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INDIA WOMEN
EYE MAIDEN T20I
SERIES WIN
12 SPORTS



SC sends Bilkis rapists back to jail

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In a massive setback to the Gujarat Government, the Supreme Court on Monday quashed the remission it had granted to 11 convicts in the high-profile gang-rape case of Bilkis Bano and the killing of her seven family members, while slamming the state for being "complicit" with an accused and abusing its discretion. It ordered all the convicts, who were released prematurely on Independence Day in 2022, to be sent back to jail within two weeks. Excoriating the Gujarat Government, the apex court said it "usurped" the power of the Maharashtra Government to grant remission to the convicts. It held as nullity the May 13, 2022 judgment of another bench of the apex court, which had directed the Gujarat Government to consider the remission applications of the 11 convicts in the case, saying it was obtained by "playing fraud on court". "This is a classic case where the order of this court dated May 13, 2022, has been used for violating the rule of law while passing orders of remission in favour of respondent nos 3 to 13 (convicts) in the absence of any jurisdiction by the State of Gujarat. Therefore, without going into the manner in which the power of remission has been exercised, we strike



down the orders of remission on the ground of usurpation of powers by the State of Gujarat not vested in it. The orders of remission are hence quashed," a bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan said. It asked whether "heinous crimes against women permit remission" irrespective of the faith she may follow or creed she may belong to. Bilkis Bano was 21 years old and five months pregnant when she was raped while fleeing the horror of the communal riots that broke out after the Godhra train burning incident in February 2002. Her three-year-old daughter was among the seven family members killed. In its 251-page judgment, the Supreme Court said the

Gujarat Government had no jurisdiction to entertain the applications for remission of sentences and only the government of the State where the offenders were sentenced was competent to consider an application for remission and pass an order. "Government of State of Gujarat (respondent No. 1 herein) had no jurisdiction to entertain the applications for remission or pass the orders of remission on August 10, 2022 in favour of respondent No. 3 to 13 (convicts) herein as it was not the appropriate government within the meaning of sub-section (7) of Section 432 of the CrPC," the bench said. The Supreme Court said just as an order passed by a court without jurisdiction is a

nullity, in the same vein, an order passed or action taken by an authority lacking in jurisdiction is a nullity and is non est (does not exist) in the eye of law. "On that short ground alone the orders of remission have to be quashed. This aspect of competency of the Government of State of Gujarat to pass the impugned orders of remission goes to the root of the matter and the impugned orders of remission are lacking in competency and hence a nullity. The writ petition filed by the victim would have to succeed on this reasoning," the bench said. The top court said if the Gujarat Government really had in mind the provisions of law and had adhered to the rule of law, it would have filed

a review petition against the May 13, 2022 judgment of another bench of the apex court by contending that it was not the appropriate government. While holding as nullity the May 13, 2022 judgment of the apex court, which had directed the Gujarat Government to consider the remission applications of the 11 convicts, the Supreme Court said on Monday it was obtained by "playing fraud on court". In its previous verdict, a bench comprising Justices Ajay Rastogi (now retired) and Vikram Nath had asked the Gujarat Government to consider the plea of convict Radheshyam Shah for premature release in terms of its remission policy of July 9, 1992, holding that the Government of the State where the offence had taken place has the jurisdiction to decide the application. On Monday, the top court noted that Shah had initially approached the Gujarat High Court in 2019 for a direction to consider his application for remission. "By order dated July 17, 2019 the High Court disposed of Criminal Application by observing that he should approach the appropriate Government being the State of Maharashtra. His second such application before the Gujarat High Court was also dismissed in 2020," it said. **Continued on Page 2**

Maldives loses traction, tourists head to Lakshadweep

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



In the midst of an escalating dispute between India and the Maldives, the hashtag #BoycottMaldives gained traction on social media as Indian tourists began canceling their scheduled vacations to the island nation. The travel agency firm EaseMyTrip has suspended all flight bookings to the Maldives on its website, while the Confederation of All India Traders has urged traders and exporters to refrain from conducting business dealings with the Maldives. The Indian Association of Tour Operators predicts that the repercussions of recent events and the call for a boycott will become apparent within the next 20-25 days. Meanwhile, MakeMyTrip announced on Monday that it has observed a 3,400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands. In a series of posts on the social media platform X, EaseMyTrip CEO Nishant Pitti said, "The water and beaches of Lakshadweep are as good as those in Maldives/Seychelles. We, at @EaseMyTrip, will come up with crazy special offers to promote this pristine

destination that our PM @narendramodi has recently visited!" The EaseMyTrip CEO also urged travellers "to discover the enchanting beauty of Ayodhya and the pristine allure of Lakshadweep" and encouraged them to "say no to Maldives bookings and explore the wonders of Ayodhya and Lakshadweep". Indian tourists constituted the highest number of visitors to the Maldives until December 2023, according to data from the country's tourism ministry. Out of the total 17.57 lakh tourists who travelled to the island nation, India had the highest share in terms of the number of visitors at 2,09,198 lakh, followed by Russia (2,09,146) and China (1,87,118). The number was more than 2.4 lakh in 2022, while over 2.1 lakh Indians flew to the Maldives in 2021. The Maldives was also one of the few countries open for international tourists during the pandemic, and nearly 63,000 Indians visited the country in that period. In 2018, India was the fifth-largest source of tourist arrivals in the Maldives, with 90,474 visitors. In 2019, India reached the second spot with nearly double the number (1,66,030). The Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) has urged all tour and flight operators to boycott the Maldives and redirect their focus to the Lakshadweep and Andaman Islands. Additionally, the ICC has called upon the Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India and the Hotel Association of India to explore investment opportunities in the Lakshadweep Islands, promising better returns compared to the Maldives. **Continued on Page 2**
Page 2: India summons Maldives envoy, condemns

JD(U) raps Congress for bid to usurp INDIA turf

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

Nitish Kumar-led JD(U), the major stakeholder of the INDIA bloc, threw a spanner into the ongoing process of talks over seat sharing between the Congress and other constituents of the coalition on Monday. The allocation of seats has become pivotal for the Congress after the recent setback in the Assembly polls when the party had planned to flex its muscles but had to settle with only one spectacular win in Telangana. Major stakeholders like TMC, Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena, and now the JD(U)-RJD combine have asserted their intention to contest on more seats.

Simultaneously, JD(U) has also questioned why the Congress is organising a Yatra of its own instead of turning it into a show of strength by the entire Opposition. The remark refers to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra scheduled to be undertaken from January 14 to March 20. Senior JD(U) leader and party spokesman KC Tyagi said that the Congress should focus where it is strong and should not press for States like Bihar where JD(U) and RJD are strong. Congress is part of an alliance with JD(U), RJD, and left parties in the Nitish Kumar-led Government in Bihar. It is alright for Congress to desire to contest on more seats where they are strong, but it is

completely impractical if they demand more seats in States where they are not in a powerful position," Tyagi said. He mentioned that both the ruling alliance partners — JD(U) and RJD — are strong and in a position to counter the BJP in Bihar, hence there will be no compromise on this. Nitish, who has been aiming to be the convener of the bloc, axed his trusted man Lalan Singh from the post of the party's presidency last week. The former is believed to be annoyed with the latter's growing proximity to RJD and Congress. Nitish was also displeased when, in the last INDIA bloc meeting, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge became a talking point for the Prime Ministerial candidate.



In fact, Nitish had walked out from the NDA and was instrumental in forming the Opposition coalition with high

ambitions to be the PM candidate against the BJP led by PM Narendra Modi. JD(U) also expressed displea-

sure at the delay by Congress in appointing a convener for the INDIA bloc. Tyagi said that Kharge's announcement that the INDIA alliance would meet in "10 to 15 days" to decide appointments to key posts has not "been well-received" by the party. He noted that the INDIA bloc is "running out of time and ideas" to counter the BJP. Tyagi emphasised that while the BJP has gained an advantage over the Opposition with a significant build-up for the Ram Temple inauguration, the Opposition also needs to present a compelling counter-narrative, especially regarding the demand for a caste census and other issues. In preparation for the 2024 Lok Sabha election, Congress has

initiated seat-sharing talks in some States with like-minded parties within the INDIA bloc. Sources indicate that senior leaders of the party have been instructed to engage with leaders from other alliance parties, and talks with some parties have already commenced. The Congress National Alliance Committee discussed the seat-sharing formula for Bihar with RJD Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Jha on Sunday. The meeting took place at the residence of Congress leader and convener of the Congress National Alliance Committee, Mukul Wasnik, in the national capital. NAC members Ashok Gehlot and Salman Khurshid were also present. Additionally, Congress leaders held a meeting with func-

tionaries of the JMM's Odisha unit to discuss the sharing of seats for the Lok Sabha elections and Assembly polls, which are being held simultaneously in the state. Sources indicate that this was the preliminary round of meetings, involving an exchange of views on the strengths and weaknesses of both parties, as well as major stakeholders like JD(U) and other INDIA bloc partners in the State. "It was a meeting between the Congress and RJD, and similar separate meetings will be held between the Congress and JD(U) and Left partners. Reaching a consensus on such aspects takes time as it is a tedious process considering the minutest of electoral factors," explained a Congress office bearer.

Empowering poor, women must for a strong India: PM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said that an empowered India would be ensured when the poor, farmers, women, and youth are empowered. Noting that his government has made all-round efforts to alleviate the difficulties of farmers, and beneficiaries have received ₹30,000 crore under the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned that the governments in the past had a "narrow ambit" regarding issues linked to farmers. The Prime Minister highlighted that Toor Arhar dal farmers can now sell their produce directly to the government online, ensuring purchases at MSP and better prices in the market. The scope of this scheme will be extended to other pulses as well, he added. "Our effort is to make the money we send abroad to buy pulses available to the farmers of the country," said the Prime Minister. Addressing the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra (VBSY) via video conferencing, Modi said the biggest objective of the Yatra is to ensure that no rightful beneficiary of government schemes is left

out. Thousands of Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra beneficiaries from across the country, along with Union Ministers, MPs, MLAs, and local-level representatives, joined the event. Prime Minister Modi noted that the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra recently completed 50 days and has connected with about 11 crore people. "Vikas Bharat Sankalp Yatra has become not only the Government's journey but also the country's journey," he said. The Prime Minister mentioned, "Modi Ki Guarantee ki Gadi is reaching every nook and corner of the country. The poor, who spent their lives waiting to benefit from government schemes, are experiencing meaningful

change today. The Government is reaching the doorsteps of the beneficiaries and proactively providing benefits. Along with Modi Ki Guarantee ki Gadi, government offices and people's representatives are reaching the people." Referring to the bus about "Modi ki guarantee," the Prime Minister emphasised the mission-mode approach to cover beneficiaries and highlighted the link between the resolution of "Viksit Bharat" (developed Bharat) and the saturation of scheme coverage. Earlier, Modi interacted with beneficiaries of Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra via video conferencing, where they praised government

initiatives. Prime Minister Modi highlighted the enduring struggles of the poor, youth, women, and farmers over many generations. "Our government aims to spare present and future generations from the hardships endured by earlier ones. We aspire to liberate a significant portion of the population from the daily struggles for basic needs," Modi said. "For us, the empowerment of the poor, farmers, women, and youth is paramount. These are the four primary pillars of our nation. When these segments are empowered, the country will become stronger," he said. Since the Yatra began, we

have received 12 lakh new applications for Ujjwala connections, along with numerous applications for Suraksha Bima Yojana, Jeevan Jyoti Yojana, and PM SVANidhi, Modi reported. Highlighting the Yatra's impact, the Prime Minister mentioned health checkups for over two crore people, including one crore TB checkups and 22 lakh sickle cell checkups. Doctors are reaching the doorsteps of the poor, Dalits, deprived, and tribals, overcoming challenges faced by previous governments, Modi said. He emphasised Ayushman Yojna, providing ₹5 lakh health insurance, free dialysis, and low-cost medicines at Jan Aushadhi Kendras. "Ayushman Aarogya Mandirs across the country have become significant health centres for villages and the poor." Modi underscored the government's impact on women empowerment, citing loans through the Mudra Yojna, women serving as Bank Mitras, Pashu Sakhis, and Asha workers. Over the last decade, 10 crore women have joined self-help groups, receiving over ₹7.5 lakh crore. As a result, many sisters have become 'Lakhpati Didis.'

Swindlers invoke business tycoons to con gullible

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI



A massive fraud is underway through social media, aiming to deceive gullible Indians of their hard-earned savings. The modus operandi of these fly-by-night operators is to exploit the words of industrialist Ratan Tata and corporate wizards NR Narayana Murthy and Nandan Nilekani, who are allegedly endorsing a business proposal by a company called BTC Ai Evex. This company claims to be an automated trading platform aimed at improving the lives of regular Indians. Vijay Mohan Valiathan, a leading chartered accountant in Kerala, told The Pioneer that the entire operation reeks of a major financial scam and deceit. The company, BTC Ai Evex, in advertisements disguised as news reports, quotes Narayana Murthy addressing an investors' meeting (with the date and place of the meeting remaining a mystery) and attributes to him the statement: "BTC Ai Evex is our brainchild, offering substantial earning potential for countless Indians." The advertisement, presenting itself as a news report, claims that the

manager, we delved into understanding BTC Ai Evex operations. Bolstered by this confidence, we tested the platform's withdrawal process, successfully transferring funds to our video operator Rahul Kumar's bank account within minutes. The statement of accounts issued by the public sector Bank of India has been posted to substantiate their claim. "Our internal investigation unequivocally affirms BTC Ai Evex authenticity. Without any prior trading experience, our team effortlessly accrued ₹23,886 in three days," claims the so-called news report. "Key advantages include accessibility, simplicity, responsive client support, minimal risk, and unwavering trustworthiness," claims the so-called news report. Two questions remain unanswered. If individuals of the calibre of Ratan Tata, Narayana Murthy, and Nandan Nilekani were to make claims like this, it would make national headlines, but no mainstream media has carried the claims by these celebrities. Similarly, any system developed by Infosys that could make people rich overnight would have made national headlines. **Continued on Page 2**

Engaging our personal

ED: PDS scam in Bengal likely ₹10,000 crore

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Friday's attack on the Enforcement Directorate officials conducting raids in North 24 Parganas Trinamool Congress strongman Shahjehan Sheikh's house has wider angle than, ED sources say. According to the ED officials the attack relates a larger "across the border money-smuggling racket" in which a number of TMC leaders including Shahjehan and Shankar Adhya a former chairman of Bongaon municipality are allegedly involved. Most of such money siphoning is connected to ratio distribution and recruitment scams say agency sources adding the officials had raided Shahjehan and Adhya's houses on Friday after getting specific leads regarding the matter. A chance retrieval of a secret letter allegedly written by former Food Minister (presently State Forest Minister) Jyotipriya Mallick --- presently in jail custody for his alleged links to the ratio scam --- led to the raids, an official said. "The letter was written by Mallick who is presently in SSKM Hospital ... in the letter he had directed someone to



collect cash from Adhya and Shahjehan ... this further confirmed the suspicion and a raid was planned," a source said. In a parallel development, a report submitted by the ED to the Calcutta High Court says that the ratio scam could go beyond ₹10,000 crore mark considering the fact that Mallick was Food Minister for about 10 years. "This ₹10,000 crore is exclusive of the money generated from rice smuggling ... and consider the fact that rice being the staple food is preferred to wheat both in Bengal and Bangladesh," an official said. Out of the ₹10,000 crore about ₹2,700 crore was siphoned out by Shankar Adhya to Dubai where a number of ruling Trinamool Congress leaders have their business interests or properties, ED has told the High Court. Like Shahjehan, Shankar Adhya who was arrested on

Friday night too has business interests on both sides of the borders. "He used 19 money transferring agencies --- out of which some were his own --- to convert Indian currencies into foreign currencies ... besides both these men used what they call carriers locally to smuggle out packets of currency notes to Bangladesh," the ED has said. "If the TMC runs on the theory of 75 per cent and 25 per cent of the ill-gotten money has to be sent to the topmost leadership and if Jyotipriya Mallick has generated ₹10,000 crore then you can consider the magnitude of the scams they perpetuated in Bengal," State Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari said. According to sources both the leaders who were raided on Friday have their business interests including star hotels at Digha, Puri and other tourists places as well as on both sides of the border. Besides, Shahjehan runs slaughter houses, numerous brick kilns, sand and earth quarries, ferries. According to sources they earn cut money from lottery agents too. "Each lottery table has to give ₹1,000 per day ... multiply with the number of agents working in a district," said ED officials.

Attempts at defaming Bengal, says Mamata



SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Three days after the Friday's attack on the ED officials during a raid at the house of Trinamool Congress strongman Shahjehan Sheikh's house at Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday spoke up saying there were attempts at defaming Bengal on the question of law and order. "People have started raising questions on the law and order situation of the State which is wrong ... I do not mind people calling me names because I am used to it and I have been suffering such attacks from my very childhood ... but I feel hurt when they give my State bad name," Banerjee told at a government function organized for students. "Very recently Serampore

Police Station in our State has been adjudged the best police station in India ... and Kolkata has been adjudged the safest city in the country ... if the State's law and order situation had been bad then how would we get such accolades ... so this attempt at defaming the State must be stopped and the people of the State must unite against this disinformation campaign," she said adding how the Centre had stopped funding the fast track courts and how her Government had to bear the costs of running them. "The Centre has not been giving funds for these fast track and POSCO courts but as we are committed to the purpose we are still funding from our meager resources," Banerjee said. She would not however directly raise the issue of Friday's attack on the ED officials.

India summons Maldives envoy, condemns barb

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A day after Maldives suspended three of its ministers for their disparaging remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India summoned the Maldives envoy to New Delhi and expressed strong concern over the comments. In a related development, Maldives Foreign Minister Moosa Sameer criticised the derogatory remarks, labeling them as "unacceptable." He emphasised that these remarks do not reflect the official position of the Maldives Government. Sameer stated that Maldives remains committed to fostering a "positive and constructive dialogue" with all its partners, particularly its neighbours. In a post shared on X, Moosa Sameer said, "The recent remarks against foreign leaders and our close neighbors are unacceptable and do not reflect the official position of the Government of Maldives. We remain committed to fostering a positive and constructive dialogue with all our partners, especially our neighbours, based on mutual respect and

understanding." A massive uproar erupted after a Maldivian deputy minister, along with other cabinet members and government officials, made disparaging and unsavory references to Modi's recent visit to Lakshadweep. On January 2, he visited the Union Territory of Lakshadweep and shared several pictures, including an "exhilarating experience" of him trying his hand at snorkeling. In a series of posts on X, Prime Minister Modi shared pictures of the white beaches, the pristine blue skies, and the ocean and tagged them with a message that read, "For those who wish to embrace the adventurer in them, Lakshadweep has to be on your list." In a post that has now been deleted, the Maldivian Deputy Minister of Youth Empowerment, Mariyam Shiuna, made a mocking and disrespectful reference to the Modi over his visit to the Indian island cluster. On Sunday, former Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih condemned the use of "hateful language" against India by Government officials on social media, saying New

Delhi has always been a good friend to the island nation. Taking to his official handle on social media platform X, Solih posted, "I condemn the use of hateful language against India by Maldivian government officials on social media." He stressed that "India has always been a good friend to the Maldives and we must not allow such callous remarks to negatively impact the age-old friendship between our two countries." Meanwhile, former Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid said the objectionable remarks against the former and fellow Indian natives on social media are 'reprensible' and 'odious'. Calling on the Maldivian government to identify the officials responsible and reprimand them, the former Foreign minister on his official X handle posted, "Derogatory remarks made by two Deputy Ministers of the current Maldives Government, and a member of a political party in the ruling coalition, towards Prime Minister @narendramodi and the people of India in social media is reprehensible and odious."

Uttar Purvi Mahotsav in Delhi from January 13

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Rich diversity of North East India, blending traditional arts, crafts, and cultures under one vibrant umbrella 'Uttar Purvi Mahotsav 2024' will be showcased at Bharat Mandapam at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, from January 13 to January 17. The five-day cultural extravaganza promises an enchanting journey through traditional dances, mesmerizing performances, and a showcase of the region's rich cultural heritage, said Chanchal Kumar, Secretary, Union Ministry of Development of North East Region recently while sharing details of the event with the media. He said that the festival which aims to foster exchanges in traditional handicrafts, handlooms, agro products, and tourism offerings, becoming a catalyst for the region's growth and development will witness participation of more than 250 weavers, farmers, and entrepreneurs. "It will also serve as a platform to showcase the unique aspects that make the NorthEast Region a cultural jewel. The Mahotsav aims to present the best of Northeast India under

one roof with exquisite, hand-crafted products, handloom & textiles, sustainable handicrafts, bouquet of GI products - indigenous fruits and organic products of Northeast India," said the official. One of the interesting features of the fest will be panel discussion on "Women Leaders in the Northeast" which will dwell into the diverse contributions of women leaders, recognizing their important role in laying the groundwork for resilient and sustainable communities in the region. At the same time, under the theme "Northeast in Action," the panel on "Youth, Workforce, and the Economic Tapestry of India" aims to unravel the compelling dimensions brought to the table by the youth and workforce of the Northeast. Exploring their contributions, aspirations, and challenges, the discussion will provide insights into how this dynamic demographic can significantly shape the economic tapestry of India. To bolster the economy of the region and as a part of its Act East Policy to reachout to the Northeast habitants, the festival will provide a conducive platform for significant buyer-seller meets, fostering valuable interactions across various sectors.

