "But we are actually doing vikas (development) and cleaning up this city. He is anti-development and I do not wish to make any comment on their criticism (of the government)," the CM said after attending a deep cleaning drive in parts of south Mumbai. "He opposed the (Metro) car



shed at Aarey land in Mumbai, construction of Metro lines, and even tried to slow down construction of the Samruddhi highway (connecting Mumbai and Nagpur)," Shinde said. Do they even have a moral

right to point the finger at us, he said. Thackeray formed the Maha Vikas Aghadi government in November 2019 after the state polls. In June 2022, a revolt led by Shinde against the Shiv

Sena leadership resulted in the collapse of the Thackeray government. On the Mumbai Trans-Harbour Link (MTHL), CM Shinde said, "Modern technology has been used for the construction of the longest sea bridge in the country. The (quantity of) steel used for this bridge is four times of the Howrah bridge in Kolkata." The MTHL, also known as Atal Setu named after former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, will be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 12, Shinde's office said on Saturday. The bridge originates from Sewri in Mumbai and terminates at Nhava Sheva in Uran taluka of Raigad district. It is constructed at a cost of Rs 18,000 crore.

'Drinking water has reached 72 per cent households in country'

PTI ■ JODHPUR (RAJASTHAN)

Union Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat on Sunday said drinking water facilities have reached 72 per cent households in the country and the remaining will be completed by December 2024. When the Jal Jeevan Mission started in 2019, a little over 16 per cent of the households had access to drinking water facilities, Singh told a group of visiting journalists from Assam here. He emphasised that the implementation of the scheme is the responsibility of the state governments, and each state faces different geographical challenges and availability of water resources ranges from surplus to scarce. "We had prepared a guideline in consultation with the state governments and implementa-

tion of the scheme was done according to it," he said. Despite the challenges faced during two years of COVID, "I can say with pride that drinking water facilities has reached 72 per cent of the households", the Union minister said. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pledged that each household will be provided with drinking water facilities and "we are committed to ensure this by December 2024", Singh said. He said Rajasthan has made little progress in terms of drinking water supply to households since the scheme began in December 2019. However, with the change in the state government, he expressed hope that significant progress will be made by December 2024. Regarding interlinking of rivers, the Union minister said several states face either flood



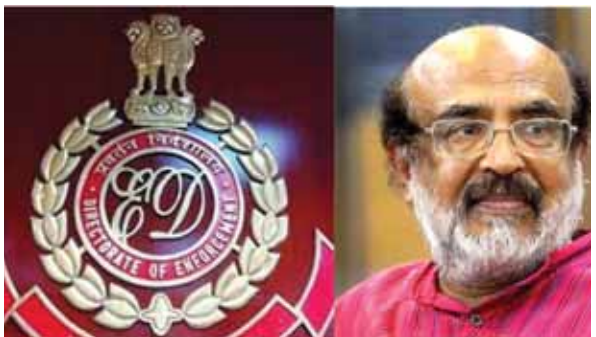
problems or drought conditions. "It was former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's dream to link the rivers and make a grid for transfer of river water", he said. A committee was formed for the purpose of studying the possibility of inter-basin transfer wherein water can be trans-

ferred from areas with surplus to deficit areas, he said. "We have prepared more than 15 Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) and shared it with various states so that the respective governments can enter into agreements and we can proceed in this direction", he said. The minister said Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh governments have shared the agreement for linking the Ken and Betwa rivers with the Centre and work will soon begin in this Rs 40,000 crore project. Discussions are also underway for other links, such as between Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, as well as between some southern states, he added. "We are hoping that the states will soon come to an agreement and the linking can go forward", he added.

ED summons former Kerala Finance Minister in masala bonds case

PTI ■ KOCHI

The Enforcement Directorate has summoned senior Kerala CPI(M) leader Thomas Isaac for questioning in a FEMA case linked to probe into the alleged violations in the financial dealings of KIIFB during his tenure as the finance minister in the previous LDF government, official sources said Sunday. The 71-year-old politician has been asked to depose at the agency office in Kochi on January 12, they said. The central agency in December had informed the Kerala High Court that it has withdrawn the summons issued to Isaac. The submissions were made during hearing of a plea by Isaac and a KIIFB official alleging that only personal information was sought through the summons by ED and seeking quashing of the same. In view of the agency withdrawing the summons, the HC disposed of the peti-



tions but at the same time, the court also said the ED was free to continue with its investigation in the matter. ED sources said the fresh summons to Isaac has been issued in light of the HC allowing the agency to go ahead with the investigation, under the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), into the end use of Rs 2,000 crore raised by KIIFB through masala bonds and its compliance with the FEMA norms.

Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB) is the primary agency of the state government for financing large and critical infrastructure projects and had raised Rs 2,150 crore in 2019 through its debut masala bond issue as part of its plan to mobilise Rs 50,000 crore to fund large and critical infrastructure projects in the southern state. The ED suspects contravention of the FEMA here and hence initiated a probe.

Nadda Jammu visit cancelled

PTI ■ JAMMU

BJP president J P Nadda's scheduled visit to Jammu on Sunday was cancelled due to "bad weather", leaving hundreds of enthusiastic party workers disappointed. J&K BJP president Ravinder Raina confirmed the last-minute cancellation of Nadda's tour of Jammu after his flight failed to land at the Jammu airport due to poor visibility. Nadda was scheduled to reach Jammu on a day-long tour to chair an extended group meeting of the BJP to discuss and finalize the party's strategy for the next Lok Sabha elections after paying obeisance at the historic Raghunath temple here. "Poor visibility at the airport forced cancellation of the BJP president's Jammu visit. He, however, will be holding the meeting of the senior leaders through virtual mode shortly," Raina, who was present at the airport, told PTI.



Raina also visited the Raghunath temple to inform the waiting workers about the cancellation of Nadda's visit. "I salute the party workers who have turned up in large numbers both at the airport and at the historic Raghunath temple to accord a warm welcome to the party president despite inclement weather," he said. The upbeat BJP workers waited for hours together since early morning but later left disappointed after being informed about the cancellation of the visit.

BJP names DT Lepcha as candidate for Rajya Sabha election in Sikkim

PTI ■ GANGTOK

The BJP on Sunday named MLA Dorjee Tshering Lepcha as its candidate for the Rajya Sabha election in Sikkim. In a statement, BJP's national general secretary Arun Singh said the central election committee of the party has approved the name of Lepcha for the January 19 election. Lepcha, 66, is at present the MLA of the Gnathang Machong seat in the Pakyong district. He was a minister in the previous SDF government, and joined the BJP along with nine other party MLAs after the 2019 assembly elections, in which the SKM came to power. As a minister, he held portfolios such as Buildings & Housing, and Transport. Lepcha said he will try to serve the Himalayan state to the best of his abilities by rais-



ing its issues in Parliament. "I sincerely thank PM Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president JP Nadda for reposing their faith in me to serve the party and my state, Sikkim, as a representative in Rajya Sabha," he told a press conference. He said that he will file his nomination papers on January 9, the last date. The lone Rajya Sabha seat in

the state is at present held by Hishey Lachungpa of the opposition SDF. His tenure will end on February 23. He served as Rajya Sabha MP for two successive terms. In the 32-member Sikkim assembly, SKM has 19 members, BJP has 12 and the SDF has one member. Indicating that the ruling Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) was on board to facilitate Lepcha's election to Rajya Sabha, BJP state president DR Thapa claimed that his party has Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang's support in the polls. The SKM, which is a part of the BJP-led NDA, is yet to officially declare support for Lepcha or field a candidate. The two parties do not work together in the state, despite the alliance at the national level. The opposition SDF has also not announced its candidate yet.

Assam Super 30 to get trained by Army

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Over 30 students from across Assam, selected through a rigorous process, will start preparing from Monday to join the armed forces as officers under an initiative led by the Indian Army, officials said. This will be the second such program to be rolled out in the state, with another started late last year, they said. The 'Super 30' program to motivate youths from the state to enroll as officers in the armed forces is supported by the state government and undertaken in collaboration with NGO National Integrity and Educational Development Organisation (NIEDO), defence spokesperson Lt Col Mahendra Rawat said. While the first program was started in Dibrugarh in November last year, the second one will begin in Tamulpur on Monday. "There is a sizeable presence of

youths from Assam in the lower ranks but officer-level personnel are very few. This program has been conceptualised by the Eastern Command of the Indian Army to motivate and enable talented students to join the armed forces as officers," he said. Lt Gen (ret) Rana Pratap Kalita, who had retired as the head of the Eastern Command last month, had also earlier stressed on encouraging more youths from the state to join the armed forces in the officer cadre. It will be a residential training program to be held at the Army Station in Tamulpur, and two batches of students will be inducted this year. The next intake will be in April, the spokesperson said. "All students who qualify the written examination will be mentored for the next phase of selection by the Service Selection Board (SSB)," he said. Last week, the Army signed an agreement with NIEDO, which will conduct the training.

Congress, BJP launch campaign as part of Ram temple inauguration

PTI ■ BENGALURU

With just a fortnight left for the consecration ceremony of Ram Temple in Ayodhya, both the ruling Congress and the opposition BJP in the state on Sunday started their campaign to woo Hindu devotees in this election year. The BJP launched Rama Akshata (scared rice) distribution as part of its public outreach programme. BJP stalwart and former Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa and his son and state president B Y Vijayendra today started knocking on the doors of Hindus in Bengaluru offering them Akshata along with an invitation letter to perform special pooja on January 22 at home. The BJP leaders also requested families to light five lamps in front of their house marking the 'home coming' of 'Ram Lalla' to his abode in Ayodhya after 'centuries of



exile'. After offering special prayers at a Hanuman temple here, Vijayendra told reporters that Lord Rama devotees would go to every household and request them to offer special poojas either at home or any nearby temples. The Congress has issued directions to the temples under the control of the Hindu Religious Endowment

Department to organise special poojas on January 22. "On January 22, Ram temple will be inaugurated in Ayodhya. I have told the Hindu Religious Endowment Department to conduct special prayers in all temples under its control on that day," Muzrai Minister (Hindu Religious Endowment) Ramalinga Reddy told reporters.

Tale of three TN girls Passion for BTS band spurs journey to Seoul

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Never in their wildest dreams, three school girls of a village, tucked away in a sleepy region of Karur district had imagined that their passion for music and dance would one day goad them to take the path unknown; of attempting to travel to a foreign country with little money and without passports. Passionate fans of BTS, the hugely popular Korean pop band, the girls, all aged 13 and students of Class 8 in a state-run school, decided to go all the way to Seoul, the South Korean capital, to meet their loved stars. "They took a firm decision to somehow meet the BTS stars and shortlisted the seaports of Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu and Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh to take a ship to South Korea and they eventually chose Visakhapatnam," a Child Welfare Committee official told PTI. The girls quietly stepped out of their homes on January 4 and reached Chennai after taking a train from Erode, which is near Karur.



Since the girls did not return home, their parents lodged a complaint with Karur police, who alerted authorities statewide and began searches. Though the teenagers together had just about Rs 14,000 with them, their savings, they naively believed that they could still make it. After much difficulty, they got a room in a Chennai hotel on Thursday night and were under the impression that they could take a ship to Seoul without passports. On Friday, their desperate attempts to go ahead dragged them from pillar to post and they lost all energy. Left with no choice, they boarded a train from Chennai to reach their homes. "At Katpadi railway station, when they got down at mid

night to buy food, they missed the train. Police personnel spoke to the children and Child Line authorities and we were alerted," P Vedanayagam, head of Vellore District Child Welfare Committee said. They were accommodated in a state-run facility in Vellore district and their parents were summoned and counselling sessions were held for the children and their parents. "We learnt that the girls knew the minutest details about the BTS band and the stars, the way they dressed and what not; they had bought shoes similar to the ones used by the pop band stars." The BTS stars were their inspiration and unhindered access to smartphones led to obsession. "It was very clear to us that they yearned for a life of dance and music." However, their decision 'to go abroad' to chase their dreams was a terrible mistake and this was conveyed to them politely. The official said the children were encouraged to focus only on studies which would help them realise their dreams, whatever it may be.

Experts bat for preserving 19th century market in Mysuru

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Conservation architects and other domain experts have pitched for preserving a late 19th century market in Mysuru and called for carrying out development projects while remaining "sensitive to the built heritage" of the city in Karnataka. The historic Devaraja Market, constructed in the heart of the city in the 1880s by the Mysore royals, is facing an uncertain future for many years and marked for demolition for a redevelopment project, according to INTACH Bengaluru Chapter. Seeking to highlight its architectural and historical value and to emphasise on preservation of historical markets, a series of events -- a symposium, a heritage walk and urban sketching



-- was held in Mysuru on Saturday. Hailed as a 'heritage city', Mysuru is dotted with iconic buildings largely constructed by the Wadiyars -- the royal family of the erstwhile Mysore State, including the Mysore royal palace, Lalitha Mahal Palace, old railway station, Mysore University building, and

many other iconic landmarks. During the symposium hosted by the Bengaluru Chapter of the Delhi-based Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) at the Wadiyar Centre for Architecture (WCFA), the current scion of the royal family, Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar eloquently made a case

for preserving the Devaraja Market, built by his ancestors. Conservation of this market and other heritage buildings in Mysuru are integral to the identity of the city, he asserted in a virtual address at the event, according to a statement issued by INTACH Bengaluru Chapter. Wadiyar, a graduate of the University of Massachusetts, the US, also suggested that "restoration" is important from the point of view of sustainability. Preserving and reinvigorating built heritage is important so that the legacy can be passed to future generations, he had told PTI in 2018 and also advocated for preserving the built heritage of Bengaluru. Other experts, including a structure engineer from Pune, concurred during the symposium

that the Devaraja Market is a city icon, and "can be restored" and form a "nucleus" for insensitive development of Mysuru. The theme of the discussion was 'Markets as Living Heritage: The Case for Conservation and Revival'. Sanghamitra Basu, a conservation architect who recently retired as a faculty from IIT, Kharagpur, said, "Conservation is not (an act of) mummification," adding that amenities could be added to old structures with due sensitivity to the architectural fabric. She shared the example of the restoration of Byward Market in Ottawa, Canada, which was to be demolished but when restored, it became one of the city's major centres for both tourists and local economic activities.

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA
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 No. 7159 Dtd. 29.12.2023

- The Chief Construction Engineer, Northern (R&B) Circle, Sambalpur on behalf of Governor of Odisha invites Percentage Rate bids in double cover system in **ONLINE MODE** for the construction of **Building Works** as detailed in the DTCN from the eligible class of contractors.
- No of works= **06 (SIX) (Buildings Works)**
- Tender Cost: **Rs. 10,000/-**
- Class of contractor: **"B" Class and "A" Class**
- Date & Time of available in web site & receipt of Bids From **08.01.2024 to 17.00 Hours of 22.01.2024.**
- Date of opening of Technical Bid **22.01.2024 at 18.00 Hours.**
- The Bidders have to participate in ONLINE bidding only. Further details can be seen from the website www.tendersodisha.gov.in.
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PAPER WITH PASSION

Toast of the world

S Jaishankar's view that a fresh vision has led to India's recognition worldwide has substance to it

From the echoes of ancient wisdom to the symphony of modern aspirations, India stands tall, a testament to the spirit that transforms challenges into opportunities. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar recently highlighted this sentiment. In a transformative era marked by technological advancements, inclusive governance and strategic diplomacy, he has asserted that India's global perception has undergone a sea change. Addressing the Viksit Sankalp Bharat Yatra, Jaishankar underlined the changing narrative surrounding India, emphasising the pivotal role of changed vision in the nation's evolution over the past decade. He pointed out that the fundamental change in India is not merely the result of economic growth or technological innovation but that it stems from a shift in vision. This paradigm shift has garnered international attention, prompting discussions about India's remarkable progress on the world stage. One of the key elements contributing to India's transformation is the effective use of technology. Jaishankar highlighted the widespread adoption of Aadhaar and the mass opening of bank accounts as pivotal milestones. These initiatives, coupled with technology integration, have not only streamlined governance but also brought about societal changes. The External Affairs Minister highlighted the multifaceted improvements in areas such as health, water, electricity, housing and education, positioning India's challenges as shared global concerns.