Come clean on MVA LS seat sharing: Ambedkar to Uddhav

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Miffed by the delay in the finalising the seat-sharing adjustments by the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) chief Prakash Ambedkar on Monday asked his party's ally Shiv Sena (UBT) to "come clean" on the electoral understanding it had reached with two other MVA partners - Congress and NCP (Sharad Pawar). Fearing that his party might be short-changed in the "seat-sharing" pact for 48 Lok Sabha seats to be arrived at among three MVA constituents in Maharashtra, Ambedkar sought to know Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray as to what kind of seat-sharing arrangement was being reached among the three MVA partners - Sena (UBT), Congress and NCP (SP). As per the understanding reached among the MVA partners, the VBA will be allotted a seat or two from the Shiv Sena (UBT) quota. Within hours after Sena spokesperson and MP Sanjay Raut went to town saying that the VBA could



contest the Akola LS seat and none of the MVA allies would object to it, Ambedkar upped the ante on the lack of clarity in the seat-sharing formula being worked out among the MVA partners. Joining issue with Raut, Ambedkar wanted to know as to why the SS-UBT kept harping only on the Akola seat when he could contest any seat in the state. The VBA chief, it may be recalled, was elected twice from Akola and later served a term in Rajya Sabha. "Why are you talking about only Akola?... Let anybody contest it, I can stand for election from Mumbai, or Pune, or even from Badayuni (Badaun) in Uttar Pradesh...

Nobody can stop me... But first you spell out to us what agreement has been reached with the Congress and NCP (SP)?" Ambedkar asked. Ambedkar - who had threatened to contest all the 48 seats in the state if VBA's claims were ignored in the seat-sharing talks - said, "Our understanding with the Sena (UBT) is clear... If the Congress-NCP (SP) do not respond, then VBA and Shiv Sena (UBT) will each contest 24 seats each in Maharashtra". On their part, the Congress and NCP (SP) have chosen not to respond to the repeated outbursts by Ambedkar. Their stand is clear that it is for the Sena (UBT) to deal with its ally - VBA.

CAPF to take precaution after attack

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

Following the Friday's attack on the ED officials and Central forces at Sandeshkhali when they went to raid the house of a TMC leader Shahjehan Sheikh the administrative authorities have mandatorily directed the central forces personnel to take certain precautionary measures before conducting such raids. Accordingly the central forces would have to wear helmets, body guards and carry lathis in addition to their guns, sources said. This, apart from other "important measures" taken as per protocol, sources added. Meanwhile, sending a stern message the Nabanna --- State administrative headquarters --- to act on the Shahjehan Sheikh case Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose has called for a report on the Friday's incident, Raj Bhavan sources said on Monday. "The governor has also directed the state government to fix responsibility for the failure of law and order and punish the police officers who failed in their duties," said an official.

Ram temple pran pratistha invitation cards to be hand delivered to all guests

PTI ■ AYODHYA

Invitation cards for the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya will be "hand-delivered to all the guests" through representatives of the temple trust and a large number of volunteers, official sources said. Besides, various representatives of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and their allies are also aiding in hand-delivering the invitations. Some of the guests have already received the invitation card. The invitation card has an imposing image of the temple and also Lord Ram. Besides the large, aesthetically-designed cards, the invitation also includes a booklet carrying brief profiles of some of the key people who were involved in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Over 7,000 people are on the invitee list of the temple trust and they include cricket legends Sachin Tendulkar and Virat Kohli, Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, and a billionaire industrialists Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

ery service," the temple trust member said. Invitations were recently also sent to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and senior Congress leader Sonia Gandhi. Party sources said the invitation cards were hand-delivered to both of them by a senior representative of the temple trust. The trust has also invited 4,000 seers from across the country and 50 guests from foreign countries. The invitees from abroad will also receive invitation cards by hand, a top source in the trust said. "Similar to our network of people in India, we have volunteers in foreign countries too. We will send the cards to them from India and representatives will then travel to hand-deliver it to the guests," the source added. Iqbal Ansari, a litigant in the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid case, on January 5, also received his invitation for the consecration ceremony. A representative of the trust hand-delivered it to him at his house in Kotia Panjitala near the Ram Path in Ayodhya. Ansari, who is in his late 50s, on December 31 told PTI in an interview that the Muslim community respected the 2019 Supreme Court verdict on the Ram temple issue. The apex court in a historic verdict settled the fractious issue that goes back more than a century, and backed the construction of a Ram temple by a trust at the disputed site in Ayodhya and ruled that an alternative five-acre plot must be found for a mosque. Actors Arun Govil and Dipika Chikhlia, who played the roles of Lord Ram and Goddess Sita in the famous TV serial "Ramayan", have also been invited to the ceremony. Invitation cards have been printed in "both Hindi and English". Each invitation set carries the main invitation card, the "Pran Pratishtha" programme card and a booklet on the journey of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and people who played a part in it, directly or indirectly.

Maldives loses traction, tourists head to Lakshadweep

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In another post on platform X, Pitti wrote: "Embark on a journey with @EaseMyTrip to discover the enchanting beauty of Ayodhya and the pristine allure of Lakshadweep! Immerse yourself in rich culture and breathtaking landscapes. Say no to Maldives bookings and explore the wonders of Ayodhya and Lakshadweep. Watch our video on the new website to ignite your wanderlust! #ExploreWithEase #Ayodhya #Lakshadweep". "In solidarity with our nation, @EaseMyTrip has suspended all Maldives flight bookings. The move comes close on the heels of the Maldives government suspending three of its ministers following a row over derogatory social media posts against Prime Minister Narendra Modi over his visit to Lakshadweep. Pitti said that every year 3 lakh people visit Maldives from India. Many Indians who already had made bookings to Maldives took to social media to announce cancellation of their travel plans to Maldives and posted pictures of cancelled flights and hotel reservations. Some unverified reports on Indian social media claimed that more than 8000-10,000 hotel bookings and 2,500-3000 flight tickets to the Maldives were cancelled. Tour operators in India are gearing up for an impact of calls for a cancellation of holidays in the Maldives as they said that there are "no new inquiries by people" for visits to the island nation. The Indian Association of Tour Operators predicts that the repercussions of recent events and the call for a boycott will become apparent within the next 20-25 days. An Indian traveller who had made bookings to Maldives for travel between March 31 to April 2 posted a screenshot on X, showing that he has cancelled the trip. Singh also said that he is

"atmanirbhar" with domestic destinations like Lakshadweep. Meanwhile Vistara has said it will monitor the demand for flights between the two countries as the "situation is evolving right now". Vistara operates one flight each daily from Mumbai and Delhi to Male. Airline's Chief Commercial Officer Deepak Rajawat said it has not cancelled anything as of now and will monitor the demand for flights. Air India, IndiGo and SpiceJet also operate flights to the Maldives. There were no comments from the three airlines on the current situation. Meanwhile, MakeMyTrip on Monday said it has observed a 3,400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands. "We have observed a 3400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since the Honorable PM's visit. This interest in Indian beaches has inspired us to launch a 'Beaches of India' campaign on the platform with offers and discounts to encourage Indian travellers to explore the country's stunning beaches. Keep watching this space!", MakeMyTrip said in a post on social media platform X. A row erupted on social media last week when a minister and some other leaders in the Maldives used derogatory remarks against PM Modi after he posted a video of him on a beach in Lakshadweep. The post by Mariyam Shiuna - which has now been deleted - featured the pictures of PM Modi from his recent visit to Lakshadweep. The Deputy Minister of Youth Empowerment, Information and Arts, referred to the Indian Prime Minister as a 'clown' and a 'puppet of Israel'.

SC sends...

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The Supreme Court said Shah later moved the SC but did not disclose that he had, within 14 days of the order dated July 17, 2019, approached the Maharashtra government with his application for remission, and that the CBI and the Special Judge (CBI), Mumbai had given a negative recommendation in his case. The apex court said when the opinions were found to be negative, Shah filed a petition before the SC in 2022 seeking a direction to the state of Gujarat to consider his remission application suppressing the above material facts. "This he could not have done, thereby misrepresenting and suppressing relevant facts, thus playing fraud on this court," the bench said. "Taking advantage of May 13, 2022 order of this court, other convicts also filed remission applications... Gujarat was complicit and acted in tandem with respondent no. 3 (one of the convicts) in this case. This Court was misled by suppressing facts," the bench said. Reacting to the verdict, senior advocate Vrinda Grover, who appeared for retired IPS officer of Maharashtra cadre

Meeran Chadha Borwankar and others, termed it a very good judgment. "... (it) has upheld the rule of law and the faith of the people of this country, particularly women, in the legal system, the courts, and that there is an assurance for justice," Grover told reporters. Celebrations erupted in Devgadhi Baria town in Gujarat's Dahod district, with relatives of Bilkis Bano bursting firecrackers. "I am happy the Supreme Court has quashed the Gujarat government's decision and asked the convicts to surrender. I feel we have received justice today," a witness in the case and Bilkis Bano's uncle Abdul Razaq Mansuri told reporters in Devgadhi Baria. The SC refused to accept the plea of "protection of the liberty" of the convicts. "One cannot lose sight of the fact that the said respondents were all in prison for a little over fourteen years (with liberal paroles and furloughs granted to them from time to time). They had lost their right to liberty once they were convicted and were imprisoned. "But, they were released pursuant to the impugned remission orders which have

been quashed by us. Consequently, the status quo ante must be restored. We say so for another reason in the event convicts are inclined to seek remission in accordance with law, they have to be in prison as they cannot seek remission when on bail or outside the jail," the bench said. Besides the petition filed by Bilkis Bano contesting the remission, several other PILs, including one by CPI(M) leader Subhashini Ali, independent journalist Revati Laul and former vice-chancellor of Lucknow University Roop Rekha Verma, had challenged the relief to the convicts. TMC leader Mahua Moitra had also filed a PIL against the remission and premature release of the convicts.

United Kingdom, urging to expedite the registration process and invest the first installment of Rs 24,000 at the earliest. The numbers from where the calls were made include + 4 4 7 9 0 6 6 0 6 9 6 4 , + 4 4 7 9 8 5 6 4 5 2 2 9 , +447983292634, etc. Interestingly, their supposed support center is in Turkey, from where a person (probably a Keralite, as per his accent)

called, urging to speed up the payment. All these international calls aimed to persuade the investor to part with Rs 24,000, revealing their ulterior motive. This is the first time in the history of India that names of top industrialists and corporate barons are being used to convince investors about the "seriousness" behind a company's investment potential.

Swindlers invoke...

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"The audio recording posted on the portal has many inherent flaws. While attempting to register with BTC Ai Evex, this writer was redirected to X Pro Market, a completely unfamiliar company. Although the effort to register with the company did not succeed, the prospective investor received at least two dozen phone calls from numbers registered in the

called, urging to speed up the payment. All these international calls aimed to persuade the investor to part with Rs 24,000, revealing their ulterior motive. This is the first time in the history of India that names of top industrialists and corporate barons are being used to convince investors about the "seriousness" behind a company's investment potential.

No decision on seat sharing; AAP, Congress to meet next

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress and the AAP on Monday held a meeting to discuss seat sharing in Punjab and Delhi for the Lok Sabha polls and decided to meet again to give a final shape to the arrangement between the two parties of the INDIA bloc. Insiders said the discussions mainly revolved around "cooperation" in seven Parliamentary seats and how they could together to defeat the BJP. "The issue of the seat-sharing is expected to be discussed in the presence of AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal in the next meeting," insiders said. Another insider said AAP is demanding Lok Sabha seats not just in Delhi and Punjab, but also in Gujarat, Goa, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana. After the talks, Congress MP Mukul Wasnik said scores of issues for the elections were discussed. The leaders of the two parties discussed possibilities of seat sharing but did not divulge any details. "We had a very good meeting. Senior AAP leaders were sent to today's meeting for holding discussions with us on behalf of



Arvind Kejriwal. The National Alliance Committee (NAC) formed by the Congress president held discussions with AAP leaders," Wasnik said after the meeting. "In this meeting, we have had in-depth discussions with senior leaders regarding seat sharing and various topics. After a few days, we will meet again and the final discussion on seat sharing will take place. We will give a final shape to the seat-sharing plans later. Together we will contest the elections with vigorous preparation and defeat the BJP," Wasnik, who is the convener of Congress' NAC, said. "It is not proper to reveal what transpired during the discus-

sions. One has to wait for sometime. We have already decided to contest elections together. Congress and AAP are an important part of the INDIA alliance," the Congress leader said. Top Congress leaders and members of the seat-sharing committee of the party Mukul Wasnik and Ashok Gehlot were present at the meeting here while those from the AAP included Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak and Delhi cabinet ministers Atishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj. Apart from Wasnik and Gehlot, Delhi Congress chief Arvinder Singh Lovely, and senior party leaders Salman Khurshid and Mohan Prakash

Rai slams DPCC chief for closure of smog tower, calls it contempt of SC

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Environment Minister Gopal Rai slammed Delhi Pollution Control Committee's (DPCC) Chairman Ashwani Kumar on closure of smog tower, calling it contempt of the Supreme Court. The Environment Minister directed the Principal Secretary (Environment & Forest & Wildlife) to release the salaries of workers within 24 hours, making Smog Towers at Connaught Place operational. Issues pertaining to non-payment of salaries of workers stationed at Smog towers, Rai expressed his displeasure, in a written communication addressed to the Principal Secretary (E&F). Taking a dig at the Arvind Kejriwal government, Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri demanded that the amount should be recovered from Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his cabinet colleagues. Bidhuri said that Delhi could not get clean air even for a single day in the last two and a half months. Rai issued directions to ensure that all payments are made on time in the near future, causing no interruptions. He direct-



ed the DPCC Chairman to submit a detailed report within 48 hours (i.e. latest by 10.01.2024) addressing important aspects related to this shocking dereliction of duties by DPCC like Details of payments released by DPCC to project partners i.e. (NBCC and TATA projects) subsequent to directions of the Supreme Court in November 2023, details of payments that are due to project partners as of 31.12.2023 and payments that have been released by the DPCC against the same, details of the first instance that the DPCC Chairman first became aware of the issue of non-payment of salaries to workers at CP Smog Tower and what the actions taken by the DPCC Chairman since then, the DPCC Chairman to further investigate to identify the officers responsible for causing a delay in the release of payment for the project as per MOU terms and recommend disciplinary action to be initiated against them. "Given the gravity and urgency of the matter, a detailed report addressing the points raised above be submitted to the undersigned within 48 hours i.e. latest by 10th January," he

added. Rai mentioned, "It has come to my notice through various newspapers that work on Smog Tower has again been stopped by the workers due to non-payment of salaries for the last two months. This is a shocking dereliction of duties by DPCC that was directed by the Supreme Court as recently as November 2023 to ensure the continued operation of the Smog Tower." "Kejriwal inaugurated this smog tower with much fanfare in 2021 and crores of rupees were also spent on the advertisement of this smog tower built at the cost of Rs 23 crores. Now the situation is such that its employees themselves have locked this tower. The Delhi government makes such aerial plans only for publicity and without following the rules and regulations. This tower was also commissioned without permission or recommendation. Even the Delhi Government's Pollution Committee never recommended it but expressed doubts over its success. The result of the report of IIT Mumbai in this regard is that it is not effective in an area of more than 20 meters," Bidhuri said in a press statement.

Capital records 24 Covid variant JN.1 cases; all recover

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The national Capital has so far reported 24 cases of COVID-19 sub-variant JN.1, including three patients who were from outside Delhi, with all of them recovering from the infection, officials said on Monday. There is nothing to worry about as the patients had mild symptoms, they said. "The first patient of JN.1 sub-variant had got admitted to a hospital since she was stressed but recovered within a few days. The remaining patients have also recovered. Three of the patients who are from outside Delhi were detected with Covid during pre-operative screening. What we have learnt so far is that majority of the patients have recovered in home isolation," said an official. Delhi had reported its first case of COVID-19 sub-variant JN.1 in December last year. The official asserted that there are hardly any symptoms and the patients are recovering within two to three days. Till last week, there were 16 cases of JN.1 variant in Delhi. According to the recent reports of genome sequencing received, out of 29 samples that were sequenced, six had low genome coverage, the officials said. Out of the 23 samples that passed the genome sequenc-



ing tests, eight were detected with the JN.1 variant, 11 were found with BA.2 while one sample each was found with the XBB.2.3 and HV.1 variant and two with HK.3. According to the officials, there are currently 35 active cases in Delhi. India has logged 605 new cases of Covid, while the number of active cases of the infection stood at 4,002, the health ministry said on Monday. The number of cases of COVID-19 sub-variant JN.1 reported from 12 states till January 7 rose to 682, official sources said on Monday. They said 199 cases have been reported from Karnataka, 148 from Kerala, 139 from Maharashtra, 47 from Goa, 36 from Gujarat, 30 from Andhra Pradesh, 30 from Rajasthan, 26 from Tamil Nadu, 21 from Delhi, three from Odisha, two from Telangana and one from Haryana.

BJP leaders witness PM's chat with Viksit Bharat beneficiaries



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

On this occasion, Nadda talked to few beneficiaries and people who were getting information about the schemes in the camps of Central Schemes organised in the Beneficiary Fair and encouraged them to avail maximum benefits of the Central Schemes. In the program organized at Pratap Camp, MPs Dr. Harsh Vardhan and Gautam Gambhir, BJP's National Media Co-Head Sanjay Mayukh, National Spokesperson Pratyush Kanth, Delhi BJP Officebearers S Dinesh Pratap Singh, Abhay Verma, Mrs. Yogita Singh, Bansuri Swaraj, Sardar Impreet Singh Bakshi, Sarika Jain, Praveen Shankar Kapoor, District President Vijendra Dhama, MLAs S Vijendra Gupta, Omprakash Sharma and Anil Bajpai and former MLA Tarvinder Singh Marwah and thousands of beneficiaries of Central Government schemes participated. In another programme organ-

ized at Uttam Nagar, Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia listened to the live dialogue of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the presence of MP Praveen Sahib Singh and encouraged the present beneficiaries and Bharatiya Janata Party workers to do their part to make India a developed nation by 2047 and made them pledge to give full cooperation. In Ranjit Nagar of Patel Nagar assembly, National Vice President of BJP Bajjayant Jai Panda in the presence of National General Secretary Dr. Radha Mohan Das Agarwal and National Minister Dr. Alka Gurjar, told the beneficiaries and Bharatiya Janata Party workers present there that India will be a developed nation by 2047 and gave them pledge to give full support for developing India. Delhi BJP General Secretary Yogendra Chandolia and Treasurer Satish Garg, Secretary Harish Khurana were present on this occasion.

LG nod to standardise non creamy layer, EWS certificates for jobs

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a move to standardise the non-creamy layer and economically weaker section (EWS) certificates for the purpose of recruitment by different departments of the Delhi Government, Lieutenant Governor Vinal Kumar Saxena has approved the recommendations of a high-level committee. The committee that was set up by the Delhi Government's chief secretary has recommended adoption of the prescribed format of certificate of the Revenue department in consonance with the format of Department of Personnel and Training of the Central Government, Raj Niwas official said. The LG's approval will simplify and standardise issuance of non-creamy layer and economically weaker section certificates to the applicants. All such certificates issued by the Revenue department will now be in consonance with the prescribed format of the DoPT, said a Raj Niwas official. Saxena has also asked the director (education) and the vice-chairman of the directorate of agriculture to explain within a week about pending 415 and 13 dossiers respectively by the Delhi Subordinate Services Selection Board (DSSSB) for appointments, he



added. The official said the new standardised and uniform certificates now issued by the Revenue department will be applicable to all user departments for recruitment purposes. The revenue officials were earlier issuing these certificates in different formats creating confusion for the user departments leading to delay in the recruitment process and giving rise to unwanted litigations, he added. The committee recommended that having a standardised format of certificates as prescribed by DoPT will leave no scope for dispute at any stage of recruitment. The official further said all issuing authorities under the Revenue department like the sub divisional magistrates (SDMs) and Tehsildars among others will now have to issue certificates in the format prescribed by the department and all user departments will have to accept such certificates.

Maliwal, Singh, Gupta file papers for RS polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party's candidates for the January 19 Rajya Sabha elections former Delhi Commission for Women chief Swati Maliwal, ND Gupta and jailed AAP leader Sanjay Singh filed their nominations at the Delhi transport commissioner's office in Civil Lines on Monday. The six-year term of Sanjay Singh, Sushil Kumar Gupta and N D Gupta ends on January 27. Maliwal's name has been nominated by the party to replace Sushil Gupta. AAP has renominated ND Gupta and jailed party leader Sanjay Singh for their second terms. Meanwhile, AAP MP Sanjay Singh was brought to Civil Lines in a police van to file his nomination for Rajya Sabha. Sanjay Singh's wife and father was also present during his nomination. Sanjay Singh's father Dinesh Singh, expressed gratitude for the unwavering support of the AAP and its workers during his son's arrest. "The party and its workers had trust in him, and they are more upset than his own family on his arrest that Sanjay Singh was punished for speaking the truth...I want to thank the party on behalf of other party workers and my family...The party has taken the right decision by not getting stuck in tyrant politics" Dinesh Singh said.