Jaishankar underscored the universality of the challenges faced by India, noting that issues such as healthcare, water scarcity, and education are not unique to it. These challenges are shared by nations worldwide, including developed countries. The acknowledgement of common problems emphasises India's role as a global player, actively contributing to discussions on collective problem-solving and sustainable development. What Jaishankar said is largely true as there has been a definite shift in India's approach towards domestic and world politics and it is today indeed a New India. But having said that, it would be rather naive to believe the Minister's every word. Despite progress on many fronts, many pressing issues still need to be addressed, the major ones being social cohesion, employment, economic growth and strengthening of constitutional institutions. He might have got good reactions from people abroad but it is also a fact that India's democratic credentials are at an all-time low in the west. Many of the achievements highlighted by him are a continuation from the past, Aadhar for one, and it is not always a good idea to draw a definitive line of demarcation. What the country today is the cumulative result of efforts of various Governments and leaders who shaped it. There are still a plethora of challenges that the country faces today. Let us deal with those; singing paeans of self-praise often acts as a roadblock on the road to progress.

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PICTALK



A visitor looks at paintings during the annual 'Chitra Santhe-Art Carnival', in Bengaluru

PTI

All is not well with Indian science

Serious doubts about the efficacy of the Indian Science Congress have emerged; no meaningful discussions and debates come out of it anyway

The cancellation (postponement, according to office bearers) of the 109th edition of the Indian Science Congress which was scheduled to begin on 3 January 2024 has brought to light a big fraud being committed on the nation by a cartel of scientific administrators. According to office bearers of the Indian Science Congress, the five-day event which was to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was postponed to another date because of the refusal of the Department of Science and Technology to pay the organisation Rs 5 crore to meet the expenses of the annual congregation of scientists and research scholars.

But a probe with scientists who are into the serious business of research brought out some startling information. The Indian Science Congress is not at all a government-controlled institution. It is as good as any Non-Governmental Organization that survives only because of its name Indian Science Congress," said P Ramachandran Nair, a veteran scientist with Bhabha Atomic Research Centre,

Trombay, the nerve center of the country's nuclear science research activities. Nair said he had not heard about the Indian Science Congress in his 36-year-long research job. "I do not think it is a government organisation. Had it been so, we from BARC would have presented research papers in their sessions," he told The Pioneer.

Prof Gyaneshwer Chaubey of Banaras Hindu University, who has more than 100 scientific papers in international journals and scientific seminars and who has specialized in Biological Anthropology, Medicinal Genetics and Forensics, said that he has not attended any of the ISC sessions. "There was no invitation to us from the ISC. Though international scientific journals are keen on having us in their publications and seminars, the ISC has not shown any interest in our work," said Prof Chaubey who was a senior member of the international scientific team that scientifically debunked and demolished

the Aryan invasion theory. A spokesman of the Department of Atomic Energy told this newspaper that the office bearers of the ISC flock in to stage the annual event which has become a kind of jamboree. "No serious discussions or debates take place during this annual event. The theme selected for this year's session was Global Perspective on Science and Technology for Sustainable Future. These are naive attempts to hoodwink the political class who are not confident to take on them," said the spokesman.

Nand Lal Mishra, a former scientist of BARC pointed out that there were no instances of the ISC coming out with a route map or blueprint to address the basic issues faced by the country. "Have they any action plan to resolve the recurring flood and drought retarding the progress of the country? Is the ISC doing anything to help the young researchers? They may be honouring scientists and veterans with annual awards but

that is not the solution," faced by the country. Many scientists with whom The Pioneer spoke said that there is a lot of money to be made by staging the ISC. "Catering, printing and stationery, entertainment, the shamiana etc are avenues through which those ruling the ISC could make money. If a white paper is made or a probe is ordered on the modus operandi of the ISA, we will be opening a Pandora's box," they said.

The country has yet to manufacture its civil aircraft or a desi car/truck. The technology meant for solar energy and atomic power has to be imported from other countries. Prof B M Hegde, a highly venerated Indian cardiologist, said that while the developed countries have failed to develop a medicine for the common cold, the Indian system of knowledge has a solution for the disease which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. But something is seriously wrong with Indian science. ISC is the tip of the iceberg.

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



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

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Increasing role of the Indian Navy

The recent incidents of hijacking on high seas and numerous maritime threats underscore the need for an increased involvement of the Indian Navy in addressing these challenges



PADMALOCHAN DASH

Amidst a rising global threat to maritime security, a prompt and robust international response is essential to ensure safety. The recent successful rescue mission by the Indian Navy's MARCOS commandos underscores the need for a decisive approach to addressing maritime risks. In a swift operation off the coast of Somalia, the Indian Navy rescued all 21 crew members from the distressed cargo vessel MV Lila Norfolk, showcasing their rapid response capabilities. This highlights the evolving role of the Indian Navy in countering piracy and sea hijacking.

The Resurgence of Piracy: Recent events indicate a troubling resurgence in maritime piracy, exemplified by the hijacking of 'MV Lila Norfolk'. Addressing this requires unified international efforts to curb piracy and enhance global maritime security. A comprehensive analysis of global maritime incidents reveals multifaceted challenges, including piracy, hijackings, and various security threats.

From January to September 2023, piracy incidents surged to 99, surpassing the previous year's count of 90. Despite a relatively low level of violence towards crews, concerns about crew safety persist, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach. Regions like the Gulf of Guinea, the Singapore Straits, the Indonesian archipelagic area, and Callao Anchorage in Peru have witnessed heightened incidents, emphasizing the global nature of maritime security and the urgency for a holistic strategy to safeguard international waters.

The Evolving Role of the Navy: At the heart of effective strategies for global maritime security lies the growing role of the Indian Navy, showcasing an integrated model of intelligence, technology, and collaboration among different forces. The recent successful rescue mission exemplifies this model, demonstrating the seamless integration of elite Special Forces, advanced naval assets, and cutting-edge technology to neutralize maritime threats effectively. This integration is crucial for the



success of maritime security, involving various forces and cutting-edge technology to enhance naval capabilities in responding to evolving threats. Establishing strong international cooperation and an efficient early warning mechanism is imperative, and the Indian Navy's response serves as a model for collaborative initiatives and timely information sharing globally.

Long-Term Strategy: Despite a perceived decline in international maritime piracy, recent events suggest a resurgence, emphasizing the need for a broader legal framework, international collaboration, and effective law enforcement. The Indian Navy's growing role advocates for comprehensive, long-term solutions to ensure sustained maritime security. Robust mechanisms at the international level, including collaborative frameworks and agreements, are essential for addressing maritime threats collectively. Implementing an effective early warning system is a critical measure to preclude and mitigate maritime incidents. The IMB's Piracy Reporting Centre, a 24-hour point of contact to report piracy crimes, plays a vital role in coordinating with response agencies, issuing warnings, and providing insights into modern piracy trends, contributing significantly to global maritime security.

FROM JANUARY TO SEPTEMBER 2023, PIRACY INCIDENTS SURGED TO 99, SURPASSING THE PREVIOUS YEAR'S COUNT OF 90. DESPITE A RELATIVELY LOW LEVEL OF VIOLENCE TOWARDS CREWS, CONCERNS ABOUT CREW SAFETY PERSIST, EMPHASISING THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Harnessing Technology: Reflecting the growing role of the Indian Navy is its embrace of advanced technology to enhance maritime security measures. Leveraging surveillance systems, drones, and communication tools, the Navy stays ahead of evolving threats. Continuous technological innovation is key to remaining at the forefront, as seen in the re-evaluation of security measures prompted by recent attacks in the Red Sea.

Anti-Maritime Piracy Bill: Legislative measures, such as the Anti-Maritime Piracy Bill, represent a comprehensive approach at the national level. Aligned with UNCLOS, the bill addresses piracy definitions, offences, penalties, jurisdiction, and other crucial aspects. The recently passed Maritime Anti-Piracy Bill 2019 outlines punishments, enforcement measures, jurisdiction, bail conditions, and a presumption of guilt, reaffirming India's commitment to maritime security.

The Maritime Threats Geopolitical Factors, Economic Interests, and Global Cooperation: The response is imperative to safeguard India's interests and ensure regional stability in the face of maritime challenges. The recent hijacking incident serves as a poignant reminder of the nation's vulnerability, prompting the deployment of

advanced naval assets like INS Chennai and cutting-edge surveillance technology. This swift and decisive response underscores the immediacy of maritime threats while emphasizing the continuous vulnerability in India's maritime domain. An analysis of recent hijackings offers valuable insights into evolving tactics employed by maritime threats, guiding the development of targeted strategies. The incident involving 'MV Lila Norfolk' emphasizes the necessity for a dynamic approach to safeguard seafarers and maritime assets.

India's deployment of INS Chennai and advanced surveillance technology reflects the multifaceted nature of contemporary maritime threats, extending beyond traditional piracy and hijackings. These challenges demand diverse capabilities for detection, prevention, and response, demonstrating the nation's commitment to addressing threats comprehensively.

The persistent challenges in combating maritime piracy underscore the need for sustained global cooperation, and the role of the Indian Navy sets a formidable precedent for a united front against maritime threats. (The author is an ICSSR-Post Doctoral Fellow, School of National Security Studies, Central University of Gujarat. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RESILIENT JAPAN

Sir —It was an unforgettable New Year for Japan as earthquakes centered off the northwest coast of Honshu in the Noto Peninsula rattled the country one after another in quick succession. Being situated in a very high-risk seismic region, ensconcing on the convergence of four tectonic plates, Japan's nuclear energy landscape cannot be overlooked. The great Japan earthquake of March 11, 2011, and the subsequent tsunamis leading to the crushing of hopes and aspirations need no reiteration. However, the people of the country have consistently displayed the wherewithal to withstand the pain and shock that have surrounded them at an alarming frequency. Residents are highly conversant with the dos and don'ts following an earthquake. During tremors, people rely on the country's highly efficient public broadcasters rather than paying heed to rumors. The contribution of the leaders of the country and its public service experts cannot be sidetracked. Japan now has a robust building code, with older wooden structures giving way to steel and concrete ones. Earthquake warning systems have considerably improved.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

TOURING TALKIES

Sir —I remember the time about thirty or forty years ago. At that time, the touring talkies from the village every year during the fair were very attractive to the people. At that time, there was no TV or any entertainment device in the village...! So the only source of entertainment was traveling touring talkies. These movies were mostly mythological or family. The advertisement of the mythological movie was a huge attraction. Veer Hanuman was sitting in a truck with a mace during the movie. Similarly, family movies such as Jagachya Pathivar, Bala Jo Jo Re, and Vahinichya Bangadya were also hugely popular and were advertised loudly on the loudspeakers in the trucks. Listening to Lavanya's popular songs drew a huge crowd. Crowds

Pottery: The human connection



As the Pongal harvest festival is just days away, the use of clay pots gains prominence. Clay pots have been playing their silent yet significant roles in human life. They may seem pretty ordinary, but they hold deep spiritual meaning. They are present in various rituals and healing practices, underscoring their universal importance.

Their existence throughout history speaks volumes about their relevance. Each pot, shaped and fired by human hands, not only serves as a tool but also as a metaphor for transformation and the cycle of life — from earth, through fire, to utilitarian beauty. Emblematically, we are all a bit like a clay pot - moulded by experiences, hardened by challenges, and ready to be filled with life's many hidden treasures.

Weaving through the threads of history, you will discover that clay pots have served as symbols of human fragility, birth, and the cyclical nature of life. It is in their formation in the kiln's fire that clay pots find their life, much like trials and tribulations forge our characters. There is an undeniable spiritual connection between humans and pottery.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

THE UNTOLD KERALA STORY

Sir — This is a reference to "CPI-M Rule: The Untold Kerala Story." Communism has almost reached its final stage of retirement in the country. Kerala State is the home ground of communism after West Bengal, Tripura, etc. Veteran Communist Leaders like EMS, AKG, EK Nayanar, and VS were mass leaders; it was due to their hard work and dedication towards uplifting communism that stood tall all these years.

The present situation in the state under communism has faded the good fortunes for youth and future generations by their one way of governance by entertaining their cadre members only. Present Communism is rich but ignores those who don't practice communism in the state. Kerala, God's own country, needs to become practical at least once for the 2024 Lok Sabha Polls as both fronts of Kerala have been tested all these years; voters from all societies must try for a change in the state.

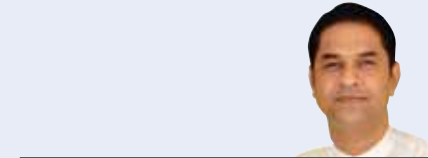
Sharadchandran S | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN LET US LEARN FROM DISASTERS

They remind us that we are all in the same boat. Nature knows no political boundaries



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

The news of a 7.5 magnitude powerful earthquake that hit western Japan on the first day of 2024, has raised an alarm worldwide about the unpredictable natural calamities that are going to take place in the coming days. Scary images of collapsed buildings, cracked roads, power outages and people running out of their houses with their children, have made everyone think of one question – What If This Happened To Me? Natural Disasters are such a phenomenon that whenever they occur anywhere in the world, the majority of the people in all nations sympathise with the victims and try to aid them in whatever way they can. That is because the scale of natural disasters overawes humans, making them feel helpless against the forces of nature.

As mentioned above, in most people the fear of a similar disaster striking them prompts many to help the victims of disasters elsewhere, as they believe they too will need the help of others, if such a tragedy strikes. At such times, barriers that divide people in normal times like nationality, religion, ideology, race, social status etc. get dissolved and old animosities are forgotten as everyone comes together in the face of a calamity. Isn't it tragic that it takes a major disaster to bring out humanity in humans? Why must it be so? Why cannot we show the same charity and compassion for fellow humans in normal times? The majority of us would not be able to answer these questions because we have all become too selfish and short-sighted. That is why today a lot of rich people are willing to squander their wealth wastefully but not share it with the less fortunate. Let alone helping others, greed, selfishness and hatred born of chauvinism and religious bigotry have so blinded humans that they are not even helping themselves. Today we see that there are countries that spend trillions on fighting a destructive war against each other which brings no solution to either side. Instead of putting the feelings of animosity behind them and getting on with the task of nation-building, these countries keep on fighting each other creating mass destruction.