Woman, partner of accused in model murder case, arrested

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

The Gurugram police on Monday arrested a 20-year-old woman, second partner of main accused and hotel owner Abhijit Singh, in the murder case of ex-model Divya Pahuja. Officials said the arrested woman, identified as Megha of Mitraon Extension in Delhi's Najafgarh, allegedly helped Abhijit in hiding the crime weapon, documents and Divya's personal belongings after the murder. A special investigation team (SIT) looking into the case has taken Megha on two-day police remand after she was produced in a city court, they said. On January 2, Divya was taken to Hotel City Point by five people and allegedly shot dead inside room number 111, police said. The body of the ex-model could not be traced even after six days. The SIT interrogated Abhijit and his second partner Megha for about two hours. A senior investigator said police have doubts that the accused who took away the



body in a BMW car might have thrown it in Ghaggar river. A team of police is also trying to fish out the body from the river with the help of divers, he added. With the arrest of Megha, four accused have been arrested in the case so far, police said. Police have already arrested main accused Abhijit Singh, Hemraj and Omprakash in the case, while they are conducting raids to nab two other accused -- Balraj Gill and Ravi Bandra. "We are questioning the accused woman after taking her on police remand. Our teams are conducting raids to find out the body and to nab

Yuva Natya Samaroh theatre festival kicks off

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The national capital witnessed enthralling theatrical performances by young directors at the opening day of Yuva Natya Samaroh on Monday. The festival, which spans over a period of five days, opened with plays such as 'Rang De Basanti' and 'Jaise Tum Kaho', with the former centred around the devastating Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the latter focusing around a contemporary family and the sentiments of young individuals with aspirations to take up opportunities abroad. Hosted by the Sahitya Kala Parishad at the LTG Auditorium, the festival was attended by many prominent individuals, including the minister of arts and culture of the Delhi government, Saurabh Bharadwaj. Addressing the audience that gathered to witness the play, Bharadwaj expressed his sentiments: "As we start the magnificent Yuva Natya Samaroh 2024, I am delighted to see the compelling energy and artistic brilliance displayed on its opening night. The stage, adorned



with the enthusiasm of up-and-coming theatrical directors, provides a dynamic platform for our vibrant city's upcoming artists. Yuva Natya Samaroh is an essential medium that creates an environment for emerging talents to spread their wings and fly." Inviting the natives of the city to the festival, Bhardawaj said, "I extend a warm welcome to all art lovers and enthusiasts to join us to support and encourage these emerging artists. Let us collectively celebrate the vibrancy and innovation that the youth bring to the stage." The festival, which concludes on January 12, is gearing up to present to Delhiites intriguing performances in the next couple of days with productions such as 'Chehre', 'Mujhe Amrita Chaiye', 'Chitralakha' 'Papa' 'Kandhe pe betha tha Shaap', 'Rejang La' and 'Savant Aunty Ki Ladkiyan'.

2 dozen traffic cops shunted for missing from duty points

STAFF REPORTER ■ NOIDA

More than two dozen traffic police personnel were shunted from their posts after they were not found on their duty points during a surprise inspection by Gautam Buddh Nagar Police Commissioner Laxmi Singh on Monday morning, officials said. An explanation has also been sought from Deputy Commissioner of Police (Traffic) Anil Kumar Yadav, Assistant Commissioners Pawan Kumar and Rajeev Kumar Gupta who were not found in their areas by 10.24 am, the officials said. "Today, a surprise inspection of the duty point of the traffic police was conducted by Police Commissioner Laxmi Singh between 9.30 am and 11 am. During the inspection, traffic personnel deployed at Link Stadium Chowk, Rai Residency, Atta Chowk, Adobe Chowk, Sector 49, 100, 105 and 107 etc. Were not found on



duty," police spokesperson said. "The police commissioner took immediate cognizance and ordered that six sub-inspectors, 15 head constables and seven constables be sent to the police line with immediate effect due to their absence from duty and indiscipline," the spokesperson said. A departmental inquiry against the policemen found absent from their duty points has been handed over to ACP Sudhir Kumar and after the investigation is complete, the report will be sent to the police commissioner, the official added.

Israel backs India in row with Maldives

Israeli Embassy in India advocates for promoting tourism in Lakshadweep



envoy to India was summoned to the external affairs ministry on Monday and conveyed strong concern over the remarks against Modi in social media by a number of ministers of the Maldives.

The Maldivian government suspended three of its deputy ministers on Sunday after they criticised Modi for his post on X following his visit to Lakshadweep, inferring that it was an attempt to project the Union Territory as an alternative tourist destination to the Maldives.

Among a diplomatic row between India and Maldives, the Israeli Embassy in India on Monday pitched for promoting tourism in Lakshadweep on Monday amid a diplomatic row between India and the Maldives over disparaging remarks made by Maldivian Ministers following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands.

It also shared pictures of the pristine beaches and marine life in Lakshadweep. Meanwhile, the Maldivian

True leaders empower those around them: IAF Chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Air Force chief VR Chaudhari said here on Monday true leaders empower those around them and their influence extends far beyond parade grounds and urged National Cadet Corps(NCC) to join the armed forces and live a life of "unity and discipline". Addressing the cadets at the NCC R-Day Camp 2024 here, Chaudhari also underlined that Republic Day is a "reminder of the struggles, sacrifices, and aspirations" that have shaped India's journey as a democratic republic.



The camp was inaugurated by Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on January 5. It will culminate on January 28. "Our nation is a mosaic of different cultures, languages, and customs, which converge into a shared commitment towards preserving democracy and inclusive progress," the IAF chief said. "As a premier uniform youth organisation of our country, the

National Cadet Corps has contributed significantly in transforming the lives of millions by inculcating the quality of discipline, leadership, camaraderie, team spirit, adventure, and national integration," he said. NCC Director General Lt Gen Gurbirpal Singh was present on the occasion. A total of 2,274 cadets will take part in the NCC Republic Day Camp 2024, which will see enhanced participation of female cadets, Singh said on January 3.



In his address, Air Chief Marshal Chaudhari also asserted that discipline, a cornerstone of the NCC's ethos, is not merely a set of rules but a way of life. "It is a conscious choice to adhere to a code of conduct, to prioritise duty over convenience, and to exhibit restraint even in the face of challenges. In cultivating discipline, you are not just shaping your destiny, but contributing to the larger tapestry of a disciplined and orderly society," he said. "Leadership, another key facet

of your NCC training, is not confined to rank or hierarchy. It is about inspiring others through your actions, fostering esprit de corps, and looking after those placed under you. Remember, true leaders empower those around them and their influence extends far beyond parade grounds," the IAF chief added. He also praised the legacy of the NCC and the values it ingrains among cadets. "I am aware that many of you want to join the armed forces. It is undoubtedly one of the best professions today, offering a quality life full of adventure and action. I call upon you to join the armed forces and live a life full of unity and discipline, the motto of the National Cadet Corps," Chaudhari said. India will on January 26 mark the 75th anniversary of its Republic Day. The IAF chief said the Republic Day holds "profound significance and so does this Republic Day camp". "It is a reminder of the struggles, sacrifices, and aspirations that have shaped our journey as a democratic republic. Remember that you are a part, and an integrated part of this narrative, contributing to the ongoing saga of a vibrant and resilient India," he added. "Selflessness is the third pillar of the NCC's philosophy. It is a quality that separates you from the rest of the country," Chaudhari said. "You will cherish the time spent here not just for the memories, but also for the personal growth and resilience the NCC has imbibed in you," he added.

Rajnath approves proposal to raise more NCC units in UTs of J&K, Ladakh



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has approved a proposal to raise four more National Cadet Corps (NCC) units in the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, Defence Ministry officials said here on Monday. The approval includes one Mixed (Boys & Girls) Army Battalion each at Udhampur (J&K), Kupwara (J&K) and Kargil (Ladakh), and one Air

Squadron at Udhampur (J&K). Resultantly, in addition to the existing 27,870 cadets, the strength in J&K and Ladakh will increase by 12,860, which is a 46.1 per cent rise. Currently, the Directorate has two Group Headquarters, with a total of 10 NCC Units, covering all the three geographical regions. The expansion will boost the morale of the youth in the region, who will contribute significantly to nation building.

Generic medicines helped poor save ₹26,000 crore

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Jan Aushadhi Kendras selling generic medicines at affordable rates have helped urban poor saving approximately ₹26,000 crores in the last nine years, now rural poor and farmers too can avail such benefits as around 241 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) have been permitted to open such outlets in villages, Union Cooperative and Home Minister Amit Shah said on Monday here. Addressing a national mega conclave here on "PACS as Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Jan Aushadhi Kendra", he informed that in the last six months, 4,470 applications from PACS were received. Out of these, in-principle approval has been given to 2,373 PACS while 241 have already taken up such venture. Shah emphasised that the Government has streamlined Jan Aushadhi Kendras to ensure the poor get medicines at lower



rates and allowed PACS to expand their business activities to open Jan Aushadhi Kendras due to changes brought in their byelaws. He said about 40 field officers have been deputed to help PACS in running these kendras. Shah said PACS were only confined to agri-credit business as their byelaws permitted them to

do this only. But after formation of a separate cooperation ministry, the Government took 56 initiatives to diversify their business activities and came out with a model byelaw. The model byelaw was framed to prevent closing down of PACS, Shah pointed out. At the event jointly organized by the Union Cooperation

Ministry and National Cooperative Development Cooperation, Shah also gave away the Jan Aushadhi Kendra 'store code' certificates to five PACS representatives from Jammu & Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. At present, there are around 63,000 functional PACS in the

country. The Government has taken several steps to strengthen PACS including their computerisation, diversifying their business activities, and putting in place model byelaws. The Government has aim to open around 2 lakh PACS across the country. Health and Pharmaceuticals and Fertilisers Minister Mansukh Mandaviya who was also present at the event added, "with these outlets being opened in rural areas, people can now buy generic medicines at affordable rates. For instance, cancer medicines, which cost about ₹2,250 in the open market are sold at ₹250. Even rural girls can buy sanitary napkins at Re 1 from these kendras." Minister of State for Cooperation B L Verma, Cooperation and Gyanesh Kumar, Secretary, Ministry of Cooperation, Arunish Chawla, Secretary, Dept. of Pharmaceuticals, Union Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilisers and representatives of Jan Aushadhi Kendras and

PACS from across the country were present at the event. Dr Mandaviya informed that "more than 10,500 Jan Aushadhi Kendras are operating in the country which are providing more than 1,965 high-quality medicines and 293 surgical and other products at 50 to 90 percent of the cost of branded medicines available in the market". Addressing the gathering, Dr Mansukh Mandaviya informed that "in the first phase, 2,000 Jan Aushadhi Kendras are planned to be opened through PACS". He also informed that the Dept. of Pharmaceuticals have already approved more than 2,300 applications from PACS for opening Jan Aushadhi Kendras in the country, of which 500 are already functional at present. The Minister asserted that opening Jan Aushadhi Kendras through PACS would strengthen PACS as a cooperative organisation besides expanding the reach of quality and affordable medicines in the country.

Tourists cancelling trips to hill destinations due to lack of snow

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Where is the snow? Tourists have started asking the travel agents to call off trips to hill destinations whether it is Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. In fact, the anticipated white blanket that tourists were eager to witness at tourist destinations such as Gulmarg and Pahalgam were disappointed as the region have received almost no snow while the hills have below-average snowfall. Experts say that the El Nino effect is throwing spanners across the northwest Himalayas with an unusually dry winter and no immediate relief in the offing, if one goes by the observation by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). It said that 2023 was the warmest-on-record year and the warming El Nino event is likely to further fuel the heat in 2024. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) too has attributed low snowfall to the absence of Western Disturbances (WDs). "Almost no major snowfall is likely till mid-January with even the expected January 9-10 WD not likely to help much," it said. The El Nino phenomenon occurs when sea surface temperatures (SSTs) are higher than average in the eastern tropical Pacific, and there is a simultaneous weakening of trade winds. The absence of snowfall is not a one-time thing but affects the annual cycle of snow. Reetu Jain, Director of Coterie Tours Pvt said that such unpredictable weather is not good for the tourism sector. It has been double whammy for the tour operators particularly in North India. "In November we were facing low turnout of international travellers due to high rise in pollution. Many of our bookings could not take place or were postponed, especially elderly travelers who refrained themselves to North India.



Now with almost nil snow falls in the upper reaches of Himalayas, newly married couples and those seeking adventures in snows too are having second thoughts about their plans of visiting the hilly tourist hotspots," she added. At the same time, glaciologist and Himalayan researcher A N Dimri told a news agency about social and economic implications of poor snow falls. "If it continues longer, it can have a huge cascading effect on socio-economic benefits. If you don't get (enough) snow, you don't get replenishment of water, it will impact agriculture, your health and can, in turn, impact your economy," he said. "Bizarre dry winters so far over hills due to prolonged dry spell & nothing major expected from upcoming Western Disturbance on 9-10th Jan," amateur meteorologist "Weatherman Shubham" posted on X on Saturday along with a photo of Kedarnath temple and surroundings sans any snow. A picture showing Gulmarg as a barren patch has also gone viral on the social media with netizens blaming the rapid urbanization and high temperature-induced climate change for the "grim situation." Gulmarg is a world-famous skiing resort, attracting hundreds of national and international skiers who travel to Kashmir for skiing adventures. "So far a number of bookings have been canceled by the international skiers and if the situation remains the same, nobody will come here this sea-

son for skiing," said Farhat Naik, a snowboarding instructor in Gulmarg. On social media, showing snowless scenes of Gulmarg, he said, "It's heartbreaking to see Gulmarg in such conditions during this time of the year, especially if you have never witnessed something like this before. Indeed, the weather patterns have been quite erratic & unpredictable in recent years, leading to unusual occurrences like this," he posted. He said that the skiers have canceled the January slot as of now, and if there is snowfall, they might consider coming in February. Scientists say that the replenishment of water sources for the southern Himalayan region will bear the brunt. "The water system will collapse. We are drifting towards living in a dryer system," Dimri warned. In fact, not only India's Himalayas, the world saw another year full of extreme weather events resulting from climate change in 2022, from intense storms to soaring temperatures and rising sea levels. Antarctica was no exception, according to research last year. "My hope is that the public starts to see both the fragility and complexity of these polar regions," said Rajashree Tri Datta, a research associate in the Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences who contributed to sections of the report related to Antarctica and the Southern Ocean.

Covid subvariant JN.1 cases rise to 682 since January 7



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Covid-19 sub-variant JN.1 has made its presence felt in at least 12 States from January 7 till date on Monday as the incidents rose to 682, official sources said on Monday. They said 199 cases have been reported from Karnataka, 148 from Kerala, 139 from Maharashtra, 47 from Goa, 36 from Gujarat, 30 from Andhra Pradesh, 30 from Rajasthan, 26 from Tamil Nadu, 21 from Delhi, three from Odisha, two from Telangana and one from Haryana. Even though the number of cases is rising and the JN.1 sub-variant has been detected in the country, there is no cause of immediate concern as the majority of those infected are opting for home-based treatment, indicating mild illness, officials said. In the meantime, India has logged 605 new cases of Covid, while the number of active cases of the infection stood at 4,002. Four deaths -- two from Kerala and one each from Karnataka and Tripura -- 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 increase after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions. After December 5, 841 new cases were reported on December 31, 2023 which was 0.2 per cent of the peak cases reported in May 2021, 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 during April-June 2021. At its peak, 414,188 new cases and 3,915 deaths were reported on May 7, 2021. Since the pandemic began in early 2020, more than 4.5 crore people have got infected and over 5.3 lakh deaths have died in about four years since then across the country. The number of people who have recuperated from the disease stands at over 4.4 crore with a national recovery rate of 98.81 per cent, according to the ministry's website. According to the ministry website, 220.67 crore doses of Covid vaccines have so far been administered in the country. The Centre has asked the states and Union territories to maintain a constant vigil amid an uptick in the number of Covid cases and the detection of the JN.1 sub-variant in the country. States have been urged to ensure effective compliance with the detailed operational guidelines for revised surveillance strategy for COVID-19 shared by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Winter chill continues to numb northern India

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The winter chill continued to numb the northern part of the country including the national capital with a dense layer of fog and 'severe' cold. Delhi woke up to another chilly morning with the maximum temperature dropped to 17.5 degree Celsius, two notches below the normal while the minimum temperature settled at 5.3 degrees Celsius, two notches below the season's average. Ayanagar recorded a minimum temperature of 4.3 degree Celsius, three notches below the season's normal. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) data showed the maximum temperature was recorded of 11.9 degree Celsius in Mangeshpur, 12.1 degree Celsius in Jafarpur, 14 degree Celsius in Narela, 14.3 degree Celsius in SPS Mayur Vihar, 14.8 degree Celsius in Palam, 16.4 degree Celsius in Lodhi Road, 15 degree Celsius in Ridge, 15.8 degree Celsius in Ayanagar, 16 degree Celsius in Pitampura, 16.4 degree Celsius in Pusa. Similarly, the maximum temperature of Gurugram was recorded 14.7 degree Celsius and 17.6 degree Celsius in Faridabad. CDO Ghaziabad was recorded the maximum temperature of 13.8 degree Celsius and NCMRWF Noida recorded 14.7 degree Celsius. A satellite image of North India, released by the weather department, showed very dense fog cover in isolated pockets of Punjab, Haryana-Chandigarh, Delhi, Western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, isolated pockets of Madhya Pradesh on Monday morning, leading to disruption and slow movement of rail, road and air transport. As many as 20 Delhi-bound trains were delayed on Monday due to weather-related conditions in the national capital. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the relative



humidity at 8.30 am was recorded at 95 per cent. In its advisory, the IMD has asked people do not ignore shivering, wear several layers of loose fitting, light weight; warm woollen clothing; cover head, neck, hands and toes adequately as majority of heat loss occurs through these body parts. "Wear several layers of loose fitting, light weight; warm woollen clothing rather than one layer of heavy cloth," it added. In its daily bulletin, the weather forecast agency said minimum temperatures were in the range of 4-8 degree Celsius over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, west Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan; 9-12 degrees over parts of east Uttar Pradesh and northwest Madhya Pradesh. "It is above normal by 1-3 degree in isolated pockets over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, south Rajasthan and in many pockets over east Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and 4-7 degree above normal over many parts of Bihar and Jharkhand." It further predicted no significant change in minimum temperatures likely over northern parts of the country during the next five days, while cold wave conditions are very likely in isolated pockets of north Rajasthan on Friday and Saturday.

According to IMD, there was slight respite from the intense cold wave conditions in Jammu and Kashmir but the minimum temperatures remained several degrees below the freezing point across the valley, owing to clear sky. Srinagar, is yet to experience snowfall this year. Gulmarg, known for its ski slopes, remains devoid of the usual winter snow, disappointing enthusiasts from India and abroad. This January marks the first time in recent public memory that Gulmarg and Pahalgam, renowned for their snowy landscapes, have seen no snow. The plains have received no snowfall, and the hilly areas have seen below-average snowfall, contributing to a 79 per cent rainfall deficit throughout December in the Kashmir Valley. Experts warn that this reduction in snowfall might lead to water scarcity and a potential food crisis in the region. "In Kashmir, El Nino's impact is evident through prolonged dry spells, milder winters, and diminished snowfall," they said. Kashmir is currently under the grip of "Chilla-i-Kalan", a 40-day harsh winter period, when a cold wave sweeps the region and temperatures drop considerably leading to the freezing of water bodies as well as water in pipes.

SENA MLAS DISQUALIFICATION CALL

SPEAKER MEETS SHINDE, SPARKS ROW

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

A fierce controversy has erupted here over a move by Maharashtra Speaker Rahul Narwekar to have a closed door meeting with Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, ahead of his impending ruling seeking disqualification of 16 Shiv Sena MLAs, including Shinde himself, Narwekar — who has been directed by the Supreme Court to give his ruling in the much-discussed case seeking the disqualification of 16 Shiv Sena MLAs, including the Chief Minister, by January 10, 2024.



about the outcome in the MLAs' disqualification case, Raut said: "Here is a Speaker who suddenly falls, then suddenly reverts and gets into his car to go to meet the chief minister," Raut said. "Just three days before the pronouncement of the verdict in the MLAs' disqualification case, the Speaker goes and meets the chief minister and accused in the case... What kind of justice can we expect from the Speaker?" Raut asked.



ahead of his delivering his verdict in the disqualification case, Raut said: "Here is a Speaker who suddenly falls, then suddenly reverts and gets into his car to go to meet the chief minister," Raut said. "Just three days before the pronouncement of the verdict in the MLAs' disqualification case, the Speaker goes and meets the chief minister and accused in the case... What kind of justice can we expect from the Speaker?" Raut asked.

Tanaji Sawant, Sandeepan Bhumre, Abdul Sattar; MLAs Yamini Jadhav, Prakash Surve, Mahesh Shinde, Lata Sonawane, Balaji Kinikar, Ramesh Bornale, Sanjay Raimulkar, Chimanrao Patil and Balaji Kalankar. It may be recalled that Shinde — who along with 15 Shiv Sena MLAs had walked out of the parent Sena camp — later mustered a strength of 40 rebel Sena MLAs and teamed with the Fadnavis-led BJP and toppled the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government and formed his own government in last week of June 2022.

questioning the delay in giving ruling in the MLAs' disqualification case. The apex court had on December 22, 2023 set January 10, 2024 as deadline for delivering the judgement in the case. Ahead of the Supreme Court's directive to Narwekar, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, representing the speaker, had told the apex court that there were a total of 34 petitions and 133 respondents in the case the Speaker would have to give his ruling under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution. The Speaker would conduct the proceedings even during the Winter Session of the Assembly held in Nagpur between December 7 and December 20, 2023.