Over the past few decades, almost every major developed country has spent billions and trillions of rupees to arm themselves against their opponent. Today, while most countries have big armies, very few developed and developing nations have actual money to educate, clothe, shelter or even provide clean drinking water to all their people. Isn't it pathetic? Such a deplorable state of affairs would not have existed had there been a feeling of oneness and brotherhood between all the nations, especially the neighbouring nations from the beginning. Hence, natural disasters like the recent earthquake remind us that we are all in the same boat. Remember!! Nature knows no political boundaries. When rich and poor, the powerful and weak, are all rendered destitute by a hurricane or earthquake, the irrelevance of man-made distinctions of class, creed, race etc. becomes clear. But sadly, this realisation doesn't come to us in normal times; it has to be forced upon us by natural calamities. And it lasts only as long as the memory of the calamity remains fresh.

Therefore, we need to take a lesson from these disasters and work to develop a sense of universal brotherhood in all people. So let us come together in our times of tribulations forgetting all our differences and help each other to build a universe where our future generations can live in harmony & peace.

(The writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist, views are personal)

Diplomatic challenges for India in 2024



KS TOMAR

This year, India faces significant challenges to its foreign policy, particularly concerning SAARC nations and the increasing influence of China

The year 2024 is staring at current Indian Foreign Policy with multiple challenges and the growing influence of China may be worrisome because it is fast making inroads in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri-Lanka which can be attributed to its dangerous 'Debt Trap Policy', Expansionism and allurements through The Belt and Road Initiative - One Belt One Road).

Foreign policy experts say that India is positioning itself as a major growing economic power in Asia vis-a-vis China though the gap is huge which is coupled with a growing geopolitical association with the United States, which too on equal terms, may checkmate China in 2024. America's defence and economic colourations with India may further strengthen the bonds which will have its fallout on the world stage. PAKISTAN TURMOIL

A cursory look at 2023 will exhibit that China was successful in moving forward on its Debt Trap Policy and Pakistan has been fully mauled and it may be impossible to come out of it in future. Prime Minister, Narendra Modi had taken an initiative to smoothen ties with Pakistan and invited the then prime minister, Nawaz Sharif for a swearing-in ceremony in 2014 but a strong army foiled the attempt. The Chinese investment in Pakistan rose to \$65 billion in 2022 and it had already acquired control of Gwadar Port on 16 May 2013. Originally valued at \$46 billion, the value of China Pakistan Economic Corridor had been worth \$62 billion as of 2020. In this way, chances of the release of Pakistan from the clutches of China seem to be remote but ensuing general elections in Pakistan in Feb 2024 may change the political landscape as chances of the return of Nawaz Sharif have brightened after the tactical support being lent to his party by the military establishment. Ex-PM has expressed his desire to have normal relations with India especially when the Imran Khan regime had taken the ties to the lowest level. If it happens then India must reciprocate as diplomacy never permits deadlock.

NEPAL, THE HIMALAYAN KINGDOM China has emerged as the largest investor and trade partner of Nepal which has changed the contour of economic and diplomatic ties between the two countries. President Xi's visit in Octo,2019 resulted in the signing of over a dozen agreements in various fields. China has invested more than USD 1.34 billion in Nepal and is pressing for the implementation of BRI. Nepal assumes a lot of relevance to India and the previous communist government headed by K.P.S Oli had tilted the balance in favour of Dragon but a new coalition government comprising of predominantly Nepali Congress and the communist faction of present PM, Prachanda has tried to repair the ties with India which are ages old. Now India has taken a lot of economic initiatives which include long-term trade deals, power purchase agreements, transit treaties etc. which might give a new dimension to the ties between the two countries. India should take this goodwill gesture to the next level in the new year. Nepal is expected to reciprocate the magnanimity and equal-term policy which will benefit the people of both nations. India will have to keep watch on any progress made in BRI which



CHINA HAS EMERGED AS THE LARGEST INVESTOR AND TRADE PARTNER OF NEPAL, WHICH HAS CHANGED THE CONTOURS OF ECONOMIC AND DIPLOMATIC TIES BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

will be a security risk due to an open border of 1,770 Kms.

MALDIVES China had spent USD 200 million on the Maldives-China Friendship bridge which had preceded investments since 2012 in various sectors like airlines, water projects, sewage treatment plants, and housing. Beijing now has leases on 17 of the 1,200 islands which

Constitute the entire Maldives and three largest Chinese projects together worth \$1.5 billion thereby worth more than 40% of the Maldivian GDP2. The Chinese investment has crossed the mark of USD 970 million which may be beyond the repaying capacity of this poor country. The present Muizzu regime will try to minimize India's influence and encourage China to grow its influence.

OPTION WITH INDIA IN 2024. India had taken the logical step of announcing the largest civilian infrastructure project of USD 500 million having a 6.7-kilometre bridge and causeway that will link Malé with three nearby islands thereby overshadowing the Chinese bridge in length, scale and price. India is bound to be worried in the new year over the blatant tilting of the new president, Mohamed Muizzu who has decided to send back Indian troops currently stationed in the Indian Ocean archipelago which may create space for China in future. It is a move primarily aimed at reversing former president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's 'India first' policy. In yet another anti-India decision, the Muizzu government has decided against the renewal of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with India for cooperation in hydrography. The agreement was signed in 2019 and it is due to expire in 2024. At this juncture, it will be a big challenge to keep Muizzu engaged who had won the election with the slogan "India Out" and China had backed him to the hilt.

SRI LANKA According to the annual report of the Bangladesh Bank, China invested 465.17 million USD (13.5% of total foreign direct

investment in Bangladesh) and Hong Kong invested 179.22 million USD (5.2%) during the financial year which took the total Chinese investment to 644.30 million USD.

In the same manner, \$4.5 billion has been invested by China in Hambantota which has created a lot of security concerns in New Delhi. However, China did not come up to the expectations of Sri Lanka when it was on the verge of economic collapse which allowed India to show magnanimity after burying the negativity of the regime. Experts say that there is a ray of hope for the continuation of Sri Lanka's present warm ties with India which could be a fallout of open-hearted support and financial assistance of over USD 4 billion thereby surpassing the International Monetary Fund's 48-month bailout package of USD 3 billion. Sri Lanka President, Rani Wickremesinghe who inclined China got a big shock when Dragon quietly refused to provide financial assistance which gave a chance to India to come to the rescue of the beleaguered country. Given the new awakening of the Sri Lanka political regime, India should undertake measures to further improve its bilateral ties which may cause discomfort to China.

BANGLADESH Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh has given a fillip to India's relations which have acquired new dimensions during the past 15 years. India is expecting a comeback of Hasina's party in forthcoming general elections in the early new year but if it does not happen then India will have to change track, especially given the suspicion and lack of trust of the opposition. Khalida Zia's government in 2000 was full of animosity towards India hence there will be a dire need for a change of strategy to deal with the new regime which will benefit both countries. China has always shown keen interest in Bangladesh which is evident from its investment of USD 26 billion between 2016-22. Data shows that Beijing emerged as the country's largest FDI provider in Bangladesh as its investments topped almost

US\$1 billion, a 30% increase from US\$700 million in 2021 hence its next move will be dangerous if Hasina fails to return to power.

MYANMAR India has kept military generals in good humour which is strategically essential but it might have done so at the cost of supporting the democratic forces after the coup in 2021. Analysts opine that China has fully supported the dictatorship in Myanmar besides helping ethnic militant groups. The United States and its allies are preoccupied with the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts which has left military rulers at their whims and fancy to crush the democratic forces. India will have to regain its prestige of openly keeping away from pro-democratic forces which are being crushed mercilessly and cruelly without pushing generals to the corner. Experts say that India will have to take care of China's 'two ocean strategy' and its game plan of pushing through BRI and other infrastructure projects. Bhutan has smooth relations with India but China's growing influence could pose a security threat, especially in the Doklam plateau which happens to be a strategic area near the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan. A standoff in 2017 preceding China's attempt to construct the road in the disputed territory claimed by Bhutan had an alarming impact on India which was forced to stop this activity. India will have to take Bhutan seriously to keep it at bay from Chinese allurements.

Analysts opine that the China factor is also worrying for India in SAARC nations keeping in view its investments and indentures in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Maldives were US\$ 12.9 billion, US 3.11 billion, US 13.87 billion, US 210 million, US\$ 1.34 billion, and US\$ 970 million respectively which warrant adoption of full proof strategy in 2024 to checkmate Dragon otherwise fallout will be serious.

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

Do not underestimate the superpower of sleep

Sleep is a metabolically active state that is crucial for human wellbeing. It enhances cognitive prowess, emotional Zen and social stardom

In today's hectic world, sleep frequently takes a backseat, yet its significance transcends further than mere relaxation. Sleep has a significant impact on many aspects of one's general health, including improving cognitive function, bolstering emotional resilience, and strengthening social ties. This article aims to explore the underappreciated advantages of restful sleep across these domains of one's life.

Cognitive Benefits of Sleep Getting enough sleep is essential to maintaining peak cognitive performance, which affects important areas including memory, judgment, and reasoning. Alertness and attentiveness are two important areas that are strengthened by getting enough sleep. The



GARIMA RAJAN



VRINDA TUTEJA

Psychomotor Vigilance Task (PVT) showed that sleep deprivation on consecutive nights causes a slower reaction rate and increased variability (Leong et al., 2023). This highlights the significance of meeting the minimum required amount of sufficient sleep for noticeable cognitive benefits. Sleep plays a crucial role in the complex processes of encoding, consolidating, and retrieving memories, which are fundamental to cognitive function. Slow-wave sleep (SWS) is essential for strengthening memories and protecting them from outside interference, although studies on the direct effects of sleep length on memory have produced inconsistent findings. Sleep has a significant influence on one's ability to make

decisions in situations of potential danger and uncertainty. Sleep deprivation makes people more prone to take risks and makes them prioritize instant satisfaction above long-term benefits.

Emotional Benefits of Sleep Sleep and emotional health are associated in a complicated way through behavioural, cognitive, and neurobiological mechanisms. Studies continuously highlight how important sleep is for psychological well-being, and how getting an insufficient amount of sleep can increase the chance of being diagnosed with mental health conditions. Sleep is critical for both the production and control of emotions. The variety of emotional experiences can be enhanced by a variety of sleep-

related behavioural tendencies, including scenario selection, modification, attentional deployment, cognitive shifts, and response modulation (Palmer et al., 2017). The neurochemical alterations that transpire throughout one's sleep serve to emphasize the widespread impact of sleep on one's emotional well-being. Lack of sleep can impair critical abilities, including the capacity to recognize moods, identification of suitable coping mechanisms, and carry them out successfully.

Social Benefits of Sleep Beyond its benefits to our cognitive and emotional well-being, sleep influences social dynamics and shapes a variety of facets of our social life. Recent studies have demonstrated the reciprocal relation-

ship between sleep and interpersonal relations, highlighting how sleep affects interactions with others as well as how social experiences affect sleep (Gordon et al., 2017).

The synergistic character of sleep is acknowledged in intimate relationships. It suggests how common sleep schedules within romantic partnerships influence the dynamics of relationships (Gordon et al., 2017). Sleep quality is also inextricably linked with conflict resolution and empathic accuracy, emphasizing the severe social repercussions of inadequate sleep in the setting of intimate relationships.

Tips to Healthy Sleep Promoting and upholding healthy sleeping practices, sometimes known as "sleep hygiene," is crucial to getting

a decent night's sleep. It's important to remain consistent; even on the weekends, have a regular sleep routine by retiring to bed and getting up at a specific time every day. Make your bedroom the ideal place to sleep by making sure it's peaceful, dark, cosy, and at the right temperature. Remove any electronics from your bedroom to minimize disruptions to your restful sleep. Give priority to a simple supper and avoid alcohol and caffeine just before bed. Make frequent vigorous physical activity a part of your schedule since it aids in deeper slumber.

Conclusions Sleep is a metabolically active state that is crucial for health and well-being. At its core, getting enough sleep is critical for maintaining general health

since it offers cognitive, emotional, and social benefits. Getting enough sleep is imperative for maintaining good relationships, in addition to improving cognitive performance and emotional resiliency. It is critical to recognize and emphasize the need to get enough sleep, especially while juggling the demands of contemporary lives. Acknowledging the multitude of social, emotional, and cognitive advantages that come with getting enough sleep makes stressing its importance all the more essential for leading a healthy, balanced life.

(Dr. Rajan is an assistant professor of psychology and Vrinda Tuteja is a psychology student at FLAME University, Pune. Views are personal)

I don't care about foreign media's acceptance

PTI ■ DHAKA

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who is expected to secure a fourth straight term in a one-sided general election, said on Sunday that she does not care about foreign media's approval of the polls as for her acceptance to people of the country is the only important issue.

Hasina's comments came after she cast her vote in the country's 12th general elections, boycotted by the main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

According to the Election Commission's initial estimates, the voter turnout is around 40 per cent but the figure could change after the final count.

In response to a question on how acceptable the election will be (in foreign media) while the BNP is boycotting it, Hasina said that her responsibility is towards the people.

"Whether people accept this election or not it is important to me. So, I don't care about their (foreign media) acceptance. No matter what did the terrorist party say or not?" she said.

"I have to prove credibility. Right, but, to whom, a terrorist party? A terrorist organisation? No, I have my accountability to my people. (I think) whether the people accept the election or not, and that is important to me," she said.

About foreign countries' interference, she said her Awami League party does not bother who says what about the election.



interference, she said her Awami League party does not bother who says what about the election.

"Bangladesh is a sovereign and independent country. It may be a small country, but it has a large population—I don't bother who says what, as the people is our main strength," she said.

The premier said they have ensured a conducive election

environment confronting all the barriers.

"A conducive environment for election has been established. Your vote is very valuable, we struggled for the right to vote and I hope that all the voters will come to the polling centres and exercise their voting rights to continue the democratic trend," she said.

Hasina expressed her gratitude to the people for their

help in ensuring a congenial atmosphere for the election.

"There were so many obstacles and hurdles, but the people of the country were cautious about their voting rights. The national election is held every five years. And people will cast their votes freely and we have been able to create that environment," she said.

About confidence in winning the election, she said, "InshaAllah, we will win the election...we will form the government. No doubt about it. We have faith and confidence in people that they will vote for Boat (her election symbol)."

Sheikh Hasina said BNP-Jamaat committed subversive acts by setting fire to trains, and buses and burning people to death to obstruct holding a peaceful election, referring to arson attacks on trains on Friday night.

"The BNP-Jamaat clique does not believe in democracy and they don't want the democratic process to continue. They don't act for the welfare of the people," she said.

'BNP DIDN'T PARTICIPATE ANTICIPATING LOSS'

Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) did not participate in the parliamentary elections because it knew that it would lose, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said on Sunday. "The BNP has

taken a strategy of boycotting the election with various excuses, various demands. They participated in the 2018 election and got some parliamentary seats, but this year they did not participate knowing they would be defeated," Khan, a senior leader of the ruling Awami League, was quoted as saying by the Dhaka Tribune newspaper.

Khan made the comments while talking to reporters after casting his vote at Monipuripara in Dhaka's Farmgate area. The BNP is involved in killing people and arson attacks just as they did in 2014, he alleged.

"People do not want such torture and violence. So, they are coming to the polling stations in a festive mood," he added. Voting for the 12th parliamentary election ended on Sunday amid sporadic violence and a boycott by the main opposition party BNP and its allies.

Ahead of the elections, Hasina's government arrested thousands of rival politicians and supporters, a move which rights groups have condemned as an attempt to paralyse the Opposition.

As part of its boycott campaign, the BNP enforced intermittent transport blockades and strikes for the past three months. Hasina, 76, has been in power since 2009 and her Awami League won the last election in December 2018.

Blinken meets Jordan's king

AP ■ AMMAN (JORDAN)

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met on Sunday with Jordan's king and foreign minister and visited a World Food Programme warehouse in Amman as he pressed ahead with an urgent Middle East diplomatic mission to prevent Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza from spreading.

On his fourth visit to the region in three months, Blinken stressed the need for Israel to adjust its military operations to reduce civilian casualties and significantly boost the amount of humanitarian aid reaching Gaza while highlighting the importance of preparing detailed plans for the post-conflict future of the territory, which has been decimated by intensive Israeli airstrikes and ground offensives.

After a day of talks with Turkish and Greek leaders in Istanbul and Crete, Blinken met Sunday with Jordan's King Abdullah II and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi seeking buy-in for US efforts to tamp down resurgent fears that the three-month-old war could engulf the region, ramp up aid deliveries to Gaza and prepare for the eventual end of hostilities.

Jordan and other Arab states have been highly critical of Israel's actions and have eschewed public support for long-term planning, arguing



that the fighting must end before such discussions can begin. They have been demanding an immediate cease-fire since mid-October as civilian casualties began to skyrocket. Israel has refused and the US has instead called for specified temporary "humanitarian pauses" to allow aid to get in and people to get to safety.

Blinken also toured the World Food Programme's Regional Coordination warehouse in the Jordanian capital where trucks are being packed with aid to be delivered to Gaza through both Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings.

He commended the work of the WFP and other UN agencies as well as the government of Jordan to get assistance into Gaza. "The efforts right here to collect and distribute food to people in need are absolutely essential," Blinken said. "The United States has worked from day one to open access routes into Gaza."

"We continue to work on that every single day, not only to open them but to multiply them, to maximise them and to try to get more assistance, more effectively," he said. "We're determined to do everything we possibly can to ameliorate the situation for the men, women and children in Gaza."

The US has been pressing Israel for weeks to let greater amounts of food, water, fuel, medicine and other supplies into Gaza, and the UN Security Council passed a resolution on December 22 calling for an immediate increase in deliveries.

Three weeks ago, Israel opened Kerem Shalom, adding a second entry point for aid into Gaza after Rafah.

Still, the rate of trucks entering has not risen significantly. This week, an average of around 120 trucks a day entered through Rafah and Kerem Shalom, according to UN figures, far below the 500 trucks of goods going in daily before the war and far below what aid groups say is needed.

North Korea again fires near sea border with South

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korea again fired artillery shells near its tense sea boundary with the South on Sunday, as the influential sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un mocked the South's ability to detect its weapons launches.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff dismissed Kim Yo Jong's statement as "a comedy-like, vulgar propaganda" meant to undermine the South Korean people's trust in the military and stoke divisions.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff said North Korea fired more than 90 rounds near the rivals' disputed west-

ern sea boundary on Sunday afternoon. It said South Korea strongly urged North Korea to stop provocative acts immediately.

North Korea's military later confirmed it used coastal artillery systems to carry out live-firing exercises. It said the drills were part of its military training schedules and the direction of its shells fired didn't expose any threat to South Korea. On Friday, North Korea launched about 200 shells. South Korea also claimed that the North fired more than 60 rounds on Saturday, but its rival has denied that. Kim Yo Jong said that North Korea on Saturday only detonated blast-



ing powder simulating the sound of its coastal artillery on the seashore, to test the South Korean military's detection capabilities. "The result was

clear as we expected. They misjudged the blasting sound as the sound of gunfire and conjectured it as a provocation. And they even made a false and impudent statement that the shells dropped north" of the sea boundary, Kim Yo Jong said in a statement carried by state media.

"I cannot but say that (South Korean) people are very pitiful as they entrust security to such blind persons and offer huge taxes to them," she said. "It is better 10 times to entrust security to a dog with a developed sense of hearing and smell." Animosity between the two Koreas is running high because North Korea has

conducted a barrage of missile tests since 2022 while South Korea has expanded its military training with the United States in a tit-for-tat cycle.

North Korea's artillery firings Friday prompted South Korea to have its troops on border islands fire artillery rounds near the sea boundary in response. The shells launched by the two Koreas fell at a maritime buffer zone they had established under a 2018 military agreement on lowering front-line military tensions. The agreement requires the Koreans to halt live-fire exercises, aerial surveillance and other hostile acts along their border, but the deal is now in danger of col-

lapsing because the two Koreas have taken measures breaching it. Experts say North Korea is likely to ramp up weapons tests and escalate its trademark fiery rhetoric against its rivals ahead of South Korea's parliamentary elections in April and the US presidential elections in November.

They say Kim Jong Un likely thinks a bolstered weapons arsenal would allow him to wrest greater US concessions if former President Donald Trump returns to the White House.

In her statement Sunday, Kim Yo Jong called South Korea's military "gangsters" and "clowns in military uni-

forms". She also suggested South Korea's possible future miscalculation of North Korean moves could cause an accidental clash between the rivals, jeopardising the safety of Seoul, a city of 10 million people which is only an hour's drive from the land border.

On Tuesday, Kim Yo Jong issued a statement calling South Korean conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol "foolishly brave" but his liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in "very smart". South Korean analysts say she was attempting to help muster those opposing Yoon's tougher policy on North Korea ahead of the April elections.

6 injured in attack on southern Mexico community

Mexico City (AP): An attack in a remote community in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero caused an undetermined number of deaths and wounded at least six people, a local human rights group said Saturday. The attack with drones and gunmen Thursday on Buenavista de los Hurtado allegedly by the Familia Michoacana drug cartel sent residents fleeing. Six of the wounded made their way to neighbouring Tetela del Rio for medical treatment, said Rev. Jose Filiberto Velazquez, a priest and director of a human rights organization, the Minerva Bello Center. Velazquez went to Buenavista with soldiers and agents from the state prosecutor's office Saturday. He said they found a burned vehicle with human remains inside, but said they had not determined how many people were inside. He shared a video of the burned vehicle. Authorities had yet to confirm any dead or wounded. Velazquez said many members of the community were missing. His group had been warning for months that the community was caught between warring drug gangs.

Guerrero state spokesman Rene Posselt confirmed there was a clash, but denied it was an attack aimed at the community. He said evidence suggested the violence was a conflict between organized crime groups.

Posselt said authorities were investigating a video that circulated on social media platforms Friday that purported to show Familia Michoacana members and bodies of a rival group known as Los Tlacos.

Sunak pledges action over Post Office scandal

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Sunday said that the government is reviewing the compensation process in an accounting scandal that wrongly accused hundreds of sub-postmasters of fraud, many of them of Indian heritage.

During an interview with the BBC, Sunak was asked about the historic scandal involving a faulty IT system named Horizon dating back to the late 1990s and confirmed that his justice minister is "looking at" how the process of overturning wrongful convictions and providing compensations can be speeded up.

The government, which formally owns Post Office Ltd, has paid out millions in compensation to many of the sub-postmasters impacted but there are many others still waiting for years.

"Obviously it's something that happened in the '90s but actually seeing it and hearing about it again just shows what



anyone affected, they should come forward," he said. The issue has been brought back into focus again with a hard-hitting real-life ITV drama series 'Mr Bates Vs The Post Office', which aired in the UK this month, and the Metropolitan Police confirmed soon after that it is investigating the Post Office over potential fraud offences.

Dozens more impacted by the faulty accounting system have since sought legal help, adding to the already over 700 sub-postmasters impacted by the scandal. Back in April 2021, the case of Seema Biswas, now 47, came to light when she had her conviction quashed alongside Vijay Parekh — two British Indian sub-postmasters among a group of 39 who won a Court of Appeal case. Misra took over her post office in Surrey in 2005 and was pregnant when she was wrongly handed a 15-month sentence over 12 years ago after being accused of stealing GBP 75,000 from her branch. "I would

have killed myself if I hadn't been pregnant," said Misra, a mother of two who had hailed the Court of Appeal verdict as a "huge moment".

Sub-postmasters like her had appealed their convictions on two grounds: that they had been denied a fair trial, and that the circumstances in which the prosecutions went ahead "represents an affront to public conscience".

In the ruling at the Royal Courts of Justice in London, a three-judge bench granted the appeal on both grounds. "Post Office Limited's failures of investigation and disclosure were so egregious as to make the prosecution of any of the 'Horizon cases' an affront to the conscience of the court," said Lord Justice Timothy Holroyde, sitting with Justice Simon Picken and Justice Judith Farber, at the time.

He said the Post Office "knew there were serious issues about the reliability of Horizon" and had a "clear duty to investigate" the system's defects.

anyone affected, they should come forward," he said. The issue has been brought back into focus again with a hard-hitting real-life ITV drama series 'Mr Bates Vs The Post Office', which aired in the UK this month, and the Metropolitan Police confirmed soon after that it is investigating the Post Office over potential fraud offences.

Dozens more impacted by the faulty accounting system have since sought legal help, adding to the already over 700 sub-postmasters impacted by the scandal. Back in April 2021, the case of Seema Biswas, now 47, came to light when she had her conviction quashed alongside Vijay Parekh — two British Indian sub-postmasters among a group of 39 who won a Court of Appeal case. Misra took over her post office in Surrey in 2005 and was pregnant when she was wrongly handed a 15-month sentence over 12 years ago after being accused of stealing GBP 75,000 from her branch. "I would



A Lithuanian Orthodox worshipper lights candles before the liturgy on Orthodox Christmas Eve in the Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit in Vilnius, Lithuania, Saturday.

Israel signals wrapping up of major combat in northern Gaza

AP ■ JERUSALEM

The Israeli military signalled that it has wrapped up major combat in northern Gaza, saying it has completed dismantling Hamas' military infrastructure there, as the war against the militant group entered its fourth month Sunday.

The military did not address troop deployments in northern Gaza going forward. Its spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said late Saturday that forces would "continue to deepen the achievement" there, strengthen defenses along the Israel-Gaza border fence and focus on the central and southern parts of the territory.

The announcement came ahead of a visit to Israel by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Biden administration officials, including Blinken, have repeatedly urged Israel to wind



Palestinians inspect the damage of a destroyed house following Israeli airstrikes on Khan Younis, Southern Gaza Strip on Sunday.

down its blistering air and ground offensive in Gaza and shift to more targeted attacks against Hamas leaders to prevent

harm to Palestinian civilians. In recent weeks, Israel had already been scaling back its military assault in northern Gaza and

pressing its offensive in the territory's south, where most of Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians are being squeezed into smaller areas in a humanitarian disaster while being pounded by Israeli airstrikes.

The war was triggered by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel in which the militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took some 250 people hostage.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday again insisted the war will not end until the objectives of eliminating Hamas, getting Israel's hostages returned and ensuring that Gaza won't be a threat to Israel are met.

"I say this to both our enemies and our friend," he told his Cabinet. "This is our responsibility and this is the obligation of all of us."

Israel's retaliation by air,

land and sea has killed more than 22,700 Palestinians and wounded more than 58,000, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. The count of the dead does not distinguish between combatants and civilians. Health officials say about two-thirds of those killed have been women and minors. Israel blames Hamas for the heavy civilian casualties because the group operates in heavily populated residential areas.

On Sunday, officials at Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis received the bodies of 18 people, including 12 children, who were killed in an Israeli strike late Saturday. More than 50 people were injured in the strike, which was set up decades ago to house refugees from the 1948 Mideast war over Israel's creation and morphed into a neighbourhood of the city.

Son of veteran correspondent killed

Rafah: An apparent Israeli airstrike killed two Palestinian journalists in southern Gaza on Sunday, including the son of veteran Al Jazeera correspondent Wael Dahdouh, who lost his wife, two other children and a grandson — and was nearly killed himself — earlier in the war. Dahdouh has continued to report on the fighting between Israel and Hamas even as it has taken a devastating toll on his own family, becoming a symbol for many of the perils faced by Palestinian journalists, dozens of whom have been killed while covering the conflict.

Hamza Dahdouh, who was also working for Al Jazeera, and Mustafa Tharaya, a freelance journalist, were killed when a strike hit their car while they

were driving from Khan Younis to the southern town of Rafah, according to the media office of the Hamas-run government.

Amer Abu Amr, a photojournalist, said in a Facebook post that he and another journalist, Ahmed al-Bursh, survived the strike.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military. Wael Dahdouh, 53, has been the face of Al Jazeera's 24-hour coverage of this war and previous rounds of fighting for millions of Arabic-speaking viewers across the region, nearly always appearing on air in the blue helmet and flak jacket worn to identify journalists in the Palestinian territories. Speaking to Al Jazeera after his son's burial, Dahdouh vowed to continue reporting on the war.

"The whole world must look at what is happening here in the Gaza Strip," he said. "What is happening is a great injustice to defenseless people, civilian people. It is also unfair for us as journalists."

Dahdouh was reporting on the offensive in late October when he received word that his wife, daughter and another son had been killed in an Israeli airstrike. His grandson, wounded in the same strike, died hours later. The Qatar-based broadcaster later aired footage of him weeping over the body of his son while still wearing his blue press vest.

In December, an Israeli strike on a school in Khan Younis wounded Dahdouh and Al Jazeera cameraman Samer Abu Daqqa.

China sanctions 5 US defence companies

AP ■ BEIJING

China announced sanctions on Sunday on five American defence-related companies in response to US arms sales to Taiwan and US sanctions on Chinese companies and individuals.

The sanctions will freeze any property the companies have in China and prohibit organisations and individuals in China from doing business with them, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement posted online. It was unclear what impact, if any, the sanctions would have on the companies, BAE Systems Land and Armaments, Alliant Techsystems Operations, AeroVironment, ViaSat and Data Link Solutions. Such sanctions are often mostly symbolic as American defence contractors generally don't sell to China. The Foreign Ministry said the US moves harmed China's sovereignty and security interests, undermined peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and violated the rights and interests of Chinese companies and individuals.

The Chinese government remains unwavering in our resolve to safeguard national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity and protect the lawful rights and interests of Chinese companies and citizens," the ministry statement said. The announcement was made less than a week ahead of a presidential election in Taiwan that is being contested in large part over how the government should manage



its relationship with China, which claims the self-governing island as its territory and says it must come under its rule. The Chinese Foreign Ministry did not specify which arms deal or which US sanctions China was responding to, though spokesperson Wang Wenbin had warned three weeks ago that China would take countermeasures following the US government's approval of a USD 300 million military package for Taiwan in December.

The deal includes equipment, training and equipment repair to maintain Taiwan's command, control and military communications capabilities.

The US said the sale would support the modernisation of Taiwan's armed forces and the maintenance of a credible defence. "The proposed sale will improve the recipient's capability to meet current and future threats by enhancing operational readiness," a news release from the Pentagon's

Defence Security Cooperation Agency said. Taiwan is a major flashpoint in US-China relations that analysts worry could explode into military conflict between the two powers. China says that US arms sales to Taiwan are interference in its domestic affairs.

The Chinese military regularly sends fighter planes and ships into and over the waters around Taiwan, in part to deter the island's government from declaring formal independence. An invasion doesn't appear imminent, but the constant military activity serves as a reminder that the threat is ever-present. The US switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 1979, but it is bound by its own laws to ensure that Taiwan has the ability to defend itself. America and its allies sail warships through the Taiwan Strait, a 160-kilometer (100-mile)-wide waterway that separates the island from China.