Voters will not fall for Congress carrots: BJP

'Modi Guarantee will bag all 28 Karnataka LS seats'

PTI ■ BENGALURU



Karnataka BJP President B Y Vijayendra on Monday said there is a pro-BJP wave in the country and the party will win all 28 seats from the state in the coming Lok Sabha elections. Addressing a BJP Lok Sabha poll planning meeting here, he said intelligent people of the country will not fall for the "gimmicky guarantees" of the Congress party as they know that Modi guarantee is the best.

teach the Congress government a lesson in the next Lok Sabha elections, adding that his party would win all the 28 seats in the upcoming polls. In the last Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won 25 seats in Karnataka, while an independent backed by the party also emerged victorious. The Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) had won in one constituency each.



CHANGE OF NAME

I, Kiron Jyoti Kumar W/o Mr. Susmit Bose, R/o, 5, Maple Avenue, DLF Farms, Chattarpur, Delhi-110074 have changed my name after marriage to Kiron Jyoti Bose alias Jyoti Bose. PD(234)A

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that my client Jagdish Kumar & Jyoti Singh are in process to avail the LAP against their Property bearing No. 55, area measuring 08.25 Sq. Yards out of total area measuring 186.5 Sq. Yards, out of Plot No. 38, K/8, No. 20 Situated at Gali No. 12, Sarojini Park Shanti Nagar in the area of Village Kharey Khas Hlaqa Shadara Delhi 110031 (having loan from Pramal Capital & Housing Finance Limited) acquired the same vide Partition Deed dated 08.08.2023 (Doc. No. 7250), they confirmed that they are not having the below documents pertaining to the property in question:

Office of the Managing Director Uttarakhand Co-operative Dairy Federation Ltd. Mangal Parao, Haldwani - 263139 (Nainital) Uttarakhand. E-Tender Notice Advt 23/UCDF/23-24, Date- 08.01.2024

FORM NO. 5 DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL 600/1, University Road, Hanuman Setu Mandir, Lucknow. SUMMONS FOR FILING REPLY & APPEARANCE BY PUBLICATION

FORM NO. 5 DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL 600/1, University Road, Near Hanuman Setu Temple, Lucknow- 226 007. SUMMONS FOR FILING REPLY & APPEARANCE BY PUBLICATION

FORM NO. 5 DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL 600/1, University Road, Hanuman Setu Mandir, Lucknow. SUMMONS FOR FILING REPLY & APPEARANCE BY PUBLICATION

PUBLICATION DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL (Area of Jurisdiction-Part of Uttar Pradesh) 600/1, University Road, Near Hanuman Setu Mandir, Lucknow- 226 007. DRC No. 875/2022

FORM No. 1 (For Publication) HON'BLE DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL, LUCKNOW (Area of Jurisdiction and part of Uttar Pradesh) 600/1, University Road, Near Hanuman Setu Mandir, Lucknow- 226 007. DRC No. 875/2022

PUBLIC NOTICE Shahnaz Co-operative Group Housing Society Ltd., H.No. 22/2, Narela Road, Near Trishul Soap Factory, Vijay Nagar, Bawana, Delhi-110039

FORM NO. 5 DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL 600/1, University Road, Near Hanuman Setu Temple, Lucknow- 226 007. SUMMONS FOR FILING REPLY & APPEARANCE BY PUBLICATION

PUBLICATION DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL (Area of Jurisdiction-Part of Uttar Pradesh) 600/1, University Road, Near Hanuman Setu Mandir, Lucknow- 226 007. DRC No. 130/2023

FORM NO. 5 DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL 600/1, University Road, Hanuman Setu Mandir, Lucknow- 226007. SUMMONS FOR FILING REPLY & APPEARANCE BY PUBLICATION

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छत्तीसगढ़ पर्यावरण संरक्षण मंडल पर्यावास भवन, सेक्टर-19, नवा रायपुर अटल नगर, जिला- रायपुर (छ.ग.)



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Facile victory

Sheikh Hasina wins fourth term as Bangladesh PM, Opposition gives poll a miss

The just-concluded election in neighbouring Bangladesh, notable for yet another boycott by the Opposition, saw the Awami League emerging victorious and Sheikh Hasina securing a landmark fourth term as the Prime Minister. The poll, however, remains embroiled in controversy over allegations of lack of fairness levelled by the Khaleda Zia-led main Opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The election was held against the backdrop of violence during the campaign. Though the Awami League secured 222 of the 300 seats, it is interesting to note that no party came second; the 'independents' --- Awami League's own candidates who were allowed to contest the poll to give it the semblance of a "competition" --- finished as runners-up. While 63 such 'independents' made it to the House, the third largest party in the country, the Jatiya Party, could win just 11 seats. It will be interesting to see who is anointed the official Opposition in Parliament. The fate of the poll was decided the day the BNP, the arch-rival of the Awami League, announced its decision to boycott the election. In her win, Hasina has defeated not only the Opposition but also democracy. However, it goes to her credit that Bangladesh has emerged as a strong economy and the abject poverty it once had has been considerably reduced. However, her Government has faced criticism for alleged human rights abuses and its crackdown on the Opposition. Hasina's career has been characterised by a mix of economic development initiatives and political dominance, and the Awami League has been in power since 2009.



A robust democratic system relies on a healthy Opposition to ensure checks and balances. The absence of a formidable Opposition can potentially impact the democratic fabric of Bangladesh, leading to concerns about the concentration of power in the hands of one political party. Hasina's supporters argue that her leadership has been pivotal in driving economic growth and social progress, justifying the measures taken to secure her victory. International observers and human rights organisations have, however, raised concerns about the fairness of the electoral proceedings. The Government's control over key institutions and the media has also been criticised for limiting the space for dissent. Back home, the victory of Hasina is good news as she is a known supporter of India and enjoys good rapport with the Indian Prime Minister. Bangladesh holds strategic importance for India due to shared historical, cultural and economic ties. The bilateral relationship has seen positive developments in recent years in areas such as trade, security and connectivity. Hasina's continued leadership is likely to maintain stability and foster cooperative endeavours between India and Bangladesh. For its part, India must convince her to allow space to the Opposition and let the democratic institutions run independently. It would be good for her and Bangladesh in the long run.

PICTALK



Devotees participate in a 'Ram Rath Yatra' ahead of the consecration ceremony of Ayodhya Ram temple, in Ranchi

Policy reforms crucial to make India a manufacturing hub

India requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort from the Government and industry players to become global manufacturing hub

With the swift expansion of India's manufacturing sector, the country is poised to become a leading global manufacturing force. Currently positioned among the top three preferred global manufacturing locations, India has the potential to boost its exports to an impressive \$1 trillion USD by 2030. [1] However, within the spectrum of various supply chains, the challenges and opportunities of Indian manufacturing are evident in the wooden pallet sector. To consolidate its position in the pallet industry, essential policy reforms are necessary for sustainable growth and global leadership. Infrastructure Development



In the era of increasing environmental awareness, sustainable and eco-friendly manufacturing practices are becoming imperative. The government should encourage manufacturers to adopt green technologies and sustainable processes by providing incentives and enforcing regulations that promote environmental responsibility. This not only aligns with global trends but also enhances the reputation of Indian products in international markets.

Simplified Regulations: The regulatory environment in India is complex, and businesses face bureaucratic hurdles. Streamlining regulations and creating a more business-friendly environment will encourage investment and growth in the manufacturing

sector. Implementing a single-window system for approvals, clearances, and licenses can facilitate ease of doing business.

Skilled Labour Development: India's education system needs to adapt to the changing needs of the economy by providing relevant skills training. Addressing the shortage of skilled workers in the manufacturing sector is crucial for its growth. The government should focus on creating appropriate skill sets among the workforce to meet the demands of modern manufacturing.

Government schemes: The government has introduced Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes to promote domestic manufacturing and increase India's share of global exports. These schemes encourage investments in manufacturing and provide incentives for various sectors, contributing to the growth of the manufacturing industry.

Trade Policies and Foreign Investment: India's trade policies and foreign investment regulations play a significant role in attracting global manufacturers. The government should continue to

focus on policies that promote domestic manufacturing, reduce import dependence, and encourage foreign investment in the manufacturing sector.

Tax Reforms
A competitive and stable tax regime is essential for attracting investment. India needs to rationalise its tax structure, ensuring that it is transparent and predictable. Reducing corporate tax rates, providing incentives for research and development, and promoting innovation through tax breaks will encourage manufacturing companies to invest and operate in India.

Conclusion: By implementing the suggested policy reforms, India can create an environment conducive to manufacturing growth, attract investments, and position itself as a key player in the global manufacturing landscape. The success of these reforms will not only boost the economy but also create employment opportunities and enhance India's standing in the world of international trade and commerce.

(The writer is CEO of Jay Wood Industry, views are personal)



JAY SHAH

Will Modi magic work in the south?

Can the enormous popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi help the Bharatiya Janata Party achieve electoral success in the southern states?

The Party is seeking to gain more voters in the challenging southern region. Its presence is limited in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. Since it has already peaked in the northern states, the BJP needs to secure more seats in the South. Last week, Modi began his election campaign for the 2024 elections in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Lakshadweep. He also inaugurated several multi-crore projects.

The BJP has access to unlimited funds and has well-organised party workers on the ground. To achieve the Party's objective, 40 central ministers had been fielded in the South. In Telangana, the Bharatiya Rashtriya Samithi (BRS) has been present since its establishment in 2014 but recently lost the State to Congress. Kerala is ruled by Congress or Left-led fronts, while Tamil Nadu alternates between Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Karnataka, Janata Dal (Secular), Congress, and BJP have all had a turn in power. Several factors influence voters in the region. They include caste, money, power, ideology, cinema, and liquor. In Tamil Nadu, political figures such as CN Annadurai, M Karunanidhi, MGR, and Jayalalitha have significantly influenced voters. In the past, N.T. Rama Rao played a crucial role in united Andhra Pradesh. However, the B.J.P. currently lacks prominent leaders in the southern states. With the passing of influential leaders like M Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha, the BJP is trying to fill the political void.

The BJP won 29 of the 130 regional seats in the 2019 elections, including 25 in Karnataka and four in Telangana. However, the Party lost the state to the Congress in last year's assembly polls.

The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) was a significant ally of the BJP. However, they ended their alliance three months ago, and neither Party has attempted to reconcile since then.



The southern states of India are known for their unique cultures. One noticeable difference is the language divide between the North and South. While Hindi is the preferred language in the North, the South predominantly uses English and local languages. Dravidian Parties in Tamil Nadu oppose the use of Hindi and follow an atheistic ideology. On the other hand, Kerala has a robust communist presence and alternates between Left Front and Congress-led coalitions.

The method of using population as a measure for constituency delimitation has led to the South feeling mistreated. This is because the population control measures implemented by Southern states have resulted in a decline in population compared to the North, leading to a sense of unfairness. As a result, the North, which has yet to enforce any population control measures, will be allocated more parliamentary constituencies than the South.

A possible solution to address the delimitation issue is to consider changing the composition of the Rajya Sabha.



RELIGION IS NOT A MAJOR POLITICAL ISSUE IN SOUTH INDIA. THE BJP'S VIEWS ON CHRISTIAN CONVERSIONS OR HOSTILITY TOWARDS ISLAM HAVE YET TO GAIN ANY TRACTION IN THE REGION

This can be inspired by the US Senate's approach of guaranteeing equal representation of all states. However, this proposal could face resistance from bigger states in the US. Prime Minister Modi is attempting to change the perception that the BJP is not aligned with the culture of South India. The BJP must still reach a mutual understanding with Southern states. The opposition coalition, INDIA, controls most of the Southern States. They are determined to unseat Modi in 2024.

The BJP has a strong focus on Hindutva, the construction of the Ayodhya Ram temple, and an anti-Muslim stance. However, these views may be less popular among voters in southern regions of India. The Opposition parties like DMK, AIADMK, TDP, and BRS hold dominant positions in their respective states. Specific communities such as Vanniyars, Thevurs, and Gounders have influential roles in Tamil Nadu. In Karnataka, Vokkaligas and Lingayats have influence, while Reddys and Kammas are rivals in Andhra Pradesh. However, Brahmins have lost

power. In Kerala, Communists opposed the rival Congress in the state, which is also a member of the INDIA coalition. In Telangana, K. Chandrababu Naidu, a Velama leader, held sway, but in 2023, Congress snatched the state. Religion is not a major political issue in South India. The BJP's views on Christian conversions or hostility towards Islam have yet to gain any traction in the region. The southern states have not experienced any religious conflicts. This is because the minorities have assimilated themselves with the local population. For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to gain success in South India, they need to adapt to the local cultural norms and political strategies. They must form alliances and regain the support of former partners. To achieve this, the BJP should revise its election strategy and develop a new narrative. Failing to do so will result in the opposition coalition INDIA becoming stronger and posing a significant threat to the BJP.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GOVERNOR CANNOT DISMISS MINISTER

Sir — A Governor is the Head of the State, and a Chief Minister is the Head of the Government. The governor is bound by the advice of the council of ministers headed by the Chief Minister. The Supreme Court has correctly observed that a Governor is not vested with powers to dismiss a minister. When the law and order of a state break down, making it impossible to run the government by the provisions of the Constitution, the Governor can recommend the President's rule in the state. During President's rule, the Governor rules the state on behalf of the President. All authorities vested in the hands of a Chief Minister are transferred to the Governor during this period. Essentially, during President's rule, the Governor assumes the role of a Chief Minister. While the Governor administers the oath of office to the Chief Minister, they have no authority to dismiss the Chief Minister or their ministers. Governors, the Attorney General the Council of Ministers, and the Prime Minister hold office at the pleasure of the President, and the Chief Minister and their Ministers hold office at the pleasure of the Governor. In practice, the President acts at the pleasure of the Prime Minister, and the Governor acts at the pleasure of the Chief Minister.

The President and the Governors of states cannot withhold assent to a Bill. The Constitution does not grant any powers to the President to act unilaterally, even when the interest of the nation demands. While a Prime Minister cannot sign a Bill into law, the President cannot refuse to sign. The President or Governor can return the Bill with observations for reconsideration. The Supreme Court, in the case of Senthil Balaji, has ruled that a Governor cannot dismiss a minister. This ruling aligns exactly with the provisions of the Constitution. However, prima facie, the term "pleasure" appears perplexing. Both the Prime Minister and Chief Minister function when they enjoy the pleasure of the majority of the MPs and MLAs.

K V Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

WORLD DAY OF WAR ORPHANS 2024



Every year on January 6th, the World Day of War Orphans is commemorated. The purpose of the day is to raise public awareness concerning children who have become orphaned as a result of wars. The World Day of War Orphans spread information about their plight and emphasised the psychological, social, and physical obstacles that children experience as

they grow up it is clear that civilians in several nations around the globe have become victims of the war. Amongst them, the children are the silent victims. Millions of children have grown up in war zones, and ethnic strife with no families. The orphans are forced to not only look after themselves but their younger siblings too. Palestinian children have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza since October 7, the government's media office says. Thousands more are missing under the rubble amid relentless bombardment and it is sad. Many children lost their parents and lived in relief camps for survival. In conclusion, World Day of War Orphans 2024 is a day of both reflection and action. It's a day to stand in solidarity with those who have lost their families to war and to work towards a future where no child has to bear the scars of conflict.

C K Subramaniam | Chennai

SHORTEST TEST MATCH

Sir — India defeated South Africa by 7 wickets in the second and last Test match, leveling the series 1-1. The bowlers dominated the match, which concluded in just two days. Bumrah and Siraj each took six wickets. With this, a new record has been set in Test cricket history. This is the shortest Test match in cricket history in terms of total balls played. The Cape Town Test concluded in just 642 balls (107 overs in total). India became the first Asian team to win a Test match against South Africa in Cape Town. This is a promising start for Team India in the new year. We hope this momentum continues and India will triumph in the T20 World Cup. Players should continue practicing, as the more they practice, the better they will perform.

Mohammad Taukirk | Champaran

ALASKA EMERGENCY

Sir — The Alaska emergency is a new threat to the airline industry and poses imminent danger in mid-air. An Alaska Airlines flight traveling from Portland, Oregon, to

Ontario, California, had to make an emergency landing after a portion of the aircraft blew out mid-air. The aircraft reached approximately 16,000 feet about six minutes into the flight before beginning its descent. The jet had 174 passengers and six crew members aboard.

In a statement provided to CBS News, Alaska Airlines said that Flight No. 1282 experienced an incident soon after departure and "landed safely back" in Portland, but it was a miraculous escape for the passengers on board. This type of aircraft comes equipped with a rear emergency exit door, mainly used by international airlines, and has a seat configuration that allows for more passengers on the plane. Most US airlines don't use that configuration and design the area to appear as a window from the inside of the aircraft. Somehow, the plane averted disaster, and the pilot deserves all credit.

C K Ramani | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

A JEALOUS AND POSSESSIVE MIND

Human minds have fallen prey to the traits of jealousy, envy and possessiveness



RAVI VALLURI

There were twenty theatre enthusiasts of a college who participated in the audition for staging the annual college day play. All six roles were up for grabs, which included one female and five male characters.

As a safety valve, the well-feted and cerebral director handpicked one additional female lead and two male characters. The first choice was a female lead who was attractive, vivacious and bubbling with talent. She felt wretched sharing stage space with another plucky woman. Her covetous and jealous mind, instead of concentrating on the character and performance, kept plotting strategies to run down her perceived opponent, much to the consternation of the director. At his wife's end, the director opted for the alternative and assigned her to the lead role. The tempestuous woman burning with envy was clearly responsible for the loss.

Companies, countries and communities have all become wary of the material success of their 'competitors' and in the process compromise with their goals and objectives. Consequently, they resort to shortcuts in order to emerge triumphant and victorious. "You can be the moon and still be jealous of the stars," writes the American musician Garry Allen. The attribute of jealousy arises in an individual when the mind is possessive of certain belongings. Interestingly, envy in many also arises out of shortages. There can be a lack of aptitude, talent, resources, connections, opportunities, or because of unfavourable outcomes. Individuals subsumed by jealousy build walls of possessiveness and false security walls around their personalities. Such minds feel cheery about their possessions.



As per the epic, The Mahabharata, Karna was extremely jealous of Arjuna, which eventually proved to be his nemesis. The jealous and possessive mind is acquisitive by nature, taking both animate and inanimate objects for granted and getting attached to things like an addiction to alcohol or marijuana. For instance, in the case of the college theatre mentioned earlier, the more talented actress became fearful and was gripped with hatred and greed. Jealous and envious minds have become laboratories of antagonism that spew hatred. How do we overcome attributes such as jealousy, envy and possessiveness? At one end of the spectrum are organizations and authorities which need to take up this responsibility. This includes proper parenting, where children are brought up on ideals of inherent goodness, an effective educational system that imparts values as part of their pedagogy, governments that take up the responsibility of providing equal opportunities to the citizens and make an attempt to carve out an egalitarian system, and a society that addresses the core issues of humaneness amongst its citizenry. Vasudeva Kutumbakam is the net result.

This may appear altruistic but is an effort to restore some semblance of sanity in society, which otherwise is plagued by avarice and jealousy. The spiritual touch is an important colour in the rainbow of goodness. One can practice any faith, but we need to be tolerant of other peoples' points of view. Spirituality succeeds where religions draw the fault lines and wave red flags. Globalisation has made the world flat, but has resulted in an exponential increase in crass commercialization and human minds have fallen prey to the traits of jealousy, envy and possessiveness. The vicious tendencies of jealousy and possessiveness can be tackled by following the two-fold approach highlighted so that the chasm between individuals diminishes.

Manifest plainness, Embrace simplicity, Reduce selfishness, Have few desires — Lao Tzu

(Ravi Valluri is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and is a faculty of the Art of Living. Views are personal)

Hiring based on skills is now a standard practice



DINESH SOOD

As India enters this transformative phase in hiring practices, both employers and job seekers need to embrace the opportunities presented by skills-based hiring



The job market in India is constantly changing, and we are now witnessing a significant shift towards skills-based hiring. The old-fashioned approach to hiring, which relied on academic qualifications and work experience, is giving way to a more dynamic method that prioritizes specific skills. The new skills-first approach enables professionals to explore unconventional career pathways and places greater emphasis on their abilities rather than their educational background. This shift reflects a wider recognition that skills, rather than just degrees, are the key to success in today's highly competitive job market.

A skills-first hiring approach gives priority to a candidate's practical abilities over traditional qualifications. This trend is growing rapidly in India as employers realize the value of diverse skill sets. It is relevant today because it provides equal opportunities for all, allowing talent to shine beyond academic labels. The advantages of this approach include a more inclusive job market and the ability to tap into hidden talent.

This approach values merit over formalities, enabling professionals from diverse backgrounds to contribute on a global scale. Every foreign job market has a specific skill shortage that they are looking to fill, and this approach helps to fill that gap. According to a report titled 'The State of Skills-Based Hiring 2023', 86 per cent of employees believe that they are more likely to secure their dream job when the hiring process includes skills-based hiring. The latest data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) is alarming: a whopping 86% of individuals aged between 15 and 59 years have not received any form of vocational training. This is unacceptable! It is high time that we focus our efforts on converting this pool of individuals into skilled human capital.

The current trend in hiring prioritizes skills. Therefore, high schools and post-secondary education institutions must design their curriculum to focus on these skills. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rightly emphasizes the need for standardized vocational training courses in high schools, with a range of experiences aimed at developing a bundle of skill competencies.

To achieve the goal set by the NEP of



THE LATEST DATA FROM THE PERIODIC LABOUR FORCE SURVEY (PLFS) IS ALARMING: A WHOPPING 86% OF INDIVIDUALS AGED BETWEEN 15 AND 59 YEARS HAVE NOT RECEIVED ANY FORM OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING

increasing the gross enrolment ratio in higher education, including vocational education, to 50% by 2035, further action is needed. This requires the addition of 3.5 crore new seats to higher education institutions (HEIs) and focusing on a flexible curriculum with creative combinations of subjects. We must integrate vocational education with mainstream education and allow for multiple entries and exits with appropriate certification. To provide our students with the best possible skills, it is imperative to establish Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) at par with the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs).