Over 100 evacuate Belgorod while soldiers celebrate Orthodox Xmas on front line

Moscow (AP): More than 100 residents of the Russian border city of Belgorod have evacuated to an area further from the Ukrainian border, local officials said. "On behalf of the regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov, we met the first Belgorod residents who decided to move to the safest place. More than 100 people were placed in our temporary accommodation centers," Andrey Chesnokov, head of the Sary Oskol district, some 115 kilometers (71 miles) from Belgorod, wrote on Telegram. Ukrainian attacks on December 30 in Belgorod killed 25 people, officials there said, with rocket and drone attacks continuing throughout this week.

Meanwhile, Russian military personnel marked Orthodox Christmas on Sunday. Russia's Defence Ministry said that military priests led prayer services on the front line both on Sunday and on Christmas Eve night.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was joined by families of military personnel who have died in the war in Ukraine at Christmas Eve services at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence, in the western suburbs of Moscow. "Many of our men, our courageous, heroic guys, are warriors of Russia even now, during the holiday — with arms in hand they defend the interests of our country," he said to the attending families, according to the Kremlin's press service.

Snow hinders rescue drive and aid deliveries to isolated communities

AP ■ WAJIMA (JAPAN)

Rescue teams worked through snow to deliver supplies to isolated hamlets, six days after a powerful earthquake hit western Japan, killing at least 126 people. Heavy snowfall expected in Ishikawa Prefecture later Sunday and through the night added to the urgency.

After Monday's 7.6 magnitude tremor, 222 people were still unaccounted for, and 560 people were injured. Hundreds of aftershocks have followed, rattling Noto Peninsula, where the quakes are centred. Taiyo Matsushita walked three hours through mud to reach a supermarket in Wajima city to buy food and other supplies for his family. The home where he lives with his wife and four children, and about 20 nearby homes, are among the more than a dozen communities cut off by landslides.

Power was out, and in a matter of hours, they couldn't even use their cell phones, he told Jiji Press. "We want everyone to know help isn't coming to some places," Matsushita was quoted as saying by Jiji Press. "We feel such an attachment to this community. But when I think about my children, it's hard to imagine we can keep living here."



Crashed vehicles by collapsed houses are seen in Wajima in the Noto peninsula facing the Sea of Japan, northwest of Tokyo, Sunday. Monday's tremor decimated houses, twisted and scarred roads and scattered boats like toys in the waters, and prompted tsunami warnings

Late Saturday, a woman in her 90s was rescued from a crumbled home in Suzu, Ishikawa Prefecture, after 124 hours trapped in the rubble. She was welcomed by shouts of encouragement, although the darkness and a long blue sheet of plastic blocked her from view. Chances for survival

greatly diminish after the first 72 hours. Ishikawa officials say 1,370 homes were completely or partially destroyed. Many of the houses in that western coastal region of the main island are aging and wooden. Cars lay tossed on cracked, bumpy roads. Snow blanketed the debris and highways. Wires

dangled from lopsided poles. The more than 30,000 people who evacuated to schools, auditoriums and community facilities slept on cold floors. They trembled in fear through the aftershocks. They prayed their missing loved ones were safe. Others cried softly for those who had died.

Survivors struggle to rebuild three months after quake in Afghanistan

AP ■ ZINDA JAN (AFGHANISTAN)

A 6.3 magnitude quake on October 7 killed and injured thousands of people in Afghanistan's west. Three months on, survivors are struggling to rebuild their lives.

Some families are living in canvas-coloured tents in Zinda Jan district, the quake's epicentre in the province of Herat, where every home was flattened. People endure the winter conditions with the help of donations and their Islamic faith, but they're anxious about what lies ahead.

Habib Rahman, 43, was watching TV at his father-in-law's home when the quake struck. The horror still rings in his ears. He can't get it out of his head. However many details he gave about that day would never be enough, he told The Associated Press.

Every squat mud building in Zinda Jan collapsed within minutes. Fear, shouting, panic

and shock swept through villages. People used their hands to pull the living and the dead from under the rubble.

"If we look at this soil and dust, we will go beyond crazy," Habib said. "The children are psychologically affected. Sometimes I play with them to distract them from being anxious and (help them) forget about the earthquake. But they don't forget."

The winds and storms continuously knock down and tear the tents of Zinda Jan, the people's only refuge from the bitter cold. "Give us your heart (warmth), find shelter for us," he implored. "The weather is cold. It is very cold."

Children still don't have access to a mosque or school, he said. He wonders what will happen to them, their future. He wants life to return to how it was before the quake, when villagers had their own means and resources. Before the quake, 55-year-old Mula Dad Mohammadi had a house with

six rooms, a kitchen, and space for crops, livestock and timber. Now, he shelters underneath tarpaulin and sheets with his wife and children. He is grateful for the relief efforts but wants measures for longer-term recovery.

"Our farming and agriculture have been destroyed," he said. "Our property and lives have been destroyed. What they gave us was for a temporary period — two sacks of rice and two sacks of wheat. Let us do our own farming."

The global response to the disaster was slow, with much of the international community wary of dealing directly with the Taliban-controlled government. The world was also focused on the surprise attack by the militant Palestinian group Hamas on Israel on October 7 that triggered the ongoing war, only hours before the quake hit Herat.

The Taliban, NGOs, the UN and the country's private sector and the Afghan public ral-

lied around quake-hit communities to help with cash assistance, food, clothing, medicine, and reconstruction.

Pale blue domes resembling beehives — built in Zinda Jan with donations from the Afghan diaspora, including artists and singers — could now be seen dotting the skyline. They're sturdier than the houses normally seen in much of Afghanistan and are intended to be more earthquake-resistant. It's the first time that this type of housing, known as super adobe, has been seen in the country. Project manager Shakib Shahabi, from a local nongovernmental organization, called the Agency for Humanitarian and Development Assistance for Afghanistan, said 37 homes have been built in 32 days.

"We have lessons learned from the implementation of this project and we're willing to share our experiences with interested organisations," he said.

Japan prosecutors make first arrest in the political fundraising scandal

AP ■ TOKYO

Japanese prosecutors made their first arrest Sunday in connection with a major political slush funds scandal that has rocked Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's already unpopular government. Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office apprehended former vice-education minister Yoshitaka Ikeda on suspicion of failing to report fundraising proceeds he received from his faction within the governing Liberal Democratic Party, according to officials and local media reports.

Ikeda's faction, which used to be led by the late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who was assassinated in 2022, has remained the largest and most influential within Kishida's ruling party. The faction is suspected of failing to report more than 600 million yen (USD 4.15 million).

The former vice-minister was accused of not reporting more than 40 million yen (about USD 276,500) he received from the faction as kickback from political event ticket sales, a violation of political funds control law, media reports say. NHK television, citing prosecutors, reported that Ikeda allegedly falsified the

compulsory report of his political funds' management organization by not including 48 million yen (about USD 331,870) as income.

The sum was quite large compared to the 10 million yen (nearly USD 69,140) allegedly received by each of several others implicated in the scandal. Ikeda's aid was also arrested on Sunday. Kishida said Sunday the arrest was "extremely regrettable" and that the party has decided to expel Ikeda. He reiterated that he took the matter seriously and his plans to set up an expert panel later this week to start discussing ways to strengthen fundraising regulations.

"We must have a strong sense of crisis and make an effort to regain public trust," Kishida told reporters. Last year, dozens of LDP lawmakers, mostly members of the Abe faction, were accused of systematically failing to report about 600 million (USD 4.15 million) yen in funds in possible violation of campaign and election laws, according to media reports. The money is alleged to have gone into unmonitored slush funds.

Kishida replaced four of his Cabinet ministers linked to the scandal in December in an attempt to mitigate the scandal

that has rocked his party and grip on power. Former top government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno and Economy and Trade Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura were among those removed. Prosecutors reportedly interviewed the two top officials on a voluntary basis, along with several other LDP lawmakers. Support ratings for Kishida have continued to drop, falling below 20 per cent despite purging members of the Abe wing involved in the scandal. This move could trigger an internal power struggle within the ruling party. The LDP has almost continually ruled postwar Japan. It has faced repeated infamy with the 1970s Lockheed bribery, an insider trading and corruption scandal in the 1980s, among other money scandals.

The current fundraising scandal is considered one of the biggest blunders in decades by the powerful party. However, LDP's grip on power is seen unchanged as long as the opposition remains fractured, though Kishida's leadership is shaking. The prime minister doesn't have to call a parliamentary election until 2025, but the Liberal Democratic Party has a leadership vote in September.

IS group claims responsibility for a minibus blast in Kabul

Islamabad (AP): The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for a minibus explosion in the Afghan capital late Saturday that killed at least two people. Fourteen others were wounded in the attack in Kabul's western Shiite neighbourhood of Dashti Barchi, according to police spokesman Khalid Zadran.

The Sunni militant group said its members detonated an explosive device on the bus carrying Shiite Muslims, whom they called disbelievers, in a statement released shortly after the explosion Saturday. It was the first attack in the country in 2024. The Dashti Barchi area of Kabul has been repeatedly targeted by the Islamic State group's affiliate in Afghanistan. The group has carried out major assaults on schools, hospitals, and mosques, and has also attacked other Shiite areas across the country.

In November, in the same area of Kabul, the IS claimed responsibility for a minibus explosion in which seven people were killed and 20 others were wounded. On October 26, four people were killed and seven were wounded when an explosion hit a sports club in the same neighbourhood.

Qureshi declared ineligible to contest from stronghold

Lahore (PTI): Pakistan's former foreign minister and Tehreek-e-Insaf party's Senior Vice President Shah Mahmood Qureshi has been declared "ineligible" to contest the February 8 general elections by a poll tribunal, a media report said on Sunday. An appellate election tribunal on Saturday rejected Qureshi's appeal against the rejection of his nomination papers, The News International reported.

While Qureshi was cleared to contest polls from the NA-214 constituency in Sindh's Umarkot city, the appellate election tribunal turned down his appeal filed against the returning officers' (RO) decision to reject his nomination papers for two

National Assembly and as many Punjab Assembly seats in Multan in Punjab province. Qureshi, 67, is currently lodged in Adiala Jail, Rawalpindi in a cipher case. The former foreign minister had filed nomination papers for NA-150 Multan-III, NA-151 Multan-IV and PP-218, PP-219 constituencies.

Multan High Court Bar Association President Rana Asif Saeed said the election tribunal had rejected Qureshi's appeal to restore his right to candidacy. The tribunal had declared him "ineligible" to contest the election. Appellate Tribunal Judge Sardar Muhammad Sarfraz Dogar delivered the verdict, he said. Earlier, ROs had rejected the nomination papers of

Qureshi from NA-150 Multan-III, NA-151 Multan-IV and PP-218, PP-219, and the PTI leader had filed appeals against the rejection of his nomination papers. However, the appellate tribunal had dismissed his appeals.

Meanwhile, the hearing of over 60 appeals continued in the election tribunal, established on the Multan Bench of the Lahore High Court on Saturday. In Lahore, an appellate tribunal held a hearing on an appeal filed against the approval of nomination papers of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) supreme Nawaz Sharif from NA-130. It directed the petitioner to appear before the court till Sunday.

4 killed, 3 injured in attack in Pak's restive northwest

Peshawar (PTI): At least four people were killed and three others injured on Sunday when unidentified gunmen opened fire on two vehicles in Pakistan's restive Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, police said. District Police Officer (DPO) Muhammad Imran said that armed attackers with automated weapons targeted two vehicles en route from Parachinar to Peshawar, Dawn News reported.

He said two security personnel were among those killed in the attack near Sadda Bazaar in Khurram district. Efforts are underway to find and arrest the culprits, the DPO said. No group or individual claimed responsibility for the attack, but the region is known for sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Shias. Dr Qaiser Abbas, the

deputy medical superintendent of Parachinar District Headquarters Hospital, confirmed the injured people were receiving treatment at the hospital. Local tribes of Turi Bangash have called for an emergency meeting to decide on a plan of action about the attacks.

Last month, nine people were killed and 25 injured in a "terrorist" attack on a passenger bus in Gilgit-Baltistan's Chilas. The year 2023 witnessed an alarming rise in terror-related incidents in the country in general and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular as the province witnessed 419 militant attacks in which 620 people were killed, including 306 security forces personnel, 222 civilians, and 92 militants.

Nomination papers of 76% of PTI candidates accepted: SC told

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's top election body on Sunday told the Supreme Court that nomination papers of 76 per cent of candidates of jailed former premier Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party were accepted for the February 8 general elections.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) submitted the data in response to a contempt petition filed by the PTI party that the electoral body had not followed a direction by the apex court to address its concerns about the lack of a level playing field in the run-up to polls. The ECP stated that 598 out of a total of 843

nomination papers of PTI candidates for the National Assembly were accepted, while another 1,398 out of 1,777 candidatures for provincial assemblies were approved.

"The ratio of acceptance of nomination papers of PTI candidates for election to the nation and provincial assemblies is 76.18 per cent," the ECP said, adding that the PTI had a right to appeal the rejection of candidatures before the appellate election tribunal.

It also said the data showed PTI candidates, their proposers, and seconders were provided with a level playing field. The ECP also informed the court that its officials met

with the PTI leaders and assured the party that a level playing field would be provided to all the candidates and the election commission's secretary, who looked after the administrative affairs of the ECP, took follow-up steps on the matter. "The commission has also issued instructions to the Chief Commissioner Islamabad and all the four provincial chief secretaries, inspector(s) general of police, and all the four provincial election commissioners. In turn, the provincial election commissioners have issued the instructions to the DROs (deputy returning officers) and ROs (returning officers)," it said.

Fire in Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh damages more than 1,000 shelters

Cox Bazar (Bangladesh): A fire raced through a crammed camp of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh's southern coastal district of Cox's Bazar, gutting more than 1,000 shelters and leaving thousands homeless, a fire official and the United Nations said on Sunday.

The fire broke out around midnight on Saturday at Kutupalong camp in Ukhiya and spread quickly, fanned by strong winds, Shafiqul Islam, head of the Ukhiya Fire Station, told The Associated Press.

No casualties were reported, he said. "The fire was big, and it destroyed about 1,040 shelters in the camp," he said. "We took about two hours to get the blaze under control, engaging 10 fire units from Ukhiya and other stations in the district." An Associated Press reporter at the scene said that thousands of refugees, including women and children, rushed to a nearby open field with their belongings as the fire started spreading aggressively during the early

hours on Sunday. "We are suffering from the cold severely, facing a difficult situation. Currently, we are sitting by a stream with my grandchildren after narrowly escaping a life-threatening situation. Our homes have been destroyed by the fire," said 65-year-old Zuhura Begum.

The United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, said in an email to the AP that fire response volunteers worked with the firefighters to bring the blaze under control. An assess-



ment of the extent of the damage is being made, it said. While it was not immediately clear how the fire started, Islam said that preliminary statements from the refugees suggested that it was caused by a mud oven.

Fire in the refugee camps is common and in the past similar incidents have gutted thousands of homes. In March, a fire left thousands of refugees homeless temporarily.

More than 1 million Rohingya refugees have fled to

Bangladesh from Myanmar over several decades, including about 740,000 who crossed the border starting in late August 2017, when the Myanmar military launched a brutal crackdown.

Conditions in Myanmar have worsened since a military takeover in 2021, and attempts to send back the refugees have failed. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said on several occasions that the refugees would not be sent back by force. Rights groups say

conditions in Myanmar are not conducive for repatriation. Muslim Rohingyas face widespread discrimination in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, where they are denied citizenship and other constitutional rights. In 2022, the United States confirmed accounts of mass atrocities against civilians by the Myanmar military in a systematic campaign against the ethnic minority. The US said the brutal oppression of Rohingyas in Myanmar amounts to genocide. AP

Proposed norms on pilot fatigue will provide facilitative regime: Scindia

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The new norms proposed to deal with pilot fatigue, including more rest hours, will help in putting in place a facilitative regime for pilots, according to Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia. Against the backdrop of rising concerns about fatigue among pilots, aviation watchdog DGCA, in November 2023, proposed various changes to the norms governing duty timings of flight crew, including more rest time for pilots. Changes have been proposed to the Civil Aviation Requirement (CAR) pertaining to 'Duty Period, Flight Duty Period, Flight Time Limitations and Prescribed Rest Periods -- Flight crew

Engaged in Scheduled Air Transport Operations'. In a recent interview to PTI, Scindia said that for pilot fatigue issues, the CARs have been relooked at. "We are putting in place a new set of rules making sure that pilot fatigue not only conforms to international standards but also due to early sunrise in our part of the world, we look at the night hours on an expanded (basis) as opposed to generally 0100 hours to 0500 hours, we are looking at 1100 to 1200 hours, to 0500 hours. "We are looking to expanding that period, which is going to be the night shift period, thereby putting a much more facilitative regime for pilots," he said. The minister also said that the regulator is looking to ensure 48 hours rest



as opposed to 36 hours rest period. In December, a senior DGCA official said the regulator has received many comments on the changes to the CAR.

Among others, it was proposed that an airline should ensure that the minimum weekly rest of continuous 48 hours, including two local nights, is provided to a pilot such that there shall never be more than 168 hours between the end of one weekly rest period and the start of the next. The issue of pilot fatigue came to the fore in September last year, especially after the death of an IndiGo pilot, who had collapsed at the boarding gate of Nagpur airport. Leading carriers, including Air India and IndiGo, have introduced tools to analyse and keep a tab on pilot fatigue. Last week, Indian Pilots Guild (IPG) and Indian Commercial Pilots Association (ICPA) said that reporting illnesses without the "fear of reprisal"

is in the interest of flight safety. IPG is the wide-body aircraft pilots' body at Air India while ICPA represents pilots who fly narrow-body Airbus 320 family aircraft of the full-service carrier. "We are writing to express our concern and objection regarding recent communications implying threats of appropriate measures for sick reporting," the pilot bodies had said in the communication, adding that it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of pilot's health and its cascading effect on flight safety. There may be instances where pilots feel "intimidated" or "compelled" to operate flights despite their health concerns, potentially jeopardizing the safety of the flight, as per the communication.



'Must linking of e invoice with e way bill may cause operational disruption'

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Mandatory linking of e-invoice with e-way bill, applicable from March 1 for certain types of transactions, may cause disruption in operation and has created confusion among tax planners who are seeking clarification from the authorities, experts said on Sunday. The move was initiated after the mismatch in e-way bills and e-invoice statements was noticed in several cases, they said. "Blocking the generation of e-way bill without e-invoice/IRN details for B2B (business to business) and B2E transactions for e-invoice enabled taxpayers," said an advisory issued by the National Informatics Centre (NIC), which manages the indirect tax portal. Rajarshi Dasgupta, Head Tax at Aquilaw told PTI that the advisory on linking e-invoice with e-way bill will cause "technical difficulty in the hands of exporters having a turnover over Rs 5 crore as there is no time limit relaxation for the generation of e-invoice". "What would happen if there are multiple containers for a single consignment? How will the shipping bill numbers be captured in e-invoice, which otherwise is a future activity?" he questioned.

These updates will further increase the compliance burden on business owners, and every day the system changes and business owners are expected to comply with the same, Lexportex India director Apurva Agarwal said. An e-way bill is a document required for the movement of goods, and it includes details such as the name of consignee, transporter, the point of origin of the movement of goods and its destination. The e-invoice system seamlessly integrates with the e-way bill system, generating such bills automatically if transportation details are included during e-invoice generation. However, some taxpayers generate e-way bills without linking them to e-invoices for B2B and B2E transactions, causing discrepancies between the separately entered invoice details in e-way bills and e-invoices, explained Vedika Agarwal, Indirect Tax Consultant at Aquilaw. "To prevent these discrepancies, starting from March 1, e-way bill generation without e-invoice details will not be allowed. This is applicable for e-invoice-enabled taxpayers and for the transactions related to supplies under B2B (business to business) and exports," she said.



IT companies expected to report soft Q3

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian IT companies are expected to report a "soft" third quarter with higher-than-usual furloughs weighing on revenue growth, industry watchers said cautioning that demand outlook commentary is likely to be unchanged as clients continue to scrutinise discretionary spends and prioritise cost optimisation. The big earnings week for tech heavyweights is up ahead, with the top tier IT companies slated to announce their December quarter numbers this week. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys will declare their Q3FY24 report card on January 11 (Thursday) and Wipro and HCL Technologies on January 12 (Friday). All eyes will be on management commentary from the IT pack on prevailing customer sentiments across BFSI, and technology services, as well as demand scenario panning out in key markets of the US and Europe. "We expect IT companies to report soft quarter-on-quarter constant currency revenue growth in Q3FY24 due to higher-than-usual furloughs

for most companies in our coverage universe. We expect margins to be impacted due to furloughs and wage hikes (rolled out by Infy, Wipro, HCLT)," ICICI Securities said in its Q3FY24 results preview. The signs of improvement in IT spending in the near term remains elusive, with continued scrutiny over discretionary spends and focus on cost optimisation, ICICI Securities further said. "Though US Fed's recent commentary allays macro uncertainty, an improvement in IT spending in FY25 is already built into our estimates. We now model a slower pace of recovery than envisaged earlier, and thus cut FY25/26 revenue growth estimates by 2-4 per cent for covered companies," it wrote. It pegged quarter-on-quarter growth for tier-1 IT services between -2.6 per cent and 5 per cent, while projecting 1 per cent to 3 per cent sequential growth for tier-2 players. "We expect sequential revenue growth to be lower in Q3FY24 versus Q2 due to headwinds from higher-than-expected furloughs, especially in BFSI and hi-tech, as well as continued cut in discretionary spends," it said.

GDP numbers for FY24 show discrepancies of ₹2.59 lakh crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Discrepancies in computation of advance estimates of the country's Gross Domestic Product for 2023-24 stood at Rs 2.59 lakh crore as against (-) Rs 3.80 lakh crore in 2022-23 and (-) Rs 4.47 lakh crore in 2021-22, according to National Statistical Office (NSO). On Friday, the NSO released its first advance estimates of national accounts which showed that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Indian economy will grow at 7.3 per cent in 2023-24, slightly higher than 7.2 per cent in 2022-23. According to data, there were discrepancies of Rs 2.59 lakh crore as against (-) Rs 3.80 lakh crore in 2022-23 and (-) Rs 4.47 lakh crore in 2021-22. Discrepancies in the statistical GDP data refer to the difference in national income under pro-

duction method and expenditure method. According to experts, there will always be some discrepancies in national accounts because of delay in reporting of information by various agencies including state governments. About the high level of discrepancies in the national accounts data for current fiscal, experts are of the view that discrepancies are shown to report data as accurately as possible. However, they say that the government make all efforts to reduce discrepancies. There are three methods of computation of national income namely, production, expenditure and income. The NSO's first estimates of national accounts for this fiscal also showed that the country's gross value added (GVA) will grow at 6.9 per cent 2023-24, lower than 7 per cent in 2022-23.

Panasonic eyes double digit growth in India this fiscal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Panasonic expects a "double-digit" growth in the Indian market this fiscal while the company prepares to tap the long-term potential of the country by bringing high-tech products, besides making it an export hub. India is among three important regions for firm headquartered in Osaka, Japan, and it is in the process of building and bringing many more products and high-tech solutions which did not exist in the past in this country, said Chairman of Panasonic Life Solutions India and South Asia Manish Sharma. Panasonic Corporation is "heavily committed" to the Indian market as its "long-term potential is very high" because of a lower penetration of products in the country, providing enough space to grow, he said.

The company is working on India-specific innovations for its business verticals such as consumer appliances, electric boxes (wire and wiring device), supply chain where it provides smart factory solutions, industrial devices and energy business in which it is offering lithium-ion batteries for mobility and stationary storage applications. Though India is a small market for Panasonic, contributing less than 2 per cent to its global revenue, it is among the top three potential regions, where the corporation in the last 10 years has invested to set up around five factories and two innovation centres, he said. When asked about the revenue, Sharma told PTI: "We had Rs 10,500 crore last year (FY23) and this year (FY24), again, we are looking at driving a double-digit growth on that base."

Rural startups seek better infra, easier access to funds

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Rural startups are making a strong pitch for new programmes to foster research and innovation, as the grassroots-level entrepreneurs seek support for streamlined supply chains, subsidies, improved infrastructure, and easy access to finance. As the Budget and the Lok Sabha elections draw closer, startups working in various sectors, especially in smaller towns and villages, said they expect the government to look at various teething issues, even as their

"overall performance has improved owing to various policy changes in the past couple of years". "India's food processing industry faces a number of difficulties such as outdated equipment, ineffective supply chains, poor infrastructure, and restricted finance availability. We expect the government to help us connect with global supply chains so that we can export our products to international markets," Pardeep Kumar Yadav, Founder of Krini Spices, which was found-



ed in March 2017, has 22 direct and over 100 indirect employees, and posted Rs 4.19 crore revenue in 2022-23. "We have high expectations

from the Agriculture Accelerator Fund (AAF) to support young entrepreneurs in rural areas who are starting agri-based startups. We hope that the finance minister allocates additional funding in the upcoming Budget," he said. Various startups in their Budget wishlist sought easing of export mechanisms. The government will present a vote on account in Parliament next month and the full Budget will be presented by the new government after the general polls. Arun Awatade, Founder of

Pune-based Iris Polymers, which manufactures agricultural films and industrial packaging films, said the government can help the segment in connecting with international supply and sales chains so that importing raw materials and exporting finished products become easier. "According to a research forecast, the global market for mulching materials was estimated to be worth USD 3.82 billion in 2022 and is projected to rise at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 7.6 per cent to USD 7.96 billion by 2032.

Credit card firms expand footprints in tier 2, 3 cities

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Acknowledging the increasing potential in tier-2 and tier-3 cities, credit card companies such as American Express are strategically expanding their footprint by partnering with key banks including Axis, ICICI, Kotak, SBI and Yes Bank, and other leading fintech partners. This is enabling merchants in previously underserved regions to accept credit card payments, thereby furthering financial inclusion and economic growth. With India's tier-2 and tier-3 cities currently undergoing widespread expansion and digitalization, these credit card companies are propelling a financial revolution which is all set to overhaul the domestic payments landscape. "American Express has a rich legacy of supporting small merchants globally, exemplified by initiatives like Shop Small. In India, the 'Offers Next Door' campaign stands as a testament to our commitment, aiding local businesses in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru to thrive amidst evolving market dynamics," said Anurag Gupta, Vice President & Head of Global Merchant & Network Services, American Express. Additionally, the ongoing digital surge has prompted credit card companies to enhance their online presence as collaborations with aggregators and processors facilitate an increased online footprint, ensuring that small merchants, even in remote areas, can tap into the vast e-commerce landscape. "In 2022, our Global Merchant Services Unit in India achieved remarkable milestones, adding over a million new merchant locations. Over 90% of the top 400 online merchants warmly accept our cards. Beyond card acceptance, our merchant partnerships offer best-in-class offers, marketing opportunities, and strategic tie-ups for growth. The success of our premium Card members highlights their purchasing power and the value of American Express Premium Cards...", added Gupta.

Payout by life insurers moderates in FY23 compared to previous year

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Payout by life insurance companies declined by about Rs 6,000 crore during 2022-23 because of lesser number of death claims as compared to previous financial year which was impacted by COVID-19. The life insurance industry paid a total benefit of Rs 4.96 lakh crore in 2022-23 as compared to Rs 5.02 lakh crore in FY22, according to the latest annual report released by sector regulator IRDAI. During FY22, the year hit by COVID-19 wave, the insurance companies paid Rs 60,821.86 crore as death claims. This came down by Rs 19,000 crore to Rs 41,457 crore in 2022-23. The benefits paid on account of surrenders/withdrawals



increased by 25.62 per cent to 1.98 lakh crore in 2022-23, of which public sector insurers accounted for 56.27 per cent. During the year, out of the total surrender benefits, it said, benefits for ULIP (unit-linked insurance plans) accounted for 62.51 per cent for private insurers and 1.56 per cent for state-

owned life insurers. In case of individual life insurance business, during the year 2022-23, out of the 10.76 lakh total death claims, the life insurance companies paid 10.60 lakh death claims, with a total benefit amount of Rs 28,611 crore, the annual report said. The number of claims repudiated was 10,822 for an amount of Rs 1,026 crore and the number of claims rejected was 4,340 for an amount of Rs 24 crore, it said. The claims pending at the end of the year were 833 for Rs 350 crore, it said, adding, the claim settlement ratio of public sector insurers was 98.52 per cent as at March 31, 2023 compared to 98.74 per cent as at March 31, 2022.

FPIs infuse ₹4,800 crore in equities on strong economic confidence

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) continued their buying spree and poured close to Rs 4,800 crore in the Indian equity markets in the first week of January driven by confidence in the country's robust economic fundamentals. Additionally, they injected Rs 4,000 crore in the debt market during the period under review, data with the depositories showed. With expectations of a prolonged decline in US interest rates in 2024, there is an anticipation that FPIs will likely escalate their purchase, particularly in the initial months of the New Year leading up to the general elections, V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist at



Geojit Financial Services, said. Further, FPI inflows into debt will also see acceleration in 2024, he added. According to the data, foreign investors made a net investment of Rs 4,773 crore in Indian equities this month (till January 5). This came following a massive investment of Rs 66,134 crore in December and Rs 9,000 crore in November.

The latest flow came amid investors waiting on the sidelines to get further cues on interest rates from the US Fed meeting minutes released last week, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director -- Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said. "India's domestic investor's consistent flow, exceptional GDP growth numbers of Q2FY24,

strong corporate earnings and good banking health are eye-watering for foreign investors," Kishlay Upadhyay - smallcase Manager and Founder of Fidel Folio, said. Adding the political stability confidence as generated from state election results in December has created the perfect recipe for a secular bull-run accompanied by FPI inflows, he added. He further said that investors want to get in as early as possible before the two most major events of the year -- Indian general elections and Fed rate cuts. Overall, the total FPI flows for 2023 stood at Rs 1.71 lakh crore in equities and Rs 68,663 crore in the debt markets. Together, they infused Rs 2.4 lakh crore into the capital market.

Footwear industry to hit \$90 billion mark by 2030: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Market size of the Indian footwear industry can increase by over three times to USD 90 billion by 2030 provided a host of measures such as a ban on show imports, fiscal incentives, more design centres and Taiwanese contract manufacturers setting up shops in the country are taken, a report said on Sunday. Economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said that the Indian footwear market, valued at USD 26 billion, is projected to reach USD 90 billion by 2030. "This growth will be character-

ized by two main changes - a significant increase in the demand for non-leather footwear (like sports shoes, running shoes, casual wear, and sneakers) in India, rising from 25 per cent to 75 per cent of the market share by 2030; and a shift in leather shoe production from small-scale, cottage industries to large corporates," it said. Suggesting eight actions for the sector, the report said shoe-making technology is primitive compared to electronics or semiconductor manufacturing and India should support local production by domestic firms and MNCs and "stop imports" of finished shoes.