However, accurately assessing these skills may pose challenges. Nevertheless, the future outlook suggests continued growth, fostering innovation and adaptability in a workforce where skills, not just degrees, define success. This reflects a dynamic shift towards meritocracy in the evolving employment landscape. The growing integration of advanced technologies like generative AI, machine learning, cloud computing, and data science across these sectors drives the trend. As these technologies continue to propel business and alter business operations, the demand for upskilling in technology remains robust. Companies are increasingly seeking professionals with specific skills to fill key roles in areas such as valuation analysis, financial research, investor relations management, and risk analysis within this domain.

Skills-first hiring is a new approach that is dismantling traditional barriers to offer global work opportunities irrespective of educational background or regional certifications. For instance, a cyber security expert equipped with practical knowledge and certifications can now find doors opening abroad, as security needs transcend geograph-

ical confines.

IBM India has adopted a 'skill-first' approach where college degrees do not matter. In 2012, IBM implemented this approach in the US by removing the four-year college degree requirement from about 50% of its jobs. Ten years later, 29% of the present IBM US workforce in hardware, software, and consulting does not have a college degree. However, companies like Oracle had 100%, followed by Intel (94%), HP (92%), and Apple (90%). A study conducted between 2017 and 2022 showed that US employers reduced degree requirements for 46% of middle-skill positions and 31% of high-skill positions. Various studies highlight that for the job of software quality-assurance engineer, only 26% of Accenture's postings for the position contained a degree requirement.

The rise of skills-based hiring can be attributed to several factors, each contributing to a more comprehensive and efficient employment ecosystem. One of the key drivers is the fast-paced evolution of technology, which has made some skill sets obsolete while creating an insatiable demand for new ones. As industries digitize and automate, employers are looking for candidates who have the technical expertise required to navigate this new world.

Skills-based hiring is not only about technical prowess but also about fostering inclusivity in the workplace. By focusing on skills, employers can tap into a broader talent pool, breaking down barriers related to age, gender, or educational background. This approach enables individuals with non-traditional career trajectories to showcase their abilities, ultimately leading to a more diverse and innovative workforce. In a country as diverse as India, this inclusive hiring model is crucial for unlocking the full potential of the population. It allows for the recognition and utilisation of a rich tapestry of skills that may be over-

looked in a more rigid, qualification-centric system.

When individuals are hired based on their skills instead of solely on academic qualifications, there is a higher likelihood of job satisfaction and engagement. Employees who feel that their skills are valued are more likely to invest in their professional development, leading to a continuous improvement loop. This paradigm shift challenges the traditional notion that a candidate's potential is solely based on their educational background. It acknowledges that skills are dynamic, and the ability to learn and adapt is highly valued in today's fast-paced work environment.

As India transitions to this transformative phase in hiring practices, both employers and job seekers need to embrace the opportunities presented by skills-based hiring. Job seekers should focus on acquiring and showcasing relevant skills, whether through formal education, online courses, or on-the-job experience. Employers, on the other hand, should refine their recruitment processes to ensure that they identify and nurture the diverse talents that the Indian workforce has to offer.

In conclusion, skills-based hiring in India marks a pivotal moment in the country's employment landscape. It is a departure from traditional norms, a response to technological evolution, and a step toward a more inclusive and dynamic professional future. As India continues to embrace this shift, the workforce will be characterised not just by degrees but by a mosaic of skills that power innovation and drive success in an ever-changing global economy.

(The writer is a Co-Founder and MD of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), and a Network Member of India International Skill Centres. Views expressed are personal)

Confronting cancer: Are we winning the war against it?

With the growing incidents of cancer, it is crucial for health authorities to prioritise early detection, cost-effective treatment and preventive measures

Cancer, often referred to as the "emperor of maladies," continues to be a formidable challenge for medical researchers and scientists worldwide. Despite significant advancements in the field of medicine and biomedical science, cancer remains a relentless adversary, and its burden is escalating rapidly in India. India is facing a mounting crisis, with alarming statistics indicating a surge in cancer cases and mortality rates. As we delve into the current scenario, it becomes evident that immediate action is imperative to strengthen cancer care infrastructure, improve early detection and enhance preventive measures. The cancer burden in India is reaching unprecedented levels.



BISHAL KUMAR SAHRA

According to a recent report presented in Parliament, there were 14.61 lakh cancer cases detected in 2022, an increase of 35,000 cases from the previous year.

Even more concerning is the mortality rate, with 8.08 lakh patients succumbing to cancer in 2022 compared to 7.89 lakh in 2021. The projections estimate a staggering 29.8 million cancer patients in

India by 2025. These figures paint a bleak picture, sounding an alarm for both healthcare authorities and the general public. Despite improvements in cancer treatment, the incidence of cancer and mortality rates persistently rise in India. The country faces multiple challenges in combatting cancer effectively. The most prevalent types of cancer in India include breast, lung, colon, rectum and prostate cancer. Moreover, India has one of the highest mortality-to-incidence ratios for cancer globally, indicating a need for early detection and accessible treatment facilities.

The actual incidence of cancer in India could be significantly higher than the official figures, as highlighted by a

2022 study conducted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and Ernst & Young (FICCI-EY). This suggests that the situation is more dire than what the statistics portray, making it all the more urgent to address this issue promptly.

One of the central issues contributing to the cancer crisis in India is the lack of easy access to specialized hospitals equipped with experienced oncologists and state-of-the-art machinery. Timely detection of the disease and affordable treatment are critical factors that need immediate attention.

The government must prioritize the establishment of cancer institutes and tertiary care centres to cater to the



growing demand for quality cancer care. While the public healthcare system is overburdened, private hospitals often provide treatments that are financially out of reach for many patients. Raising pub-

lic awareness about cancer detection and prevention is a key aspect of tackling this crisis effectively. Beyond the well-known risk factors such as tobacco and alcohol consumption, obesity and seden-

tary lifestyles, environmental factors also play a significant role in the rising disease burden. For instance, the consumption of processed and packaged foods with preservatives has been linked to cancer. Promoting healthy habits, including regular exercise, can be instrumental in reducing cancer risk.

Among women of reproductive age, breast and cervical cancers are the leading causes of cancer-related mortality. These cancers, however, are largely preventable through early screening and timely interventions. Public health campaigns aimed at encouraging regular screenings and educating women about the importance of early detection can save many lives. Cancer continues to cast a

dark shadow over India's healthcare landscape.

As the cancer burden increases, it becomes vital for health authorities to focus on early detection, affordable treatment and preventive measures. The establishment of specialized hospitals coupled with heightened public awareness campaigns, can significantly alleviate the challenges posed by cancer. The time for action is now, as India must stand united in its fight against the dreaded emperor of maladies. Only through collective efforts, we can hope to turn the tide and provide a brighter future for cancer patients in the country.

(The writer studies at Delhi University and is a freelance writer, views are personal)

Muizzu to sign pacts to bolster ties with China

PTI ■ BEIJING

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu arrived in China on Monday on a five-day state visit during which he is due to hold talks with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping and sign several agreements to bolster the bilateral ties.

Muizzu, who is regarded as "pro-China", is accompanied by his wife Sajidha Mohamed and a high-level delegation. The President and the First Lady were greeted by senior Chinese officials upon their arrival in the country. They visited the Xiamen Free Trade Zone in China's Fujian province after their arrival. Representatives from the Xiamen Free Trade Zone presented an introductory video. Following the presentation, the President and the First Lady took a tour and inquired about significant areas in the zone.

Muizzu's maiden visit to China, however, has been marred by a huge diplomatic row triggered by the derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi by some Maldivian ministers after he posted a video of him on a pristine beach during his visit

to Lakshadweep. The Maldivian envoy to India was on Monday summoned to the external affairs ministry and conveyed strong concern over remarks. Muizzu is due to hold talks with Chinese President Xi and sign several agreements to bolster the bilateral ties, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin.

"The relations between China and the Maldives now stand at a new historical starting point. We believe that through this visit, the two heads of state will provide strategic guidance for the bilateral relations to reach a new height," Wang told the media on January 5.

During President Muizzu's visit, the Maldives and China will hold official talks and sign key agreements to enhance trade, professional development, and socioeconomic cooperation, the Maldivian President's Office said in a press release.

The visit will also pave the way for collaborations in technology and other areas between the two countries, it said. Muizzu will also attend the Invest Maldives Forum in the southeastern Chinese city of



Fuzhou, China and meet with senior Chinese business leaders to explore avenues for strengthening socioeconomic relations between the Maldives and China, it said.

Muizzu's predecessors in the recent past visited India first, considering the wide-ranging bilateral ties and the Maldives' proximity to India, followed by China which has expanded its influence in the island nation by investing in major infrastructure projects there.

Surprisingly Muizzu, who was sworn in as President in

November, chose Türkiye as his first destination for a foreign visit soon after his election followed by the UAE where he met Prime Minister Modi on the sidelines of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) on December 1 and discussed the progress of the wide-ranging bilateral ties.

During the meeting, both leaders agreed to set up a core group to discuss the multi-dimensional relations and further deepen ties. The meeting took place after Muizzu requested New Delhi to with-

draw 77 Indian military personnel from the Maldives and decided to review more than 100 bilateral agreements between the two countries.

Earlier, Muizzu's government announced its plans to drop a hydrographic survey agreement with India. In December, the new Maldives Vice President Hussain Mohamed Latheef visited China, his first visit abroad, and took part in the China-sponsored China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, (CIORF) in Kunming.

Significantly, while praising Chinese infrastructure projects, Latheef made no mention of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under which most of the Maldives' infrastructure projects were built.

The BRI is an ambitious plan initiated by President Xi in 2013 to develop new trade routes connecting China with the rest of the world via land and maritime networks to improve regional integration, increase trade and stimulate economic growth.

Observers say Muizzu's foreign policy perhaps is still evolving as the Maldives domestic political situation has

undergone a major change after his election in November last year. Soon after his election Muizzu fell out with former pro-China President Yameen, regarded as his mentor, and opted to pursue his own foreign and domestic policy.

Under Yameen's Presidency, China carried out major infra projects amid allegations of debt traps by some influential politicians of the Maldives. Angry with Muizzu, Yameen, who is currently serving a prison sentence for corruption, quit the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and formed his own political party called People's National Front (PNC) from jail to oppose Muizzu.

Also, the island's Parliament is currently dominated by the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) headed by Solih and the island nation is due to go to Parliamentary polls in April.

The Maldives is India's key maritime neighbour in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and occupies a special place in its initiatives like SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Neighbourhood First Policy' of the Modi government.

SC quashes life-long disqualification of Pak lawmakers

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Monday quashed the lifetime disqualification for lawmakers, ruling that parliamentarians would be barred from holding office for five years, in a major relief to leading politicians, including former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan, ahead of the February 8 elections.

A 2018 judgment by a five-member bench of the apex court had declared that disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) was for life, but changes made in the Elections Act 2017 on June 26, 2023, by a coalition government led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) restricted it to a five-year term only.

A seven-member bench, headed by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, on Monday ruled that no person can be barred for a lifetime from running in elections if they are disqualified under Article 62 (1)(f).

The bench with a 6 to 1 split judgment abolished the lifetime disqualification and thus went against the judgment of its five-member bench which in 2018 had ruled in favour of lifetime disqualification. The bench comprising Chief Justice Isa and Justices Syed Mansoor Ali Shah, Yahya Afridi, Aminuddin Khan, Jamal Khan Mandokhail, Muhammad Ali Mazhar and Musarrat Hilihi had reserved judgment on Friday after concluding hearing of multiple petitions.

Justice Afridi differed from the other six judges and wrote a note of dissent in favour of life-long disqualification. The verdict has determined once and for all the controversy around the period of disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution and the Elections Act 2017.

Sharif, the 74-year-old former prime minister and also a frontrunner for the fourth term in the February 8 general elections, was disqualified in the Panama Papers case in

2017. His rival 71-year-old Imran Khan, who was disqualified in the Tashkhana corruption case last year, also was hit by the same law. The outcome of the hearing has decided the political future of both Sharif and Khan as well as many other politicians.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz leader and former law minister Azam Nazir Tarar welcomed the judgment and said that it was long overdue. "The Supreme Court removed a discrepancy as the life-long ban was against the fundamental rights," he said. During the hearing spanning over several days, the court heard many lawyers in order to get various points of views on the duration of disqualification.

The remarks made by the chief justice and some other judges showed that they were not comfortable with the life-long ban on a convicted politician. However, it was not clear if the limit of disqualification should be imposed through a court order and an amendment in the constitution. Most of the arguments were in favour of nullifying the concept of life-long ban and limiting it to a five-year term. However, the chief justice repeatedly said that he also wanted to hear arguments in support of life-long disqualification and asked lawyers to come forward.

The issue came into the focus of the Supreme Court towards the end of 2023 during the hearing of a petition of Badshah Khan Qaisarani, who was disqualified for producing a fake graduation degree. During the hearing, the chief justice had remarked that the SC verdict on lifetime disqualification and the amendments made to the Elections Act, 2017 could not co-exist. He had further stated that discrepancies in the apex court's interpretation and the law could result in "confusion" in the upcoming general elections. On Thursday, Chief Justice Isa said that disqualifying anyone for life from Parliament is "against Islam".

SL Navy ready to despatch ship to Red Sea

Colombo (PTI): The Sri Lanka Navy on Monday said it is ready to send a naval ship to the Red Sea to combat the threat to merchant vessel lines by Houthi rebels, joining countries such as India, in protecting the key waterway for global trade. The announcement comes following last week's orders of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had declared the cost as Rs 250 million every fortnight.

The Iran-backed Houthi rebels have launched more than 20 attacks on merchant ships in recent weeks, claiming to take revenge against Israel for its military campaign against Palestinian terror group Hamas in Gaza. These attacks have sharply raised goods' transportation costs between Asia and Europe. Newswire Lanka quoted Navy spokesman Captain Gayan Wickramasuriya as saying that but the exact date of deployment is yet to be confirmed. The vessels would be covering the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and connected sea lanes. Captain Wickramasuriya went on to say that initially one ship would be deployed as part of Operation Prosperity Guardians, the Naval operation underway at the Red Sea, and adjoining trade routes. "Discussions will be held and based on the warship's capability it will be deployed to any one of the sea lanes requiring protection from the Houthi rebels," the Newswire Lanka quoted him as saying.

He also stated that the deployment of more ships or swapping of ships will take place based on the current requirements and economic situation of Sri Lanka, and a discussion on the matter. Wickremesinghe, also the defence minister, has come under criticism for the decision at a time when the island was going through its economic crisis.

4 civilians killed in Ukraine in missile attacks

AP ■ KYIV

Russia launched its latest barrage of hypersonic and cruise missiles against Ukrainian targets early Monday, striking near the front lines of fighting in the east as well as in central and western parts of the country, officials said. At least four civilians were reported killed and at least 30 injured.

Western officials and analysts had previously warned that Russia was stockpiling its cruise missiles in preparation for a strategy of winter bombardment, as bad weather keeps the 1,500-kilometre (930-mile) front line largely static after 22 months of war. Unlike last winter, when the Kremlin's forces targeted Ukraine's power grid, Russia is now aiming at Kyiv's defence industry, they say. But the barrages have repeatedly hit civilian areas.

Monday's attacks struck a string of urban areas, including

housing and a shopping mall, across Ukraine. In the south-eastern Dnipropetrovsk region, a woman died in a missile attack outside the city of Kryvyi Rih and 24 people were injured in a strike on the town of Novomoskovsk.

In Kryvyi Rih itself, which is Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's home town, more than 20 houses and a shopping mall were damaged in the attack, said regional governor Serhii Lysak. At least four missiles hit Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city, injuring one person, said mayor Ihor Terekhov. A woman rescued from the rubble of a building later died, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said. More people may be trapped, he said.

Authorities in the Khmelnytskyi region said two people died as at least six explosions were heard during the morning missile attack. Meanwhile, Russian troops



In this photo provided by the Ukrainian Emergency Service, emergency workers help a wounded man after a residential houses were badly damaged in a Russian missile attack, near Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine, on Monday

conducted 131 artillery attacks on the Kherson region, killing two people and injuring five, according to governor Oleksandr Prokudin.

Kherson and the surrounding region have been consistently targeted since Russian

forces withdrew from the city to the eastern side of the Dnipro in the autumn of 2022. In Zaporizhzhia, a major southern city along the Dnipro River, two people were injured in a missile strike on a residential district, said regional gov-

ernor Yuriy Malashko.

Two people injured in a January 2 attack died on Monday, officials said. The Ukrainian military said on Monday that Russian forces have made unsuccessful efforts to advance during the past day in several areas, including around Lyman in the Kharkiv region and in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia regions. In the Russia-occupied Luhansk region in Ukraine's east, a Russian warplane accidentally released a bomb on the town of Rubizhne, said Leonid Pasechnik, head of the region's rebel government.

The bomb, an FAB-250 that carries a high-explosive warhead, did not cause injuries, Pasechnik said. The incident comes six days after Russia accidentally dropped munitions over the village of Petropavlovka in the Belgorod region that has come under repeated Ukrainian attack.

'I look after my people with motherly affection'

PTI ■ DHAKA

Newly-elected fifth-term Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Monday said she looks after her people with motherly affection but did not think her gender is any impediment to her work.

Refusing to be bracketed as a woman running the top office in Bangladesh, she said, "Actually when you run the country, you should not think about whether you are a man or a woman. "When I took over power, I had heard many things about it. But when I work, when I start working, I never thought I am a woman, I had restrictions, no," the 76-year-old leader told a press conference hours after winning the fourth consecutive victory with a decisive majority.

"I try to work for my people and yes, I can tell you one thing. A woman as a mother (they) look after families, look

after children, (I have) brought up children. With motherly affection, I look after my people. And I try to assist them and help them," she replied to a question about the restrictions she felt as a woman leading the country.

Wearing a pastel green saree, tackling questions with wit and a smile evoking laughter and appreciation, the Awami League leader responded to a question comparing her with other great women prime ministers or presidents from across the world, former prime ministers of India, Indira Gandhi, Sri Lanka's Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Israel's Golda Meir, disagreed.

"You mentioned about Mrs Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandarnayake or Golda Mier. They are very great ladies. I am not. I am very simple, just a common person. I feel I am just a common person," she said. "I am not saying I have not



got much but one thing, I always feel (is) my responsibility for my people that I have to serve them. So I never felt that this is a position I have to run it no I felt this is an opportunity to serve my country, my

people, and ensure that they get a better life," she asserted.

Without betraying a hint of sadness, but with a pause, she also said: "I am in power... you know... the killer, they eliminated my entire family. My younger brother was only 10 years old. Perhaps they had in their mind that nobody from the family will come again in power. In August 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his wife and their three sons were assassinated in their home by military officers. His daughters Hasina and Rehana survived the purge as they were abroad. "But yes, it is about people. Our people gave me this opportunity. Time and again, people are voting for me and I am here. I have survived many times and I think, Allah gave me this opportunity," Hasina, who won two-thirds of the seats in an election boycotted by the major opposition parties, added.

PTI says candidates to be announced within 24 hrs

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's beleaguered Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party on Monday said it would announce its candidates for the upcoming February 8 election within the next 24 hours.

Senator Ali Zafar from the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party told Geo News that the party had issued the confirmation to 98-99 per cent of candidates vying to contest the election on a PTI ticket. He said a decision needed to be taken on merely two per cent of seats. "The approval has been given on who will contest elections on which seat. The candidates will be announced today or tomorrow," said Zafar.

He said the decision will be

announced after the Peshawar High Court (PHC) verdict. The PTI leader also shared that a large number of lawyers have been given tickets to contest the election. However, he clarified that there is no ratio of how many tickets were awarded to lawyers and workers of the party.

The general election in cash-strapped Pakistan is just a month away but political parties, except a few, have yet not finalised their list of candidates. Meanwhile, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is facing a difficult situation as it has been under pressure to accommodate PTI dissidents as well as the Istehkam Pakistan Party (IPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) in Punjab.

On the other hand, the

PTI has been demanding a level playing field, alleging that it is being targeted.

The former ruling party has also been struggling in connection with its election symbol — the cricket bat.

It has also approached the Supreme Court with a petition challenging the January 3 order of the Peshawar High Court (PHC) which stripped the party of its iconic election symbol. On January 3, the PHC revoked the stay order granted by its single-member bench and restored the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) decision to declare PTI intra-party polls null and void. The PHC also stripped the PTI of its election symbol. The PTI, however, challenged the verdict in the top court.

Only 41.8% turnout in Bangladesh, least since 1991

Dhaka (PTI): Bangladesh's opposition-boycotted general election on Sunday that re-elected Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ruling Awami League for the fourth consecutive term registered a voter turnout of only 41.8 per cent, almost half compared to 2018 polls and the lowest since 1991.

"According to the final count, the figure stands at 41.8 per cent," Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibur Awal told a news briefing at his office on Monday. "If anyone doubts the number, you are most welcome to challenge it," Awal said. The main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by an ailing former prime minister Khaleda Zia, who is under house arrest on graft charges, had boycotted the polls calling it a "sham." According to data available for previous elections, the 2008

elections, which installed Hasina's Awami League (AL) to power, drew over 87 per cent votes. The subsequent 2014 polls, which were boycotted by BNP, drew over 40 per cent votes though Awami League candidates were elected uncontested in 153 out of the 300 seats. Over 80 per cent of voters turned out in the 2018 elections, the data showed.