"Today many brands make in China or Vietnam shoes in India. Few others do part manufacturing in India and import the premium shoes. India should support firms to make shoes locally by removing policy and logistics impediments,"

it said. It suggested the government introduce the PLI (production-linked incentive) scheme for inputs needed to make premium shoes as India does not make key inputs like the outsole moulds, glue, ethylene vinyl acetate (EVA) granules, and thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) films. Currently, manufacturers import such critical materials, which increases production costs by 30-40 per cent. This forces most brands to import premium shoes from China and Vietnam. "PLI-supported local production of critical inputs will help in making premium quality light

and strong shoes locally. The government should also consider exempting leather shoes from QCO (quality co-tool order) application," the report prepared by GTRI Co-Founder Ajay Srivastava said. It also suggested the government impose a 35 per cent customs duty on footwear imports priced below USD 3 per pair and set a minimum import price of USD 5 per pair to protect the domestic industry. Around 25 per cent of shoe imports in India are priced at less than USD 3 per pair. It added that leather shoes face no quality issues and are not imported in large values and this

is evident from the fact that they currently make up 81.7 per cent of India's footwear exports with most exports going to the quality-conscious markets of the EU and the USA. "QCO should primarily apply to non-leather shoes that constitute 77 per cent of India's USD 900 million footwear imports. India is lagging in the non-leather shoe sector in terms of quality and relies on imported inputs," the report noted. Further it said that the footwear manufacturing industry is dominated by Taiwanese contract manufacturers that make shoe brands like Nike, Adidas, and Puma.

JUNIOR WOMEN HOCKEY NATIONAL CAMP

India names 41 members core probable group

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hockey India on Sunday named a 41-member core probable group for the junior women's national coaching camp that begins on Monday at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) Centre, Bengaluru. The players were picked based on their performances in the domestic championships held in 2023, HI said in a release. They will report to coach Tushar Khandker for a month-long camp that concludes on February 6. "This core group has been picked based on the players' performances for their respective state teams in Hockey India Junior Women's National Championship, Zonal Championships as well as Junior Women Academy



National Championships and Zonal Championships," Khandker said. "I have always believed that

there is no dearth of talent in India. I look forward to working with this new group as these players will be closely watched

and developed with focus on the next FIH Junior World Cup," he said. List of players in the 41-member core probable group:

Goalkeepers: Vidyashree V, Aditi Maheshwari, Nidhi, Engil Harsharani Minz

DEFENDERS: Lalthantluangi, Niru Kullu, Mamita Oram, Thounjaojam Nirupama Devi, Jyoti Singh, Anjali Barwa, Pawanpreet Kaur, Puja Sahoo
MIDFIELDERS: Priyanka Dogra, Rajni Karketta, F Lalbi Aksiami, Manisha, Nirali Kujur, Hina Bano, Ksetrimayum Sonia Devi, Anisha Sahoo, Priyanka Yadav, Khaidem Shileima, Supriya Kujur, Jaisikdeep Kaur, Binima Dhan, Huda Khan, Sakshi Rana
FORWARDS: Sonam, Sanjana Horo, Dechamma PG, Ishika, Himanshi Sharad Gawande, Kanika Siwach, Nisha Minj, Yamunna, Geeta Yadav, Gurmail Kaur, Lalrinpuii, Munnuni Das, Ashwini Punjab Kolekar, Sunelita Toppo.
Standbys: Lakhimoni Majuwar (Goalkeeper), Mamteshwari Lahare (Defender), Sejal (Forward).



Rybakina blitzes Sabalenka to win Brisbane International

Dimitrov wins first title in six years

AP ■ BRISBANE (AUSTRALIA)

Elena Rybakina claimed her sixth career title with a 6-0, 6-3 rout of top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka to win the Brisbane International in a perfect tune-up for the first major of 2024. Sabalenka, who had won five of her seven previous meetings against the fourth-seeded Rybakina, had no answer Sunday to the world No. 4's laser-like groundstrokes and deft touches at the net as Rybakina dominated the final and stamped her credentials as one of the favourites for the upcoming Australian Open.

Almost a year after contesting the Australian Open final, where Sabalenka beat Rybakina in a tight three-setter, the tables were turned dramatically as the 2022 Wimbledon winner broke Sabalenka three times in a one-sided first set of just 24 minutes on Pat Rafter Arena in Brisbane. The top-seeded Sabalenka finally got on the scoreboard when she broke serve in the ninth game, but Rybakina broke back immediately for a 3-1 lead in the second.

Sabalenka held serve for the first time in the match in the 11th game, but it was too little too late as Rybakina nervously closed out the win on her first match point opportunity when the reigning Australian Open champion pushed her attacking forehand wide. It capped a dominant week for Rybakina, who conceded just 15 games across five straight-set wins and was the

24-year-old sixth career title and first since Indian Wells last year.

"I'd like to say congrats Aryna for a great week and great season last year and hopefully we meet in Melbourne," Rybakina said. "Despite the score, it's always tough to play against you, we always push each other."

The loss ended Sabalenka's streak of 15 wins on Australian soil, including a title run in Adelaide last year before her Grand Slam breakthrough at Melbourne Park, but the world No. 2 made light of a rare heavy defeat.

"I don't know where to start ... That was an interesting match, great job, thank you for those three games to at least make it look like a fight," Sabalenka said post-match. "Couple of words to my team - you did a bad job today. 6-0 6-3, that's all your fault guys."

"It is how it is. We showed some great tennis, and hopefully, we'll do better at the Australian Open."

The final was the first to feature the top two seeds in Brisbane since 2015, when No. 1 Maria Sharapova held off No. 2 Ana Ivanovic in three sets.

Dimitrov claims first title in six years Second-seeded Grigor Dimitrov beat top-seeded Holger Rune 7-6 (5), 6-4 in a tightly-fought men's final which stretched over 2 hours, 13 minutes and contained only one break of serve.

Dimitrov, ranked 14th, claimed his ninth career title and his first since the ATP finals in 2017.



Nadal withdraws from Australian Open

With an injury just one tournament into his comeback

AP ■ MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA)

Rafael Nadal has withdrawn from the Australian Open with an injury after playing just one tournament in his comeback from 12 months on the sidelines.

Nadal said he had concerns over his surgically repaired hip after needing a medical timeout in the third set of his Brisbane International quarterfinal loss to Jordan Thompson on Friday. The 22-time major winner initially said it seemed like more of a muscular problem than the tendon issue that caused him so much pain this time last year. He posted on social media Sunday that scans after he arrived in Melbourne revealed a small tear in the muscle and he was flying back to Spain for treatment.

"Right now, I am not ready to compete at the maximum level," he said on X, formerly known as Twitter. "I have worked very hard during the year for this comeback and as I always mentioned my goal is to be at my best level in 3 months," he said.

"Within the sad news for me for not being able to play in front of the amazing Melbourne crowds, this is not very bad news and we all remain positive with the evolution for the season. "I really wanted to play here in Australia and I have had the chance to play a few matches that made me very happy and positive."

Nadal won his first two competitive matches of the year, beating former No. 3-ranked Dominic Thiem and Australian wildcard entry Jason Kubler, before losing to Thompson. He had three match points in the second set of his quarterfinal but lost in three.

Ross tops Stage 1 for Hero at Dakar Rally

PTI ■ AL HENAKIYAH

Hero MotoSports Team Rally made a strong start to the Dakar Rally as its rider Ross Branch topped the opening stage of the iconic off-roading event.

In total, three Hero riders crossed Saturday's finish line successfully, with Branch finishing first among 136 competitors in the bike category.

After a spectacular performance in Stage 1, Branch leads the field with a healthy 12-minute advantage. The Hero squad also displayed remarkable camaraderie and commitment. Joaquim Rodrigues crashed and fell head over on the ground losing consciousness.

Joan Barreda and Sebastian Buhler, competing in the Rally GP class, reached the accident spot shortly, stopped to take care of their teammate and waited until he was evacuated by helicopter to the hospital. Branch too found fellow competitor Toscha Schareina crashing, and



decided to remain by his side until medical assistance arrived. Exhausted to the core, Barreda and Buhler also crossed the finish line of the extreme challenge in the top-15.

In the overall Rally GP class rankings, Barreda and Buhler find themselves on the 13th and 15th positions. Hero's fourth pilot Joaquim Rodrigues, however, encountered an unfortunate crash during the Stage

and had to exit from the rally. After a steady start in the Prologue stage, the competitors set out on their first full Stage at the 46th Dakar edition as early as 6am on Sunday - a 532 km eastward journey from AlUla to Al Henakiyah. The Stage was particularly demanding and saw several top riders crash and exit from the race. Rocks and canyons set the preface for the stage, as in the prologue

stage, followed by a maze of alternating wadis, off-piste, and lots of changes in direction.

While the rough winding tracks and volcanic lava settlements made way for amazing sceneries, the competitors had to risk everything until the last kilometer to finish.

The competitors will now make their journey further east to Al Duwadimi, covering a massive 662 kms in Stage 2 - of which 470 kms are timed. The route will feature fast stretches and will favour the brave. Wolfgang Fischer, Team Manager, Hero MotoSports Team Rally, said: "Today is a day of mixed emotions for us. The light and shadow are very close in this year's Dakar - an unfortunate exit for JRod, and Ross wins his third Stage for Hero - all in the same day!"

"The victory is also by a great margin, and we are extremely proud to put Hero on the overall lead at the Dakar Rally for the first time in our history. I look forward to a great race ahead."

Gauff rallies to beat Svitolina and retain Auckland title

AP ■ AUCKLAND (NEW ZEALAND)

Top-seeded Coco Gauff has retained her title at the WTA Auckland Classic, beating second-seeded Elna Svitolina 6-7 (4), 6-3, 6-3 in Sunday's final.

For the first time all week, Gauff fought with her hands. She swept into the final without dropping a set; in fact, dropping only 15 games on her way through the semi-finals.

That followed her flawless tournament last year when she didn't drop a set at all and capped off a perfect week with a 6-1, 6-1 win over Rebeka Masarova in the final. Third-ranked Gauff had needed only four hours of court time to reach the final whereas Ukraine's Svitolina took twice that much, beating Wang Xiyua of China 2-6, 6-4, 6-3 in a match which lasted four-and-a-half hours with rain breaks.

Sunday's match against Svitolina was by far the toughest Gauff has faced in this, first week of her 2024 season. She had to come from a set down for the first time and it took 2 hours, and 23 minutes to complete her victory. Previously, Gauff's longest match at the tournament had been 1 hour, 22 minutes.

It was a struggle throughout. Gauff's serve has been the cornerstone of her game all week. She served 10 aces alone in her 6-3, 6-1 win over fellow American Emma Navarro in the semi-finals and she won 80 per cent of points all week when her first serve was in play. Against Svitolina, Gauff managed only three aces and had seven double faults. She put only 65 per cent of first serves in play and had 43 unforced errors.

Gauff looked uncomfortable against the hard-hitting Svitolina who was tenacious and ran down



shots that Gauff previously would have counted as winners. But, she persevered and had a winning edge in the third set in which she broke Svitolina only once, in the eighth game. She served for the match and

championship in the next game and had to save a break point before winning on her first match point. She became the first player since Julia Goerges in 2018 and 2019 to win back-to-back Auckland titles and the first

American to do so since Patty Fendick in 1988 and 1989. "This is the first time ever having to defend a title so I'm really happy I was able to do it today," Gauff said.

"I'd like to congratulate Elna for an incredible week. What you do, being a mum and coming back so fast and at such a high level is pretty inspiring. Hopefully - not any time soon - I'll be able to do it like you've done it."

Gauff broke Svitolina in the fourth game of the first set but Svitolina broke back immediately. Svitolina was broken again in the eighth game and, again, broke back straight in a service game in which Gauff had two double faults. The set went to a tiebreak, won comfortably by Svitolina at 7-4.

Gauff started the second set by breaking Svitolina and broke her again in the seventh game. Svitolina broke back in the eighth game but

Gauff broke again. She was 15-40 down serving for the set but recovered to level the match.

The third set was a tight one with some extraordinary rallies in which both players mixed power and touch. Gauff took the vital service break in the eighth game and again faced a break point before serving out the set and match.

"It's been a really great experience to play for the first time here," Svitolina said. "I want to congratulate Coco and her team for the great start to the year and good luck at the Australian Open."

"I've been really enjoying myself here, playing great matches. It was a tough loss today, but I hope I can come back next year to play more tennis here."

Svitolina was supported from court-side throughout the week by husband Gael Monfils who will play the men's Auckland Classic which starts Monday.

Chelsea enters FA Cup with comfy win

AP ■ LONDON

Even while Chelsea is struggling in the English Premier League, its form in cup competitions could yet see it end the season with a trophy or two.

With a place in the League Cup semifinals already, Chelsea advanced to the fourth round of the FA Cup on Saturday after pasting Preston North End 4-0.

That could give U.S. Owners Todd Boehly and Clearlake Capital cause for optimism in a crisis-ridden run since their takeover in 2022.

At 10th in the league, Chelsea looks likely to miss out on qualifying for the Champions League for a second year in a row. But manager Mauricio Pochettino is finding joy in the domestic cups, extended against second-division Preston after Armando Broja, Thiago Silva, Raheem Sterling and

Enzo Fernandez scored in a second-half rout at Stamford Bridge. "The first half I was a little disappointed. We started so sloppily," Pochettino said. "I told the players at halftime we needed to increase the energy and match that of Preston. The second half was a completely different game. We dominated, created chances and deserved victory."

In the League Cup, Chelsea will face second-division Middlesbrough over two legs in the semifinals, and is favored to meet Liverpool or Fulham in the final.

But Pochettino will note how close Middlesbrough was to forcing a replay against Aston Villa before eventually losing 1-0 against the second-placed team in the Premier League. Matty Cash scored an 87th-minute winner at Riverside Stadium.

Aston Villa and Newcastle also advance



As well as being an unlikely league title contender, Villa has reached the knockout stage of the Europa Conference League. "Which competition is the

most important? We have to go into each match and get the best result," Villa manager Unai Emery said. "The first target is to be consistent through the Premier League and then to try

be consistent in the Conference League and the FA Cup."

UPSET AVOIDED Alexander Isak scored twice as Newcastle won the first north-east derby in eight years against Sunderland 3-0 in front of a fervent crowd at the Stadium of Light. Dan Ballard's own goal gave Newcastle a first half lead. "I never worried about the draw, I always thought it was a great draw - as long as we won it," Newcastle manager Eddie Howe said. "We handled the occasion well, were brave with the ball and were very composed. We didn't let the crowd take over."

Newcastle had won just one of its previous eight games and was eliminated from the Champions League and League Cup. The derby against second-

division Sunderland was seen as a difficult encounter but Newcastle comfortably beat Sunderland for the first time in 13 years.

"It has been a long time since we've played this type of game," Newcastle defender Dan Burn said. "If you can ask fans whether they would rather advance in the Champions League or beat Sunderland, I think they would pick beating Sunderland."