The BNP which had boycotted the 2014 election joined the process in 2018, which the party leaders later said was a mistake and alleged the voting was marred with widespread rigging and intimidation. According to the final result, Awami League candidates secured 223 seats, the parliamentary opposition Jatiya Party (JAPA) got 11 and independent candidates including ruling party rebels bagged 61 in the 300-seat parliament.

B'desh main opp rejects 'dummy polls', demands fresh elections

PTI ■ DHAKA

Bangladesh's main opposition BNP, which boycotted Sunday's general elections swept by Sheikh Hasina's party, on Monday demanded the cancellation of the "dummy election" and the prime minister's resignation, questioning the accuracy of the voter turnout.

To mobilise public support for their demands, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party announced a two-day mass contact programme on Tuesday and Wednesday. The party also renewed its demand for a fresh election under a non-party polls-time government to establish a legitimate and accountable government.

Hasina's Awami League party won 223 seats in the 300-seat Parliament. Election was held for 299 seats. The election to one seat will be held later due to the death of

a candidate. The main opposition in Parliament, the Jatiya Party, got 11 seats, Bangladesh Kallyan party won in one constituency while independent candidates came out victorious in 62 seats. Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and the Workers Party of Bangladesh won one seat each.

Bangladesh's Election Commission on Monday said 41.8 per cent of the voters turned out to cast their votes. "According to the final count, the figure stands at 41.8 per cent," Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibur Awal told a news briefing at his office, adding if anyone doubts the number "you are most welcome to challenge it".

The BNP boycotted the elections and observed a strike on Sunday. Nazrul Islam Khan, another BNP standing committee member, said their party wanted to establish a government elected by peo-

ple's vote and accountable to them.

"A free and fair election is necessary for that, and that didn't happen yesterday. So, people have turned down this election. Everyone is saying the voter turnout which was shown was fake," he said.

"So, BNP and other political parties who are on a movement for the restoration of democracy demand the immediate cancellation of the dummy election of January 7, resignation of Sheikh Hasina and formation of a polls-time non-party neutral government for holding a national election," Nazrul said.

He also said people's ownership of the state must be restored and all enforced disappearance, killing, and ghost cases must be stopped and people will have to be protected from his repressive regime.

"These are now people's demands. We congratulate

and thank people as they made sacrifices in the face of various pressures and allurements and foiled the government's evil efforts to show a huge turnout by taking them to the voting centres.

BNP Standing Committee member Abdul Moyeen Khan said the country's people unilaterally and spontaneously rejected Sunday's election.

On behalf of the parties that called for boycotting the polls, he congratulated the people of the country for turning down the election. He also said the government failed to take voters to the polling stations despite various threats and intimidation.

"There was no voting and election on January 7. What happened was vote robbery and vote rigging," the BNP leader said. The party has been saying no election under the current government would be fair and credible.

US designates China, Pakistan as 'Countries of Particular Concern'

New York (PTI): The US has designated China, North Korea and Pakistan as "Countries of Particular Concern" for engaging in and tolerating "particularly severe violations of religious freedom."

Announcing the Religious Freedom Designations, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that advancing the freedom of religion or belief has been a core objective of US foreign policy ever since Congress passed and enacted the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998. As part of that "enduring commitment", Blinken said last week that he has designated Burma, China, Cuba, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as "Countries of Particular Concern for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom." In addition,

he designated Algeria, Azerbaijan, the Central African Republic, Comoros, and Vietnam as Special Watch List countries for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. Blinken also designated al-Shabab, Boko Haram, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis, ISIS-Sahel, ISIS-West Africa, al-Qa'ida affiliate Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin, and the Taliban as "Entities of Particular Concern."

The top US diplomat further noted that significant violations of religious freedom also occur in countries that are not designated. "Governments must end abuses such as attacks on members of religious minority communities and their places of worship, communal violence and lengthy imprisonment for peaceful expression, transnational repression, and calls to violence against religious communities," Blinken said.

Blinken brings US push on post-war Gaza planning

AP ■ ABU DHABI

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has opened his third day of meetings on an urgent Mideast diplomatic mission to prevent Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza from exploding into a broader regional conflict.

Blinken was meeting Monday with United Arab Emirates leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed before travelling to Saudi Arabia for talks with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman aimed at enlisting the key Arab leaders in a push to not only keep the war contained but also prepare for post-conflict Gaza's future.

With Sheikh Mohammed in Abu Dhabi Blinken "emphasised the importance of preventing further spread of the conflict and stressed continued US commitment to securing lasting regional peace that ensures Israel's security and advances the establishment of an independent Palestinian state," the State Department said.

Blinken arrived in Abu Dhabi from similar meetings in Qatar, Jordan, Turkey and Greece, where he claimed at least modest success in his mission with pledges from those countries to consider contributing to the effort to plan for Gaza's reconstruction and governance once the fighting has ended.

Gaza has been decimated by three months of Israeli bombardments that have sparked anger around the world for the massive damage and huge number of civilian casualties. Financial and in-kind support from the UAE and Saudi Arabia will be essential to the success of any such plan and US officials said Blinken on his fourth trip to the region since the war began in October hoped to overcome initial Arab resistance to considering "day after" scenarios for Gaza.

Arab countries have been pressing for an immediate

cease-fire and an end to civilian deaths before discussing such plans.

But after his first meetings on his latest tour, Blinken said he had been speaking with officials about contributions they could make to post-war plans and about using their influence to tamp down resurgent fears that the conflict could expand and potentially draw in direct US involvement. "This is a conflict that could easily metastasize, causing even more insecurity and even more suffering," Blinken told reporters during a joint news conference in Doha with Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani.

"So from day one, among other priorities, we have been intensely focused on working to prevent the conflict from spreading," he said. "We share a commitment to ensure that the conflict does not expand." He said his talks had also included "not necessarily easy discussions" of what each country can do once the conflict is over "to provide the assurances and the incentives required to build a more secure and more stable, more peaceful future for the region."

"And my takeaway from the discussions so far, including here with our friends in Qatar, is that our partners are willing to have these difficult conversations and to make hard decisions. All of us feel a stake in forging the way forward," Blinken said.

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 a cease-fire since mid-October as civilian casualties began to skyrocket.

After his talks with Blinken, Sheikh Mohammed called for an immediate cease-fire, saying the constant images of death and destruction in Gaza are de-sensitising people to the horrors of what is happening.

Israeli strike kills elite Hezbollah commander

AP ■ BEIRUT

An Israeli airstrike killed an elite Hezbollah commander in southern Lebanon on Monday, the latest in an escalating exchange of strikes along the border that have raised fears of another Mideast war even as the fighting in Gaza exacts a mounting toll on civilians. The strike on an SUV killed a commander in a secretive Hezbollah force that operates along the border, according to a Lebanese security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity according to regulations. Hezbollah identified the slain fighter as Wissam al-Tawil without providing details. He is the most senior militant in the armed group to have been killed since Hamas' October 7 attack into southern Israel triggered all-out war in Gaza and lower-intensity fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, which has escalated since an Israeli strike killed a senior Hamas leader in Beirut last week.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is back in the region this week, appears to be trying to head off a wider conflict.

Israel says it has largely wrapped up major operations in northern Gaza and is now focusing on the central region and the southern city of Khan Younis. Israeli officials have said the fighting will continue for many more months as the army seeks to dismantle Hamas and return scores of hostages taken during the militant group's October 7 attack that triggered the war.

The offensive has already killed over 23,000 Palestinians, devastated vast swaths of the Gaza Strip, displaced nearly 85 per cent of its population of 2.3 million and left a quarter of its residents facing starvation.



Al Jazeera journalist Wael Dahdohou holds the hand of his son Hamza, who also worked for Al Jazeera and who was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Rafah, Gaza Strip, Sunday. Dahdohou lost his wife, two other children and a grandson earlier in the war and was nearly killed himself.

in Deir al-Balah in recent days, saying it was too dangerous. That spread panic among people sheltering there, causing many to join the hundreds of thousands who have fled to the south of the besieged territory.

Tens of thousands of people have sought shelter in Gaza's hospitals, which are also struggling to treat dozens of people wounded each day in Israeli strikes. Only 13 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are even partially functioning, according to the UN humanitarian office.

Omar al-Darawi, an employee at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, said the facility has been struck multiple times in recent days. He said thousands of people left after the aid groups pulled out, and that patients have been concentrated on one floor so the remaining doctors can tend to them more easily.

"We have large numbers of wounded who can't move," he said. "They need special care, which is unavailable." More dead and wounded arrive each day as Israeli forces advance in central Gaza following heavy airstrikes. Gaza's Health Ministry said Monday that 249 Palestinians have been killed and 510 others were wounded across the territory in the last 24 hours. World Health Organisation staff who visited Sunday saw "sickening scenes of people of all ages being treated on blood-streaked

China detains man accused of spying for Britain

AP ■ BEIJING

China says it has detained an individual accused of collecting state secrets on behalf of Britain's foreign intelligence agency MI6.

The Ministry of State Security posted on social media on Monday that Britain had been cooperating since 2015 with the person, who it said was a citizen of a third nation and had the surname Huang.

The ministry said Huang had received training in intelligence gathering, provided with equipment and had collected numerous state secrets on repeated visits to China. No further information on the intelligence gathered was given, nor did the ministry say when he or she had been detained or where they were being held.

The definition of state secrets is not clearly defined under China's opaque political and legal system, and many consulting and advisory firms have been investigated for obtaining data that would ordinarily be in the public record, particularly if they were shared with foreign entities.

The British government has yet to comment on the allegations, but they follow a deterioration of relations between the sides sparked in part by British opposition to Chinese investments in the country, especially in the power and communications industries where the ruling Communist Party exercises strong influence.

London has also been highly critical of China's curtailment of political rights in Hong Kong, a former British colony where violent anti-government protests in 2019 were met with Beijing's imposition of a sweeping national security law and electoral changes.

Those have largely eliminated any political opposition to Beijing's decrees and silenced freedom of speech in what had been one of Asia's most dynamic societies and a major financial centre.

Sunak denies doubting Rwanda migrant scheme as chancellor

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has denied reports that he had doubts in the past over the deterrent effect of the country's Rwanda scheme, which will see illegal migrants deported to the East African nation while their asylum applications are processed.

A BBC report based on papers it has seen from two years ago claimed last week that Sunak was concerned about the cost of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda and wanted to limit the numbers initially in his role as chancellor under Boris Johnson's premiership.

On Sunday, he was questioned by the news channel about these documents when he admitted pushing back to ensure the value of taxpayer money but denied he had doubts over its deterrent effect.



"Just because someone's asking tough questions doesn't mean that they don't believe in the proposal," said Sunak.

"My job is to ask probing questions of every proposal that crosses my desk as chancellor.

Whether you have doubts about it or not, you shouldn't come to it with a preconceived notion that everything is fine when you're spending taxpayers' money... But to infer from

US Defence secy remains hospitalised

Washington (AP): Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin remained in the hospital Sunday as more details emerged about key decision-makers, even President Joe Biden, being kept in the dark for days that the Pentagon chief had been in the intensive care unit at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

The Pentagon's failure to disclose Austin's hospitalisation reflects a stunning lack of transparency about his illness, how serious it was and when he may be released. Such secrecy, at a time when the United States is juggling myriad national security crises, runs counter to normal practice with the president and other senior US officials and Cabinet members. A senior defence official said Deputy Secretary was not notified until Thursday that Austin had been hospitalised since January 1.

'SICKENING SCENES' IN GAZA'S HOSPITALS

Medics, patients and displaced people fled from the main hospital in central Gaza as the fighting drew closer, witnesses said Monday. Losing the facility would be another major blow to a health system shattered by three months of war.

Doctors Without Borders and other aid groups withdrew from Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital

floors and in chaotic corridors,

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of the UN agency, said in a statement. "The bloodbath in Gaza must end."

DIRE CONDITIONS IN THE ISOLATED NORTH THE situation is even more dire in northern Gaza, which Israeli forces cut off from the rest of the territory in late October. Entire neighbourhoods have been demolished, and hundreds of thousands of people have fled, while those who remain face severe shortages of food and water. The WHO said late on Sunday it has not been able to deliver supplies to northern Gaza in 12 days.

Even there, Israel is still battling what it describes as pockets of militants.

An airstrike early on Sunday flattened a four-story home filled with displaced people in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp, killing at least 70, including women and children, according to Mahmoud Bassal, a spokesman for Gaza's civil defence.

There was no immediate confirmation from the Health Ministry, which has struggled to maintain its operations in the north.

Search efforts were still underway on Monday.

The civil defense circulated a graphic video showing the aftermath of attack, with several bodies scattered among the rubble.

Boeing jetliner was restricted over warning light concern

Portland (US) (AP): The Boeing jetliner that suffered an inflight blowout over Oregon was not being used for flights to Hawaii after a warning light that could have indicated a pressurisation problem lit up on three different flights, a federal official said on Sunday.

Alaska Airlines decided to restrict the aircraft from long flights over water so the plane "could return very quickly to an airport" if the warning light reappeared, said Jennifer Homendy, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

Homendy cautioned that the pressurisation light might be unrelated to Friday's incident in which a plug covering an unused exit door blew off the Boeing 737 Max 9 as it cruised about three miles (4.8 kilometres) over Oregon.

The warning light came on during three previous flights: on December 7, January 3 and January 4 — the day before the door plug broke off. Homendy said she didn't have all the details regarding the December 7 incident but specified the light came on during a flight on January 3 and on January 4 after the plane had landed.

The NTSB said the lost door plug was found on Sunday near Portland, Oregon, by a school teacher — for now, known only as Bob — who discovered it in his backyard and sent two photos to the safety board. Investigators will examine the plug, which is 26 by 48 inches (66 by 121 centimetres) and weighs 63 pounds (28.5 kilograms), for signs of how it broke free. Investigators will not have the benefit of hearing what was going on in the cockpit during the flight. The cockpit voice recorder — one of two so-called black boxes — recorded over the flight's sounds after two hours, Homendy said.

Japan quake renders thousands homeless

AP ■ WAJIMA

Thousands of people made homeless overnight are living in weariness and uncertainty on the western coast of Japan a week after a powerful earthquake left at least 168 dead and dozens missing. The rescue effort since the magnitude 7.6 New Year's Day quake has drawn thousands of troops, firefighters and police who picked through collapsed buildings Monday hoping to find survivors.

Authorities warned of the danger of landslides, exacerbated by a heavy snowfall, throughout the quake's epicentre on the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture. The landscape blanketed in fluffy white revealed burned and crumbled houses, ashen blocks of a city, highways with gaping holes and cracks.

The deaths included 70 people in Wajima, 70 in Suzu, 18 in Anamizu and the rest

were spread among four other towns. At least 323 people were still unaccounted for, a jump from some 100 earlier in the day as rescuers pour over a list of the region's population. Another 565 people were injured, and 1,390 homes were destroyed or seriously damaged.

A tsunami of several metres (feet) followed the initial major quake, adding to the damage. Aftershocks have continued daily. Japanese meteorological officials warned strong quakes could persist for another month. Their frequency, while gradually diminishing, remained high compared to past quakes, totalling more than 1,000. For the residents, recovery work has barely started. Shuji Yoshiura, a fisherman, said his boats were damaged and he could not go out on the sea.

Before the quake, Wajima was a tourist town with a shopping street offering seafood and traditional crafts. Much of it was destroyed in the fires that broke out after the January 1 disaster.

Kentaro Mitsumori, who runs a corner grocery shop, slept in his car with his wife to guard against looting. Their store still stands but has no lock, electricity or running water. Everything sold out in three days. But he plans to close his business.

"Even if I manage to fix up the place, there just aren't going to be enough customers. I don't know how Wajima can survive," he said.

Nearly 30,000 people staying in schools, auditoriums and other evacuation centres worried about infections as cases of COVID-19 and other illnesses popped up.

In the shelters, people were still sleeping on cold floors. After initial help of a piece of bread and a cup of water for each person a day, more aid is allowing some facilities to begin serving hot



Firefighters search for missing people in the snow in Wajima, Ishikawa prefecture, Sunday. Rescue teams worked through snow to deliver supplies to isolated hamlets Monday, a week after a powerful earthquake hit western Japan.

Pope calls for global ban on surrogacy

Rome (AP): Pope Francis called Monday for a universal ban on the "despicable" practice of surrogate motherhood, as he included the "commercialisation" of pregnancy in an annual speech listing threats to global peace and human dignity. In a foreign policy address to ambassadors accredited to the Holy See, Francis lamented that 2024 had dawned at a time in history in which peace is "increasingly threatened, weakened and in some part lost."

Citing Russia's war in Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war, migration, climate crises and the "immoral" production of nuclear and conventional weapons, Francis delivered a lengthy laundry list of the ills afflicting humanity and the increasing violation of international humanitarian law that allows



them. But Francis also listed smaller-scale issues that he said were threats to peace and human dignity, including surrogacy. Francis said the life of the unborn child must be protected and not "suppressed or turned into an object of trafficking." "I consider despicable the practice of so-called surrogate motherhood, which represents a grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother's material needs," he said.

N Korea's Kim turns 40

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un turned 40 on Monday with no announced public celebrations at home, after he entered the new year with artillery barrages into the sea and vows to expand his nuclear arsenal.

Since taking power in late 2011, Kim, the third generation of his family to rule North Korea, is believed to have established an absolute leadership similar to his predecessors. But his birthday has yet to be officially celebrated, unlike his late father Kim Jong Il and grandfather Kim Il Sung.

Their birthdays are two of the North's biggest holidays and are marked with great fanfare, loyalty campaigns and sometimes massive military parades.

On Monday, North Korea's state news agency published a lengthy article extolling Kim's



guidance of major construction projects in the past decade. It also reported Kim visited a chicken farm with his daughter the previous day. But it made no mention of his birthday.

Some observers speculate Kim may think he's still relatively young or needs bigger achievements to hold such lavish birthday festivities. Others say the lack of a public birthday bash may be related to his concerns about attention to his late Japan-born mother.

Huge car rally planned in US to celebrate Ram Mandir consecration

New York (PTI): The Indian-American diaspora is gearing up to commemorate the consecration ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, with plans to hold car rallies in the US to celebrate the occasion.

The group "California Indians" is organising a special car rally on January 20 to celebrate "Bhagwan Shri Ram Ji's homecoming". The organisers said that more than 400 cars will join the rally that is expected to go from South Bay to the iconic Golden Gate Bridge. The organisers said in a press release that "Indians of Northern California are coming together to celebrate the biggest and proudest event in the modern

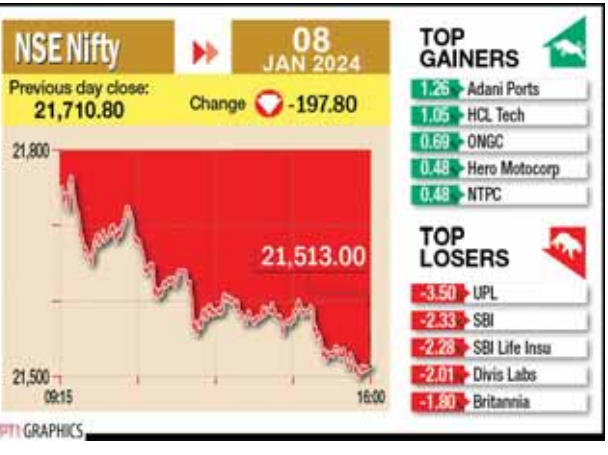
history of India." Local temples and diaspora organisations across the US are planning to hold special celebrations in the days leading up to January 22, when the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya will be inaugurated.

Car rallies have been held in Washington, Chicago and other US cities over the past several weeks.

Community leaders including Rohit Sharma, Mani Keeran, Param Desai, Daipayan Deb, Deepak Bajaj and Bimal Bhagwat are planning the California rally, the organisers said. "We cannot go to Ayodhya but Ram ji is in our hearts and this is our contribution to his homecoming," the organisers said.

Sensex, Nifty tumble nearly 1 per cent on global weakness

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Equity benchmarks Sensex and Nifty surrendered early gains to close with deep losses on Monday, snapping their two-day winning streak as investors pared exposure to banking, metal and FMCG stocks amid a weak trend in global markets. The 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 670.93 points or 0.93 per cent to settle at 71,355.22. During the day, it fell 725.11 points or 1 per cent to 71,301.04. The Nifty declined 197.80 points or 0.91 per cent to 21,513. "Nifty snapped a two-session rally to end lower after opening with marginal gains. Global stocks slipped on Monday ahead of a busy week of inflation and economic data and



dipped 0.36 per cent. Among the indices, FMCG fell 1.55 per cent, commodities declined 1.44 per cent, bankex (1.42 per cent), metal 1.40 per cent, financial services (1.05 per cent), telecommunication (0.93 per cent), IT (0.90 per cent) and tech (0.77 per cent). Power, realty and services were the gainers. "The market witnessed wide-spread selling as the euphoria over early rate cuts may diminish due to the better-than-expected non-farm payroll data

from the US and the consequent rise in the US 10-year yield. "In the near term, investors' trade positions will be more inclined towards the upcoming result season. While the outset may be tempered by lower expectations in the IT sector, the overall forecast for earnings growth remains optimistic, projecting double-digit figures," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 1.21 per cent to USD 77.81 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 1,696.86 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark jumped 178.58 points or 0.25 per cent to settle at 72,026.15 on Friday. The Nifty climbed 52.20 points or 0.24 per cent to 21,710.80.