COMEBACKS

Trailing at second-division Queens Park Rangers 2-0, Bournemouth was in danger of defeat. But Marcus Tavernier sparked a second-half comeback. Further goals from Kieffer Moore and Justin Kluijver sealed a 3-2 win.

Brighton was also behind to second division opposition after Jan Paul van Hecke's 16th-minute own goal at Stoke.

Pervis Estupinan leveled for the Premier League team in first-half stoppage time and Lewis Dunk added another goal early in the second half. Lewis Baker equalized for Stoke from the penalty spot, but two Joao Pedro goals completed a 4-2 win for Brighton. There were no scares for Sheffield United, which picked up only its third win of the season in all competitions by beating fourth-division Gillingham 4-0.

LEICESTER ADVANCES

Leicester, which won the cup in 2021, beat Millwall 3-2. The 2016 Premier League champion is enjoying an impressive season after being relegated from the top-flight last year. Leicester has a 10-

point lead atop division two, and victory against Millwall was its 24th in 30 games in all competitions.

NON-LEAGUE HEROES

Non-league Maidstone can dream of a date with one of the giants of English soccer after beating third-division Stevenage 1-0. Sam Corne's penalty in the 45th settled the match.

Another non-league team, Eastleigh, will be in the draw for the fourth round after holding fourth-division Newport to 1-1.

But Chesterfield suffered an agonizing exit at second-division Watford. Chesterfield led 1-0 at halftime at Vicarage Road and was on course for a replay at 1-1 going into added on time. But Tom Dele-Bashiru's winner in the fifth minute of stoppage time sealed Watford's comeback.

T20 WORLD CUP

ROHIT SHOULD CAPTAIN, VIRAT ALSO SHOULD BE THERE: GANGULY

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Former captain Sourav Ganguly on Sunday backed stalwarts Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli to feature in India's squad for the T20 World Cup in June. The duo, who have not featured in any T20I for about 14 months, have made themselves available for the sport's shortest format, and it remains to be seen if they are picked for the three-match T20I series against Afghanistan, beginning January 11 in Mohali. "Of course Rohit should captain the team in the T20I



World Cup. Virat Kohli also should be there. Virat Kohli is an outstanding player, nothing will happen (to return after 14 months)," Ganguly added. India's semifinal defeat to England in the T20I World Cup on November 10 was the duo's last appearance in the shortest format.

Ganguly is impressed with Yashasvi Jaiswal's outing in the two-Test series in South Africa and said the young opener will get enough opportunities in future. The 22-year-old left-handed batter managed only 50 runs in four innings on the challenging South African tracks of

Centurion and Cape Town as the series ended in a 1-1 draw. "He has played well in the second Test, it's just the start of his career. He will get enough opportunities," Ganguly said during a promotional event here. After their innings and 32-run defeat at Centurion, India made a strong comeback to defeat South Africa by seven wickets at Cape Town in what was the shortest ever Test. "People say a lot of things after losing one match, India are a strong side. But look at the way they have played. They won the ODI series, drew both the Test and T20I series."



Mumbai players celebrate the wicket of Bihar batter Nawaz Khan on the third day of the Ranji Trophy cricket match between Mumbai and Bihar, at Moin-ul-Haq Stadium in Patna, on Sunday PTI

Aryan century helps UP extend lead over Kerala

PTI ■ ALAPPUZHA

Skipper Aryan Juyal struck a fine century to complement the bowlers as Uttar Pradesh extended their lead by 278 runs on day 3 of their Ranji Trophy Group B fixture against Kerala here on Sunday. Resuming at 220 for six, Kerala could add just 23 runs before being shot out for 243, handing Uttar Pradesh a 59-run lead. Pacer Ankit Rajpoot (5/64) claimed the remaining four wickets to seize a fifer.

In their second innings, Uttar Pradesh were off to a great start with Juyal (115*) and Samarth Singh (43) sharing an 89-run opening partnership.

While Jalaj Saxena got rid of Samarth, Juyal and Priyam Garg (49*) added an unbeaten 120-run stand to put the team in the driver's seat.

Ricky Bhui's ton headlines Andhra's fightback vs Bengal. In another Group B encounter in Visakhapatnam, Ricky Bhui (107) hit an unbeaten hundred to lead Andhra Pradesh's fightback against Bengal, taking the team to 339 for six. Resuming the day on 119 for 3, Andhra lost only three wickets, with Bhui and captain Hanuma Vihari (51) engaging in an 87-

run stand for the fourth wicket. It was followed by two more decent partnerships, as Andhra trailed Bengal by 70 runs with one day to go.

For Bengal, Akash Deep and Mohammed Kaif have been the stars so far, clutching a couple of wickets each.

BRIEF SCORES

IN ALAPPUZHA: Uttar Pradesh 302 & 219-1 (Aryan Juyal 115 not out; Jalaj Saxena 1/52) leads Kerala 243 (Vishnu Vinod 74; Ankit Rajpoot 5/64) by 278 runs.

IN VISAKHAPATNAM: Bengal 409 (Sourav Paul 96, Anustup Majumdar 125, Abishek Porel 70; Lalith Mohan 4/134) leads Andhra 339-6 (Hanuma Vihari 51, Ricky Bhui 107; Mohammed Kaif 2/37) by 70 runs.

IN PATNA: Mumbai 251 (Bhupen Lalwani 65, Suved Parkar 50, Tanush Kotian 50; Veer Pratap Singh 5/45) leads Bihar 100 & 91-6 (Sharman Nigrodh 40; Shivam Dube 4/7) by 60 runs.

IN RAIPUR: Chhattisgarh 327 (Ashutosh Singh 58, Amandeep Khare 110, Shashank Singh 82; Akash Sengupta 2/45) leads Assam 159 & 171-5 (Riyann Parag 82 batting; Jivesh Butte 2/35) by 3 runs.

ICC rejects Khawaja appeal against armband sanction



PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Australia opener Usman Khawaja suffered a setback after his appeal against the sanction imposed on him for wearing a black armband during the opening Test against Pakistan was rejected by the International Cricket Council, a report said on Sunday. Last month, Khawaja was reprimanded by the ICC for wearing the black armband to mourn the children who have been the victim of the conflict between Israel and Palestine that has been going on since October last year. The 37-year-old, who was born in Pakistan and is the first Muslim to play Test cricket for Australia, had challenged the reprimand saying that the armband was for a personal bereavement. However, a report in Sydney Morning Herald on Sunday said that "Usman Khawaja's reprimand for wearing a black armband onto the field during the first Test against Pakistan in Perth will stand after the International Cricket Council rejected his appeal against the sanction..." It was "according to a source close to the situation who wished to remain anonymous ahead of any public announcement being made". ICC regulations prevent cricketers from displaying messages of political, religious or racial causes during international matches. However, players can wear black armbands to mark deaths of former players, family members or other sig-

nificant individuals after taking prior permission from the governing body. ICC had said that Khawaja did not take required permission from his Cricket Australia or the ICC. "Usman displayed a personal message (armband) during the first test match against Pakistan without seeking the prior approval of Cricket Australia and the ICC to display it, as required in the regulations for personal messages," ICC statement had said. "This is a breach under the category of an other breach' and the sanction for a first offense is a reprimand." Khawaja had also arrived for a training session on December 13 with "all lives are equal" and "freedom is a human right" inscribed on his batting spikes and had reportedly planned to wear them during the inaugural Test. "The ICC asked me day two (of the Perth Test) what (the black armband) was for, I told them it was for a personal bereavement. I never ever stated it was for anything else," Khawaja had said. "I respect the ICC and all the regulations they have, I will be asking them and contesting them... From my point of view, that consistency hasn't been done yet. The shoes were for a different matter, I'm happy to say that, but the armband (reprimand) made no sense to me," he added. Khawaja also denied that he had "any hidden agendas" when he arrived for a training session with inscri-

Pollard replaces injured Rashid as MI Cape Town captain in SA20

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Former West Indian all-rounder Kieron Pollard on Sunday replaced Rashid Khan as captain of MI Cape Town in SA20, beginning on January 10. The Cape Town outfit had initially named ace leg-spinner Rashid as their skipper but the Afghan is still recuperating from his injury. "Rashid Khan is unavailable

currently, as he continues his recovery from injury. The MI CT wish Rashid a quick recovery and look to have him back on the playing field soon," the franchise said in a media statement. However, Rashid has been named in Afghanistan's squad to tour India for a three-match T20I series, but he is unlikely to be available. The MI Cape Town will begin



their campaign in the tournament with a match against Durban SuperGiants on January 11. The Cape Town side has some leading players such as Kagiso Rabada, Rassie van der Dussen, Sam Curran, Jofra Archer and Liam Livingstone in their ranks. Meanwhile, MI Emirates appointed West Indian batter Nicholas Pooran as their captain for ILT20.

Warner expresses coaching ambition

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Batting great David Warner has expressed his ambition to take up coaching in future, while also predicting that sledging will be gone from the sport within the next decade as players of different countries share dressing rooms in domestic leagues like IPL. The 37-year-old Warner played his final Test at the SCG on Saturday, helping Australia sweep the series 3-0 against Pakistan. He has already announced retirement from ODIs but will be available for T20Is and T20 leagues across the globe. "Yeah, I've got ambitions later down the track to potentially coach," Warner told 'Fox Cricket'. "I'll have to speak with the wife first to see if I'm allowed a few more days away." The left-handed opening batter was known for his aggressive behaviour against opposition players before the Cape Town ball-tampering saga in 2018. Earlier this week, Australian



opener Usman Khawaja claimed that the coaching staff instructed Warner to sledge opponents during the early stages of his Test career, with the Newlands sandpaper scandal prompting an overhaul of the team's culture. "When I came into the team, the way that I went about it on the field was to get in people's faces, to upset them and to get them off their rhythm when they're batting. I was moulded into being that person." He said the art of sledging will

soon become a thing of the past courtesy of T20 franchise leagues such as the Indian Premier League, where cricketers share change rooms with their opponents, according to the 'Fox Cricket' report. "I don't think you'll see that kind of sledging or anything like that anymore. I think it'll be just like a bit of laughter, a bit of banter, like me and Shaheen Shah Afridi (in the Test against Pakistan). "I think that's probably the way forward. I don't think you'll see that old aggression again," he said. "It will change. In five, ten years' time, if I am coaching, I think the whole dynamic will be changing, and it'll be more about cricket specifics and how you're winning games, and not about how you get on the skin of batsmen when you're out there." Warner finished his Test career with 8786 runs at an average of 44.59, including 26 centuries and 37 fifties. He is Australia's fifth-leading run-scorer in Test history.

De Villiers blames T20 cricket for short India, South Africa series

PTI ■ DURBAN

Legendary all-rounder AB de Villiers is annoyed that India and South Africa played only a couple of Test matches in the just concluded series and blamed proliferation of T20 leagues across the world for the situation. De Villiers said "something has to change" if the best team in the world is to be identified, advocating longer series. South Africa and India shared the honours with the hosts winning the opening Test in Centurion and the visitors emerging victorious in Cape Town. "I am not happy that there is not a third Test. You have to blame the T20 cricket going around the world for that," he said on his YouTube channel. "I do not know whom to blame, but I sense something is wrong. If you want to see all the teams



compete and see who is the best Test team in the world, something has to change." South Africa will next be travelling to New Zealand in February, again for a two-Test series. However, eyebrows were raised when Cricket South Africa (CSA) announced a second-string squad for the series, with uncapped Neil Brand to lead the side. The series is clashing with the second season of the SA20 League, set to run between January 10-February 10, with most of the top Proteas cricketers playing in the tournament.

De Villiers feels Test cricket is under pressure and admitted that the players and coaches would opt for competitions that offer handsome money. "It has sent shockwaves around the cricketing world and has made it clear that Test cricket is under pressure, for that matter even ODI cricket and the whole system is turning around T20 cricket." "The players, the board and coaches will turn towards where there is more money. You cannot blame them for thinking about their future with their family," he said.

Cape Town wicket was pretty stock-standard As far as the India-South Africa Test series is concerned, while the hosts won in Centurion by an innings and 32 runs within three days, the visitors prevailed by seven wickets in Cape Town within just two days.

Netherlands, Namibia to play series of warm up matches

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

The Netherlands and Namibia will play a series of warm-up matches against SA20 teams as part of their preparations for the T20 World Cup in June. The Dutch and Namibian players will have a chance to face some of the top cricketers in the world taking part in the SA20 League Season 2, which kicks off on Wednesday. The Netherlands will face Sunrisers Eastern Cape, Paarl Royals and MI Cape Town,

while Namibia will play against Joburg Super Kings in warm-up matches. Namibia head coach Pierre de Bruyn said the quality of the opposition and facilities in the SA20 will give his squad the ideal preparation for the global event taking place in the USA and the West Indies. "It's a fantastic opportunity for us to play against a top franchise like the Joburg Super Kings in these matches. For the Namibian players, it is another opportunity to use it as a measuring tool against a vari-



ety of top international players," he said. "Secondly, playing at a world-class stadium is very similar to what you will get playing at a World Cup, we experienced that at the last two World Cups in the UAE and Australia and as a player you can use this platform to simulate that World Cup coming in June, which will be against some quality players." Betway SA20 League Commissioner Graeme Smith said, "The League is thrilled to be able to provide a preparatory platform for Associate teams

eyeing success in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup later this year. "Our League's commitment to promoting cricketing talent aligns with the aspirations of these teams. We look forward to seeing the incredible growth and performances of these teams as they gear up for the pinnacle event in the T20 format in June." Defending champions Sunrisers Eastern Cape host Joburg Super Kings in the opening match of the SA20 on Wednesday.

Ashwin terms Vaughan underachiever remark laughable

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Ace spinner Ravichandran Ashwin rebutted former England captain Michael Vaughan's claim of India being an "underachieving team," saying they have been one of the best travelling sides in contemporary cricket. During a panel discussion in Fox Sports recently, Vaughan had said the Indian cricket team should have achieved

more on the field, particularly in the ICC events, considering the resources at their disposal. "Michael Vaughan recently made a statement that the Indian team is underachievers. Yes, we haven't won an ICC trophy in a while, and we call ourselves the powerhouse of the game. But that's just one side of the coin," Ashwin said in his YouTube channel. The 37-year-old said India



have produced excellent results, especially in Test cricket, around the world in the last few years. "Our Test team has been one of the best travelling teams at present. We have seen many great results. After Vaughan made that statement, so many experts from our own country started debating if India is an underachieving team. Frankly, it made me laugh," he said.

Ashwin then went on to offer a reverse scenario for the first Test in Centurion which was won by South Africa. "Let's reverse the situation. If South Africa had batted first after winning the toss in Centurion, wasn't there a chance they could have gotten all out by 65? "Even India was staring at the barrel at 20 for three, but Virat and Shreyas' partnership from there saved us."

Ashwin also emphasised that the series-drawing effort of India in Cape Town underlined the team's ability to bounce back from adversities. "Quality cricket team with good mental fortitude and mental skills can make a comeback from any situation, and this Indian team has time and again proved it. "Yes, we lost two WTC finals. I accept it wholeheartedly. But in the case of Test series,

a comeback is always possible," he added. Ashwin also urged the pundits to view cricket just as a sport. "What we need to understand is that cricket is still a sport. In India, we talk cricket in every nook and cranny and consider the sport a religion. "I feel we criticise and nitpick too much and get into unnecessary details. I think these are blinding us," said Ashwin.