K-shaped recovery narrative flawed and prejudiced: SBI report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The repeated argument that India witnessed a K-shaped recovery post-pandemic is "flawed, prejudiced, and ill-concocted," said a research report by SBI on Monday. According to the report, post-pandemic, households are reconfiguring their savings towards physical assets, including real estate, it said. "The oft-repeated conundrum debating a K-shaped recovery post-pandemic seems at best flawed, prejudiced, ill-concocted and fanning interests of select quarters to whom India's remarkable ascendance, signalling more the renaissance of the new global south, is quite unpalatable," the report said. K-shaped recovery reflects uneven recovery where certain sectors of the economy thrives while other sectors continue to decline or struggle to recover. It further said post-pandemic, there has been two-way shift between savings channelised into physical assets from financial assets in consonance with the global trend to take advantage of lower interest rates. However, it said, recent data

DGCA revises duty time limitations norms for flight crew, raises weekly rest periods to 48 hrs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Aviation safety regulator DGCA on Monday came out with revised Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) norms for flight crew, entailing increased weekly rest periods to 48 hours, extension of night hours, and limiting the number of night landings to only two as against six earlier. These regulations have been instrumental in managing fatigue-related aviation safety risks for more than a decade now, an official statement said. Airlines are required to comply with the revised norms latest by June 1, it said. With a view to address and mitigate concerns on pilot fatigue through a data-driven approach, Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) collected and analysed extensive numbers of pilot rosters, along with pilot fatigue reports submitted by airline operators, it said. Based on the study and analysis, some of the key areas inducing fatigue, such as maximum flight duty period, night duty, weekly rest period, flight duty period extension, among others, were identified, it said. The revised FDTL regulations have been formulated after extensive data analysis and feedback from various stakeholders, including airline operators, pilot associations and individuals, as per the statement. It also said the best practices in the world — FAA in the US, and EASA in the



European Union — have also been taken into consideration in amending the regulations, while keeping in mind the specific operating environment in India. The revised regulations mandate increased weekly rest periods from 36 hours to 48 hours for flight crew, thus ensuring sufficient time for recovery from cumulative fatigue, it said. Moreover, the definition of night has been amended and it now covers the period of 0000-0600 hours in the revised regulations vis-a-vis the period of 0000-0500 hours under the previous regulations. This enhancement of one hour during the early morning will ensure adequate rest and also align the night duty period, which encompasses Window of Circadian Low



ONGC starts oil production from delayed USD 5 billion deep-water project

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
State-controlled Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has started oil production from its much-delayed flagship deep-sea project in Krishna Godavari basin in Bay of Bengal, helping reverse years of decline in output, the company said. ONGC has started producing from the Cluster-2 project in KG-DWN-98/2 block and will slowly ramp up output. Oil Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said "first oil production commences from complex and difficult" block. He did not indicate the current output but said "production is expected to be 45,000 barrels per day and over 10 million standard cubic metres per day of gas". Cluster-2 oil production should have begun by November 2021 but was delayed because of the Covid pandemic. ONGC has hired floating vessel Armada Sterling-V, owned 70 per cent by SPOG (Shapoorji Pallonji Oil & Gas) and 30 per cent by Malaysia's Bumi Armada, for producing oil from below seabed. The FPSO (floating production, storage and offloading vessel), Armada Sterling-V, has been waiting to receive oil since January 2, 2023, after she was hooked up on December 27, 2022. ONGC previously set May 2023 as the first Cluster-2 oil deadline, extended to August 2023, September 2023, October 2023

India's coal import rises 11.7 per cent to 21 MT in Nov

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The country registered an 11.7 per cent rise in coal imports to 20.95 Million Tonnes (MT) in November as compared to the year-ago period. The country's coal imports in November 2022 was 18.75 MT, according to data compiled by B2B e-commerce company mjunction services. However, coal import in the April-November period of the current financial year dropped to 169.08 MT from 173.47 MT in the year-ago period. There was reduction in coal imports due to ample domestic supply and a slowdown in demand after the festive season in October, mjunction MD and CEO Vinaya Varma said. The demand for imported coal, he said, is likely to remain subdued in the coming months. Of the total import in November 2023, non-coking coal import was at 14.37 MT, against 11.88 MT in the same month the previous year. Coking coal import was at 4.23 MT, against 3.90 MT imported in November 2022. During the April-November period in 2023, non-coking coal import stood at 108.90 MT, lower than 116.28 MT imported during the same period in the previous fiscal. Coking coal import was at 37.97 MT during the April-November period, up against 36.64 MT recorded in the year-ago period.

Agri exports likely to double to USD 100 bn by 2030: Commerce Secretary

PTI ■ GREATER NOIDA
India's agriculture exports, which stood at over USD 50 billion at present, are expected to double by 2030 and reach USD 100 billion, Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said on Monday. He said that the country is targeting USD 2 trillion worth of exports of goods and services by 2030. "I am very sure that this USD 50 billion exports of India today will see a doubling of our exports by 2030 to almost USD 100 billion," he said at the IndusFood Show 2024 here. This is the largest food and beverage show in South Asia. The secretary said that areas like the ready-to-eat food segment have huge potential to grow. He also urged the industry to focus on the technical standard requirements of importing countries. Inaugurating the show, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said that this fiscal year, the country's agri exports will be more than last year's level of USD 53 billion, despite restrictions imposed on shipments of certain key commodities, including rice, wheat and sugar. Earlier, an official said that the export ban and restrictions on these commodities may hit exports of about USD 4-5 billion this fiscal. The government has prohibited exports of wheat and non-



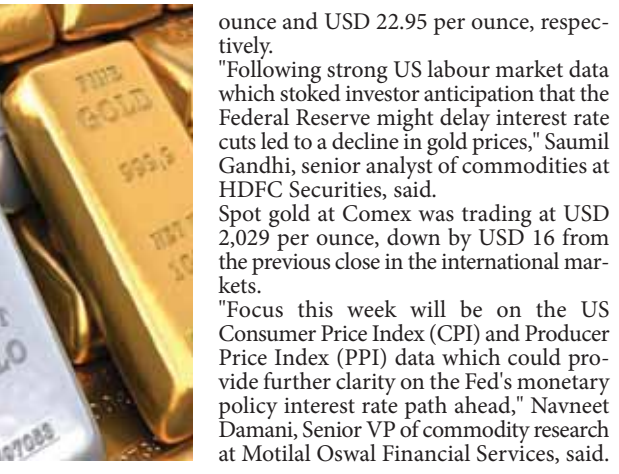
Ramdas, Grand Hypermarket, Nesto, Mustafa, X5, Lulu, Almaya Group, and Spar, are also participating, he added. Goyal also said there is a need for large-scale food processing, product branding, and export focus to provide better value to farmers, generate employment, and enhance the country's earnings. He added that as many as 158 food and agri products have been granted Geographical Indications (GIs) tags, and 708 food items have been identified under the One District One Product (ODOP) initiative for their promotion. He urged the industry to focus on frozen, packaged, and ready-to-eat foods, encouraging skill development, university exchange programmes, and startups in the sector. The industry should also prioritise quality, nutrition, organic ingredients, and eco-friendly packaging, underscoring the significance of promoting food nutrition and sustainability, the minister said.

MF industry assets surge by ₹11 lakh crore in 2023, crosses ₹50 lakh crore mark

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
After a lackluster performance in 2022, the mutual fund industry saw a substantial rebound in 2023 with its asset base surging by nearly Rs 11 lakh crore, reaching over Rs 50 lakh crore-mark fuelled by an optimistic equity market, steady interest rates, and a robust economic expansion. The year 2023 has seen a substantial increase in overall inflow, data from the Association of Mutual Fund Industry (Amfi) showed on Monday. The inflow has pushed the assets under management (AUM) of the mutual fund industry by 27 per cent, adding Rs 10.9 lakh crore in 2023. This was way higher than the 5.7 per cent growth and Rs 2.65 lakh crore increase in AUM observed throughout 2022, as well as the nearly 22 per cent growth and close to Rs 7 lakh crore addition to the asset base in 2021. The asset base rose from Rs 39.88 lakh crore in 2022 to an all-time high of Rs 50.78 lakh crore in 2023, the data showed. The asset base stood at Rs 37.72 lakh crore at the end of December 2021 and Rs 31 lakh crore in December 2020.

Gold slips ₹250; silver slumps ₹400

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Gold prices slipped Rs 250 to Rs 63,200 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday amid a decline in precious metal prices internationally, according to HDFC Securities. The precious metal had settled at Rs 63,450 per 10 grams in the previous close. Silver also slumped Rs 400 to Rs 76,300 per kilogram. In the previous trade, silver closed at Rs 76,700 per kg. In the futures trade on the MCX, the February contract of gold plunged Rs 355 to Rs 62,202 per 10 grams. Also, the March contract of silver tumbled Rs 415 to Rs 72,172 per kg on the bourse. In the overseas markets, both gold and silver were trading lower at USD 2,029 per



BUSINESS BRIEF

SRM GLOBAL HOSPITAL EXCELS IN SERVICE
CHENNAI: Being the Times Healthcare Achievers of 2023, SRM Global Hospitals, Kattankulathur serves its excellence on a scale of effective critical services and delivering salient features through world-class equipped amenities and patient care. The President of SRM Group of Companies, Dr. P. Sathyanarayan feels that the SRM Global Hospitals indulge in offering seamless compassion towards the art of healing medical ailments. The stupendous brand ambassadors of each speciality provide a legacy of healthcare services over the years. With immense pride, he introduced the miscellaneous crew of 4 cardiologists, 5+ gastroenterologists over a supported 15+ doctors for the emergency and critical care services onboard.



Mercedes Benz lines up ₹200 cr investment, to launch over 12 products in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
German luxury carmaker Mercedes-Benz will invest Rs 200 crore in India this year on new products, manufacturing operations and digitisation, to strengthen its position after posting record sales of 17,408 units in 2023, a top company official said on Monday. Mercedes-Benz India will have more than 12 launches in 2024, including three electric vehicles, out of which half will be in the top end vehicle segment (TEV) and will be priced Rs 1.5 crore onwards. "This year marks a special year as we celebrate 30 years of Mercedes-Benz in India. We are going to invest Rs 200 crore more into our factory in Pune. This takes a total investment of Rs 3,000 crore in India now. So that's a strong statement of intent," Mercedes-Benz India Managing Director & CEO Santosh Iyer told PTI in an interview.



"double-digit" growth despite volatility in both supply and demand sides. Currently, the company's order bank stands at 3,000 units. On the product launch plan, Iyer said, "We are looking at 12-plus new car lines to be launched in '24 and 50 per cent of them will be in the top end vehicle segment. These will include three new electric vehicles." The TEV segment continues to drive aspiration for the brand, Iyer said, adding that three new EVs to be launched in 2024 will build up the company's EV portfolio. "EVs now comprise 4 per cent of our total sales and the segment witnessed a trebling of growth in 2023," he added.

INDIAN WOMEN HOCKEY TEAM CONFIDENT

PTI ■ RANCHI
Indian women's team is confident of booking a third successive Olympic berth and its knowledge of the conditions here will put it in good stead ahead of the eight-team hockey Olympic Qualifiers, said attacking midfielder Navneet Kaur on Monday. The Indian team, led by Savita Punia, had won the Asian Champions Trophy at the same venue of Marang Gomke Jaypal Singh Mundha AstroTurf Hockey Stadium in November last year. The hosts defeated Japan 4-0 in the final to secure their second consecutive title in the competition. "Arriving in Ranchi early has helped us gain quite a few sessions on the main pitch and it has also helped us acclimatise to this weather," Navneet said in a Hockey India release. "Since we have also played in this venue before, during the Women's Asian Champions Trophy, we know the pitch well." Fuelled by their historic fourth-place finish in the Tokyo Olympic Games, the Indian side spent about a week under-

OF MAKING 3RD SUCCESSIVE OLYMPICS



standing the conditions. The Indian members also visited and trained at some venues in Kunti district. "We also went and trained in Kunti district which is home to some of our teammates and it was incredible to see the excitement on the children's faces

who had come to cheer us," Navneet said. Placed in Pool B, India's campaign kicks off with a clash against the United States on Saturday, followed by their match against New Zealand the next day. After a day's rest, India face Italy on January 16. Pool A comprises World No 5 Germany, former Asian Games Champions Japan, Chile, and Czech Republic. "We are upbeat and eager to get on with our campaign. After our Tokyo Olympics performance, the expectations are high and we want to live up to the billing. We are well-prepared for the event and are confident of a good show," Navneet said. The top two teams from each Pool will qualify for the semi-finals and the teams that finish in top-3 will earn a ticket to Paris 2024. The semi-finals are scheduled for January 18, with the grand final and bronze play-off set to take place on January 19. The event was originally slated to be held in China, but Hockey India requested FIH to shift the venue to India after China Women's directly qualified for the Paris Olympics.

SHOOTING Varun, Esha seal Olympic quota places

With 10m air pistol golds at Asian Qualifiers

PTI ■ JAKARTA
Young Indian shooters Varun Tomar and Esha Singh on Monday secured two Olympic quota places for the country with gold medals in the men's and women's 10m Air Pistol events of the Asian Qualifiers here. The duo's qualification took the total number of Indian shooters bound for Paris to 15, equalling the highest-ever tally that was achieved in the Tokyo Games. India can add more to the group headed for the Games in July-August this year when the remaining qualifiers are held. India secured six medals on Monday, including two team golds, at the continental event. The 20-year-old Tomar shot 239.6 in the final to claim the top position, while Arjun Cheema won the silver medal with a score of 237.3. Mongolia's Davaakhuu Enkhtaivan (217.2) won the bronze medal. Earlier, Tomar (586), Cheema (579) and Ujjawal Malik (575) shot a total of 1740 to win the 10m air pistol team gold, while Iran and Korea claimed the silver and bronze medals respectively. Tomar, a former junior world champion, is the cousin of Tokyo Olympian Saurabh Chaudhary, who won a gold medal in the 2018 Asian Games. "It helped that I had someone



like Saurabh to take guidance from as I don't have anyone in the family who is a shooter," Tomar, who comes from a farming family, told PTI. The 19-year-old Esha then grabbed the gold in the women's event with a score of 243.1. The silver went to Pakistan's Kishmala Talat (236.3), while the bronze was grabbed by Esha's compatriot Rhythm Sangwan (214.5). The 21-year-old Talat also earned a quota for the Paris Games, becoming the third Pakistani shooter to achieve the feat. Esha, Rhythm and Surbhi Rao also won the team gold medal with a combined score of 1736. Esha is a world championship gold-medallist in the 10m air pistol mixed team and 25m pistol team events. "She can also win a medal, possibly gold, in 25m sports pistol here. But an individual can bag only one quota place for the country. Her bagging the quota in 10m air pistol means she can also compete in 25m sports pistol in Paris," said Esha's father Sachin Singh. A total of 16 quota places for the Paris Olympics are available at the continental showcase here. The 10m air pistol events for men and women have four quotas on offer with a maximum of three for the Indian shooters. As many as 385 athletes from 26 countries are in action at the Senayan Shooting Range in Jakarta for 256 medals (84 gold, 84 silver and 88 bronze medals), besides the Paris quotas. Ahead of this tournament, India had won 13 Olympic quota places in shooting across rifle, pistol and shotgun disciplines.



BAI to fund 28 shuttlers for international exposure

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Badminton Association of India (BAI) will fund 28 Indian shuttlers, including senior national men's and women's champions Chirag Sen and Anmol Kharb, for international tournaments this year. Indian players ranked between 26 and 75 in BWF world rankings and top performers from the Senior National championships, who are not part of the national camp, will benefit from this opportunity. The funds will come as part of BAI's partnership with Rural Electrification Corporation (REC). Abu Dhabi Masters champion Unnati Hooda and 2023 Badminton Asia U-17 Junior championships silver medallist Tanvi Sharma are among the 28 players across singles and doubles categories who have been chosen based on their performances in multiple tournaments. "BAI is committed to ensure promising talents get much-needed support to showcase their potential as the national campers even if they are not part of the national camp," said BAI Secretary Sanjay Mishra in a release on Monday. "Our partnership with REC will not only help us broad base these opportunities and give shuttlers more and more opportunities to participate in multiple international challenger events as well as Super 300s and thereby better their rankings as well as gain experience of playing against foreign players. "This initiative aligns with our goals to create strong opportunities for more players to show their abilities as well as compete and benefit from the national badminton structure."

Was inspired by Saurabhs: Varun

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Promising shooter Varun Tomar always wanted to be like his cousin, Olympian Saurabh Chaudhary, and on Monday the 20-year-old took a giant step towards achieving his goal by securing a quota for the 2024 Paris Games by winning gold medal at the Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Jakarta. Tomar, who initially trained with multiple-time World Cup gold medallist and 2018 Asian Games champion Chaudhary at his home range in Baghpat district of UP, said the individual gold medal will motivate him to train harder for the 2024 Paris Games. "I took up shooting seven years back watching my senior cousin Saurabh. He has been my motivation, having struck success early in his career. I always wanted to be like him and achieve international success," Tomar told PTI from Jakarta. "I started shooting a year after Saurabh and we both initially had the same coach (Amit Sheoran) in Benoli village of Baghpat," said Tomar, a former junior world championship gold medallist in team event. Tomar, who hails from Garhi Kangran village in Baghpat, secured India's 14th Olympic quota place on the opening day



of the competition, clinching both the individual and team gold. The 20-year-old shot 239.6 in the final of the 10m air pistol event to claim the top position in individual category ahead of compatriot Arjun Cheema (237.3). Earlier, Tomar (586), Cheema (579) and Ujjawal Malik (575) shot a total of 1740 to win the 10m air pistol team gold. "It helped that I had someone like Saurabh to take guidance from as I don't have anyone in the family who is a shooter," said Tomar, who comes from a farming family. After nearly seven years of training, Tomar finally got success last year, winning individual bronze medals at the World Cups in Bhopal and Cairo. Soon he was selected for training at the National Centre of

Excellence (NCOE) at the Karni Singh Ranges here and is now employed with the Indian Army. "I have always appreciated Varun for his calm nature. He is a copy of Saurabh. He hardly interacts with anyone at the range and just keeps to himself, training hard," said national rifle coach Deepak Dubey here. "He is still a junior but is learning fast. The success in the two World Cups last year and the individual gold medal today are an indication that he really has a sound technique and temperament," said Dubey. "I know for a fact that he got inspired by Saurabh. He came into NCOE about 5-6 months back. He made a place in the Indian team last year and won two medals in World Cups. He has shot some really good scores last year. "His selection by the Army Marksmanship Unit has given his career a big boost. The fact that he has come up on his own without having a personal coach is indeed creditworthy," said Dubey. "He only shoots 10m air pistol and not 25m rapid fire, which helps him give undivided attention to just one discipline. He is just like Saurabh, doesn't talk much, very disciplined, hard working and very obedient," added Dubey.

Anahat finishes runner up at 2024 British Junior Open squash

PTI ■ BIRMINGHAM (ENGLAND)
Rising Indian star Anahat Singh signed off with a runner-up finish in the girls' under-17 category at the British Junior Open squash tournament here. The Indian top-seed Anahat went down 2-3 to Egyptian second seed Nadien Elhammamy in a tense 68-minute cliffhanger at the University of Birmingham on Sunday. The 15-year-old won the opening game 11-7, before Elhammamy fought back to claim the next two on tiebreak 13-11 & 12-10. The Delhi girl won the fourth game 11-5 to force a decider, and not much separated the pair in the fifth, which the Egyptian clinched 11-9. Late last month, Anahat won the Under-19 crown at the Scottish

Junior Open to cap a spectacular 2023. In 2023, Anahat secured the under-19 and senior National championship double, besides winning bronze medals in the mixed doubles and team event at the Asian Games Huangzhou. She also won another bronze partnering Abhay Singh at the inaugural Asian Mixed Doubles Championships. Meanwhile, Aryaveer Dewan, the reigning US Junior Open boys' under-15 champion, took third place in the boys' under-15 section. He lost to Egyptian top seed Philopater Saleh 3-1 in the semifinals, but bounced back to win the play-off for third place. Promising Aadya Budhia was edged out 3-2 by top seeded American Vivienne Sze in the under-13 girls' quarterfinals.



Meb named brand ambassador of Tata Mumbai Marathon

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Celebrated long distance runner Meb Keflezighi, who won a silver medal in the 2004 Athens Olympics, has been named brand ambassador of the 19th Tata Mumbai Marathon scheduled to be held on Sunday. The race is a World Athletics Gold Label event and Procram International is the promoter of the event. "The Tata Mumbai Marathon has been on my bucket list for the longest time, and finally being able to witness Mumbai's indomitable spirit, is indeed exciting," Keflezighi, an Eritrean-born American, was quoted as saying in a press release. "This event inspired a country to run and changed mindsets, that is the true legacy of a sporting event. Mumbai's incredible energy and enthusiasm, combined with the dedication of its runners, embodies the universal language of endurance. "I will only say this... remember to run with purpose, embrace the journey, and move ahead together. In every stride, find the strength to go the distance and make a difference to what you believe in." Keflezighi has several record-breaking accolades in his career. He scripted history when he became the only runner to win an Olympic medal (2004), the New York City Marathon (2009) and the Boston Marathon (2014). In 2009, Keflezighi became the first American since 1982 to win the New York City Marathon. He has achieved the feat of being in the top 10 in the New York Marathon for a total of eight times in his career. In 2015, he set a TCS New York City Marathon masters event record with a timing of 2:13:32sec. In 2014 he won the Boston Marathon (2:08:37), the first American male to do so since 1983, and the first American since 1985. Since 1930, Keflezighi has held the record for being the oldest winner of the Boston Marathon as he triumphed there when he was 39 years old. He is also a former USA National 10,000m track record holder. The Tata Mumbai Marathon will flag off from the iconic Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus on Sunday.

Theegala misses win by one shot, finishes 2nd

PTI ■ KAPALUA
Indian-American golfer Sahith Theegala missed a 10 foot putt on the 18th hole to finish second in the Sentry, the opening event of the 2024 PGA TOUR season. Theegala fired a sizzling 10-under 63 to finish at 28-under but Chris Kirk, the overnight leader playing in the final group, carded 8-under 65 to finish at 29-under, that included a superb second shot to set up a birdie on the 17th to go one ahead. He parred the 18th and won the title. Akshay Bhatia, the other Indian-American in the field, who was second after 54 holes, had a double bogey start after two bogey-free days and finished with 2-under 71 to drop to Tied-14th place. Bhatia, one shot behind at the start, drove his opening tee shot into the native grass and never contended thereafter. Theegala missed a 10-foot birdie chance at the par-5 closing hole and shot 63, while Jordan Spieth, whose tee shot on

BHATIA 14TH AS KIRK WINS SENTRY



the 16th plugged under the lip of a bunker for a bogey, missed a 15-foot eagle putt on the 18th and shot 65 to finish third at 27-under. Korean Byeong-Hun-An (66) was fourth at 26-under.

"Yeah, I really wish I could have had that second shot on 18 back. It's not how it works." Theegala had a great final day. After four birdies in a row from second to sixth, he added one on ninth to turn in 5-under. Another birdie followed on 11th and four more came in a row from 13th to the 16th. That birdie on the 16th gave him a one-shot lead. Then he parred 17th and missed a 10-footer for the 11th birdie of the day and finished one behind. Sungjae Im got into the PGA TOUR record books with 34 birdies, beating Jon Rahm's mark of 32 set last year. While he was delighted with his record, Im was still somewhat disappointed with his third round of 73 on Saturday which knocked him out of contention in his search for a third PGA TOUR title. This is the second birdie record on TOUR which Im now proudly holds as in 2021, he snared 498 birdies to set a new record for most birdies during a season, breaking the previous mark of 493 by Steve Flesch in 2000.

Malaysia Open: Indian shuttlers hope for bright start in high stake Olympic year

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR
With the Paris Olympic qualification at stake, top Indian shuttlers, including HS Prannoy and Lakshya Sen, will hope to begin the new season on a bright note when they start their campaign at the Malaysia Open Super 1000 badminton tournament here on Tuesday. A lot will be on the line for Indian shuttlers in the next four months as they zoom through a hectic calendar, hoping to get inside the world's top-16 by April end to book their berths for the Paris Games. Frontrunner in the Olympic race, world no. 8 Prannoy, had a sensational season with maiden bronze medals at the World Championships and the Asian Games and a title-run at the Malaysia Masters super 500. He also registered a final finish at the

Australia Open super 500. The 31-year-old, seeded 8th, will hope to continue his rich vein of form when he opens against Denmark's Anders Antonsen, who made a successful comeback from an injury by winning the Korea Open in 2023. All eyes will also be on Lakshya and Kidambi Srikanth as they fight to get inside the top 16 after enduring contrasting fates last season. While world no. 16 Sen claimed the Canada Open super 500 before losing his form in the back end, Srikanth, ranked 24, has looked subdued and had just four quarterfinal finishes to show in 2023. Things are not going to be easy for Sen and Srikanth as they face tough competitors in China's Weng Hong Yang and sixth seed Jonatan Christie of Indonesia respectively in the opening round here.



Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have looked in ominous form in the men's doubles arena. They went on a record-breaking spree to emerge as the best-performing Indian shuttlers in 2023. In a span of 12 months, they won an Asian Games gold, a super 1000 crown in Indonesia, the Korea Open super 500 and the Swiss Open super 300 before grabbing a career-best ranking of World No.1, albeit for a brief time. The second-seeded pair, which reached the semifinals in 2023, will look to continue the good run and go deep in the draw when they open against the Indonesian combination of Muhammad Shohibul Fikri and Bagas Maulana. Brimming with confidence after making three finals in December, the women's doubles pair of Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto will

now look to make the right moves this season to crack the global top 16. The duo is currently placed 21st in the Olympic Games Qualification rankings, ahead of Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who are at the 27th spot. Ashwini and Tanisha, who claimed the Guwahati Masters super 100 title, will face USA's Francesca Corbett and Allison Lee in the opening round. With two-time Olympic medallist P V Sindhu recovering from a knee injury, India will have no representation in women's singles. There are also no Indians competing in mixed doubles. Malaysia Open is one of the four BWF World Tour Super 1000 tournaments, having gained the status last year. All England Championships, China Open and Indonesian Open are the other three in the world circuit.

He also registered a final finish at the

ROHIT, KOHLI GET FINAL SHOT AT T20 GLORY

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The selectors have clearly gone for the status quo rather than addressing the elephant in the room by picking Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli for their first T20 series in 14 months. Will it have a bearing on India's chances in another T20 World Cup? Only time can tell. Having endured a heartbreak in the previous two editions of the T20 World Cup, the two greats of the game can't be faulted for wanting a final shot at glory in the format. But the same can't be said about the selectors, who picked a fresh bunch of players to take the team forward since the crushing semifinal loss to England in November 2022. Now that Rohit and Kohli have been picked for the home series against Afghanistan beginning on January 11, it is a given that the famed duo will be a part of India's squad for the ICC show-

piece in the US and Caribbean in June. It also means that India, who have been guilty of playing conservative cricket at the top of the order, are also back to square one as far as their planning for the T20 mega event is concerned. The two superstars played a massive role in taking India to the ODI World Cup final but can they step up to the demands of the shortest format where one needs to go after the bowlers from ball one? Rohit, who did not score tons of runs in the recently held ODI showpiece but yet managed to make a compelling impact with his high risk game, will most likely carry on in the same vein when the Afghanistan series begins in Mohali. On the other hand, Kohli's game is tailor-made for the 50-over format but he has also managed to maintain more than a decent strike rate of 137.96 over 148

T20s. Rohit strikes at almost 140 in T20s but he too will need to bat at a higher clip to keep up with the fast changing demands of the modern game. In contrast, their teammate and world's best T20 batter, Suryakumar Yadav, bats at a 170 plus strike rate. The likes of Yashasvi Jaiswal and Ruturaj Gaikwad showed promise in the opportunities they got in the absence of senior players but there is no substitute to experience at an ICC event. It's a sentiment that has been unanimously voiced by former players including Sunil Gavaskar and Sourav Ganguly, who have backed the inclusion of Rohit and Kohli in the T20 squad. Former India selector Sarandeep Singh too feels Rohit and Kohli are best suited for the job. "It is the right call. In ICC events, you need players who can handle pressure well. They both were great in the ODI World Cup and are in top form.

But will selectors safe approach cost India another WC?



However, this development means it would be very difficult to accommodate Jaiswal and Ruturaj," he told PTI. He also justified the celebrated pair not playing the shortest format since November 2022. "You have to prepare bench strength also. In all probability this will be their last T20 World Cup. If Rohit and Virat were not rested, you could not have tried the likes of Jaiswal, Ruturaj, Jitesh (Sharma) and others. "Having said that, these two greats don't need to play the shortest format to make a comeback. Eventually, the performance of all the World Cup probables in the IPL will make the picture clearer for the subsequent World Cup," the former India spinner added. With Rohit and Kohli's inclusion, it is amply clear that selectors did not want to rock the boat. Former India opener Aakash Chopra feels the selectors had to pick both the greats as they could not have left one and included the other. "It seemed they won't play another T20 World Cup (after 2022) as they had not been playing since the previous edition. Both are in the same boat. Even if the selectors thought about leaving out one of the two, I don't think they would have been able to do that. It was always about picking both or otherwise," Chopra said on his youtube channel. Hardik Pandya had led the T20 side in Rohit's absence and was expected to lead the team in the US and Caribbean but another injury setback seems to have cost him that chance. Rohit is back as captain and will have Kohli by his side to rely on when India take on the sprightly bunch of Afghans in the three-match series. But most significantly, will they finally be able to land an elusive ICC title? That question will be answered in five months' time.



India women eye maiden T20I series win over Australia

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI
The culmination of a long and mixed home season brings the Indian women's cricket team one last opportunity to register a maiden T20I series triumph over Australia at home when the two sides square off in the series-decider here on Tuesday. With the three-match affair levelled 1-1, Harmanpreet Kaur's India have a chance to beat the reigning world champions Australia in their own den and kick off the 2024 T20I World Cup year in style. India have only one series win to show against Australia's four in their five-series bilateral T20I history. Their triumph in an away affair in 2015-16 sits atop in the list of achievements for this side. However, having registered historic wins in one-off Tests earlier this season against both Australia and England, India would want to make this one last opportunity count. India were on a roll in the first game and thrashed Australia by a record margin of nine wickets but their batters cut a sorry figure in the second. A tricky pitch here at the DY Patil Stadium on Sunday did not allow batters to flourish. While heavy dew in the first half of the game assisted India's charge with the bat, the absence of it in the second made the job of containing the Australian batters difficult.

But to their credit, the Indian bowlers did well to take the game as deep as possible with some tight lines and sharp fielding. However, the home team's fielding has only been sporadically good. Kaur's own form with the bat will remain a huge concern for the hosts, who were humbled by six wickets in the second game. The Indian captain has not made a fifty yet in 10 matches so far across formats in these games. She has seven single-digit scores now in 11 innings including the first T20I wherein her services were not required. "Every player cannot have a good day everyday, but suddenly anyone can have a very good day. It is not the case that we are (right away) aiming for big shots but we are trying to play (as per the) merit of the ball," all-rounder Deepti Sharma told the media after the match when asked if Kaur's form was a concern for the team. Deepti waged a lone battle of sorts with a combative all-round performance in the second game scoring a 27-ball 31 in a faltering Indian innings to give them some late impetus, and also fought hard with the ball to take the first two wickets of the four Australian wickets to fall. The pitches for the two T20Is so far have not allowed batters to go berserk especially in the first innings, allowing the bowlers to dominate the proceedings. "It has been a really good con-

test between bat and ball, there is something in it for both the batters and the bowlers," said Australia's player of the match on Sunday Kim Garth. "Especially, coming from the wicket that we played on the Test match, (it) was a lot more challenging for the batters, so it has been really pleasing that there has been a bit in it for the bowlers, particularly with the new ball," she added. Deepti also found the pitch for the second game a challenging one to bat on. "...It was not an easy wicket to bat on. The ball was turning as well as getting slow (off the surface). I think we were about 15 runs short..." she replied when asked what went wrong for India.

SQUADS:
INDIA: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smriti Mandhana (vc), Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Deepti Sharma, Yastika Bhatia (wk), Richa Ghosh (wk), Amanjot Kaur, Shreyanka Patil, Mannat Kashyap, Saika Ishaque, Renuka Singh Thakur, Titas Sadhu, Pooja Vastrakar, Kanika Ahuja, Minnu Mani.
AUSTRALIA: Darcie Brown, Heather Graham, Ashleigh Gardner, Kim Garth, Grace Harris, Alyssa Healy (c&wk), Jess Jonassen, Alana King, Phoebe Litchfield, Tahlia McGrath (vc), Beth Mooney (wk), Ellyse Perry, Megan Schutt, Annabel Sutherland, Georgia Wareham.

Heinrich announces Test retirement

PTI ■ PRETORIA (SOUTH AFRICA)
South African wicketkeeper-batter Heinrich Klaassen has announced his retirement from red-ball cricket, bringing curtains to his brief stint in the format. Having made his debut against India in Ranchi in 2019, the 32-year-old played four matches in his brief Test career with his final outing against the West Indies in Johannesburg last year. He has scored 104 runs at an average of 13.00, while his top score was 35 against Australia in Sydney. Klaassen will continue to be available for the Proteas in white-ball cricket. "After a few sleepless nights wondering if I am making the right decision, I have decided to retire from red ball cricket," he said in a statement. "It's a difficult decision that I have made because it is by far my favourite format of the game." "The battles that I faced on and off the field has made me the cricketer I am today. "But for now, a new challenge awaits and looking forward to it." It is understood that the explosive batter is keen on the T20 franchise leagues with his commitments in the IPL, Hundred, and MLC. He has become the second



South African player to retire from red-ball cricket within a week. Dean Elgar also hung up his boots following the conclusion of the two-Test series against India that ended in a 1-1 draw last week. Klaassen was dropped for the India series, as head coach Shukri Conrad went ahead with Kyle Verreynne.

Dhull loses captaincy after defeat in Ranji Trophy opener

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Yash Dhull was on Monday removed as Delhi captain, hours after the team suffered a heavy defeat against Puducherry in their Ranji Trophy opening match. Senior batter Himmat Singh will now lead the side that takes on Jammu and Kashmir in an away game from January 12. In an attempt to revive Delhi's flagging fortunes, U-19 World Cup-winning captain Dhull was made the skipper of the side in December 2022. Since making his debut in February 2022, Dhull has made 1185 runs at an average of 43.88. Dhull made two and 23 in the nine-wicket loss to Puducherry at home. The 21-year-old had also led the side in the white-ball tournaments earlier in the season.

Himmat Singh is new skipper



"Yash is a talented player but is out of form. We wanted him to do well as a batter, that is why we have relieved him of captaincy duties. Himmat is our senior player and has done very well for us. He will captain the side," DDCA joint secretary Rajan Manchanda told PTI. Dhull has struggled against fast bowlers, of late and was reluctant to open the innings. Himmat had led Delhi to a momentous win over Mumbai in the former's absence last season. The 27-year-old has played 22 first-class games, having made his debut back in 2017. The team manages to court unwanted attention season after season. Last year, senior players Nitish Rana and Dhruv Shorey left Delhi and moved to UP and Vidarbha respectively. Senior pacers Navdeep Saini, who was named in the India A squad to face visiting England Lions, and Ishant Sharma won't be travelling with the team to Jammu. It has been learnt that veteran pacer Ishant will only be available for Delhi's home games. Delhi, who have won Ranji Trophy seven times, last lifted the coveted trophy back in 2007-08.



England still comes first: Liam Livingstone

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN
He is an acclaimed T20 free-lancer but white ball commitments for England is still a priority for Liam Livingstone, one of the world's most destructive batters in the shortest format. Livingstone, who has played 25 ODIs and 38 T20Is for England, has already plied his trade in IPL (Rajasthan Royals and Punjab Kings), Birmingham Phoenix in The Hundred, Perth Scorchers in Big Bash League (BBL) of Australia and Peshawar Zalmi in Pakistan Super League (PSL) to name a few. In the second edition of SA20, Livingstone will play for MI Cape Town and he, along with Kagiso Rabada and skipper Kieron Pollard, will be the guiding light for the franchise. How does he balance his calendar in terms of playing for franchise leagues and English white ball commitments? "Yeah, I think England comes first. We see our calendar at the start of the year and see where we have gaps. If we feel like it's a good opportunity for us to go away and play franchise cricket, then we'll do that," Livingstone replied to a query from PTI. "If we feel like we need a rest and it's going to hinder our international cricket, then we'll probably have a rest. So I guess at the start of the year, you just try and work out when you can play and where you can go and go from there," he added. Livingstone believes that a league like SA20 will help youngsters stake claim for national berth in their respective countries. "Yeah, international cricket is very different from franchise cricket. It is what it is. I think it's different for the young boys coming up compared to the older boys who are already playing international cricket. It's a great chance for young boys to make a name for themselves and showcase their talent. "I think it's a little bit different for the older ones of us, shall I say that? We've already played international cricket for a while now," the 30-year-old said. Playing for a legacy franchise like MI, what's his expectations? "Hopefully, lots of entertainment, win games of cricket. I guess that probably will be the two biggest things in a franchise tournament. You want to entertain people that pay money to come and watch and you want to win games of cricket for your franchise. "So yeah, hopefully we can do both. You've got to try and get everybody together, everybody on the same wavelength. Hopefully, we can do that over the next couple of days and start the season really strong," Livingstone concluded.

RANJI TROPHY

Seamers set up Mumbai outright win over Bihar

PTI ■ PATNA
Seamers Shivam Dube (4/10) and Sand Royston Dias (3/35) powered Mumbai's outright win over Bihar by an innings and 51 runs in their Ranji Trophy 2023-24 season opener here on Monday. Bihar's fate was decided on the third day evening itself when they were reduced to 91/6 following-on, having made 100 in their first innings in reply to Mumbai's 251, with Mohit Avasthi returning 6/27. Bihar could not manage a run more than that in their second attempt and lost heavily as Mumbai walked away with seven points.

with a superb 11-4-10-7 after 6-3-13-2 in the first innings. In another game, Chhattisgarh also clinched an outright win and seven points following a 10-wicket hammering of Assam, for whom Riyan Parag produced a record century. Parag cracked 12 sixes and 11 fours to make 155 from 87 balls for the second fastest century in the Ranji Trophy history, but his outstanding effort had no say in the outcome. Chhattisgarh, who made 327 in the first innings, bowled out Assam for 159 in reply and Parag's ton could only take his side to 254 in the second essay. Chhattisgarh remained unscathed in their 87-run chase. However, at Visakhapatnam, Ricky Bhui's marathon 347-ball 175 (23x4s, 1x6s) helped Andhra force

a draw against Bengal who made 409 batting first. Bhui's ton, combined with fifties from Hanuma Vihari (51) and Shoaib Khan (56) took Andhra to 445 in reply with a slender 36-run first-innings lead, thus giving them three points from the tame draw in which Bengal reached 87/1 in their second essay. At Alappuzha, the visitors Uttar Pradesh team walked off with a draw and three points against hosts Kerala in a hard-fought contest. UP took a 59-run lead in the first innings, for they dismissed Kerala at 243. In the second innings, Priyam Garg (106) followed Aryan Juyal (115) in completing a three-figure mark as UP declared at 323/3, taking an overall lead of 382 runs. In reply, Kerala were 72/2.

BRIEF SCORES:
AT PATNA: Mumbai 251 beat Bihar 100 & 100 (Sharman Nigroth 40; Shivam Dube 4/10, Royston Dias 3/35) by an innings and 51 runs. **AT RAIPUR:** Chhattisgarh 327 & 87/0 (Eknath Kerkar 31*, Rishabh 48*) beat Assam 159 & 254 (Riyan Parag 155; Vashudev Bareth 3/59, Jivesh Butte 3/37) by 10 wickets. **AT VISAKHAPATNAM:** Bengal 409 & 82/1 (Sourav Paul 30; Shoaib Md Khan 1/16) drew with Andhra 445 (Hanuma Vihari 51, Ricky Bhui 175, Shoaib Khan 56; Mohammed Kaif 3/62). **AT ALAPPUZHA:** Uttar Pradesh 302 & 323/3d (Aryan Juyal 115, Priyam Garg 106; Basil Thampi 1/30) drew with Kerala 243 & 72/2 (Rohan 42; Kuldeep Yadav 1/19).

Matthew grabs maiden five wickets haul as Puducherry win easy against Delhi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Medium-pacer Abin Matthew hogged the limelight with a maiden five-wicket haul as Puducherry bowlers came up with an exceptional show to orchestrate a commanding nine-wicket win over hosts Delhi in their Ranji Trophy opener here on Monday. Resuming on 126/8 in their second innings, Delhi managed to add 19 more runs before being bowled out for 145. Matthew claimed a career best 5/39 to dismantle the Delhi batting order. Gaurav Yadav (3/49) and Saurabh Yadav (2/43) also contributed to Delhi's downfall to give them an easy 51-run chase. In reply, Puducherry lost opener Akash Kargave (23) with seven runs shy from the target.

Jay Pande (21 not out) and Marimuthu Vikneshwaran (7 not out) then sealed the chase in the very next over.

BARODA WIN EASY VERSUS ODISHA
Off-spinner Mahesh Pithiya's impressive five-wicket haul complemented Shashwat Rawat's stellar 102 in the second innings as hosts Baroda defeated Odisha by 147 runs in Vadodara. Set a tall chase of 432, Odisha were bundled out for 284. In only his fifth Ranji match, the budding 22-year-old Pithiya showcased immense skill and determination to return figures of 5/61. **Brief Scores**
AT DELHI: Delhi 148 and 145; 46.4 overs (Abin Matthew 5/39, Gaurav Yadav 3/49, Saurabh Yadav 2/43). **Puducherry** 244 and 51/1; 13.4 overs. Puducherry won by nine wickets. Points: Puducherry 6, Delhi 0. **AT VADODARA:** Baroda 351 and 258/4 declared. Odisha 178 and 284; 101.5 overs (Shantanu Mishra 78, Anurag Sarangi 56, Sandeep Pattnaik 51, Suryakant Pradhan 46; Mahesh Pithiya 5/61). Baroda won by 147 runs. Points: Baroda 6, Odisha 0. **AT JAMMU: Jammu & Kashmir 100. Himachal Pradesh 120/1.** Match drawn. Points Himachal Pradesh 3, Jammu & Kashmir 1. **AT DEHRADUN:** Madhya Pradesh 323 and 243/3 declared. Uttarakhand 192 and 266/8; 95 overs (Piryanshu Khanduri 62, Aditya Tare 51, Kunal Chandel 50; Kumar Kartikeya 4/73, Saransh Jain 3/77). Match drawn. Points MP 3, Uttarakhand 1.