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KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN

LUCKNOW, WEDNESDAY JANUARY 31, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹3



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POLITICAL TURMOIL IN JHARKHAND

ED likely to arrest Soren; Wife may take oath as CM

RAJESH KUMAR ■
NEW DELHI/RANCHI

After Bihar, it is now Jharkhand, its neighbouring State, that is heading towards political uncertainty. On Tuesday, Chief Minister Hemant Soren, who was evading questioning by the Enforcement Directorate (ED), convened a meeting with his party leaders and ministers. His wife was also present, giving indications that Soren may hand over the baton to his family.

There is also speculation that Soren could be arrested by the ED if he appears before them for questioning on January 31. In Patna, former Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav on Tuesday appeared before the ED for questioning in a money-laundering case linked to the alleged land-for-jobs scam, a day after his father and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad appeared before it.

Soren ended the suspense over his whereabouts after he resurfaced in Jharkhand's capital Ranchi on Tuesday, after probe agency officials failed to locate him for nearly 30 hours. The reappearance of JMM chief comes amid frenetic political developments in Ranchi and Delhi.

Travelling in his official car, Soren smiled and waved at the media persons amid intense speculation of his whereabouts.



Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren with JMM MLAs after paying tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his death anniversary, in Ranchi, on Tuesday

CM House, Raj Bhavan and ED office, from 10 am to 10 pm, officials said.

Demonstrations, rallies or meetings cannot be held in and around these areas. BJP MP Nishikant Dubey has claimed that Kalpana Soren may replace husband Hemant, and it's for this purpose only that the alliance MLAs have been instructed to remain in Ranchi. Dubey said Hemant has called all allied MLAs to reach Ranchi 'with their luggage.' In a post on X, Dubey queried how a man who is absconding will protect the people of the State.

"A big piece of advice to those who are doing wrong on the instructions of Chief Minister Hemant Soren: the CM is proving himself to be a fugitive, running away from facing the investigating agency. The man is facing insults in the country and abroad all day long. How will that man protect the officers or the people of the State?" he said.

In the 81-member Assembly, JMM has 30, Congress 16, RJD 1, while the Opposition BJP has 25, Jharkhand Vikas Morcha 3, All Jharkhand Students Union 2, and others 4.

ED officials had reached his Delhi address on Monday to question him in a money-laundering case but could not locate him. The chartered plane on which he traveled from Ranchi to Delhi is parked at Delhi airport.

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Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with Union Ministers Piyush Goyal and Pralhad Joshi, Union Minister of State Arjun Ram Meghwal and others during an all-party meeting ahead of the Budget session of Parliament in New Delhi on Tuesday

PTI

President seeks smooth Budget Session

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Budget Session of Parliament, the last of the present Lok Sabha, begins on Wednesday with President Droupadi Murmu addressing the joint sitting of the Lower and Upper Houses, and the Government urging Opposition parties to cooperate in the smooth conduct of the proceedings.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will present the Interim Budget on Wednesday, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections likely to be held in April-May. The new Government will present the full Budget after it assumes office.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi said at the meeting of floor leaders of political parties in Parliament that Sitharaman will also present the Budget for Jammu and Kashmir, which is under the President's Rule.

Joshi said the main agenda of the 17th Lok Sabha's brief session, set to conclude on February 9, was the President's Address, presentation of the Interim Budget, and the debate on the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address with a reply by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Opposition leaders raised a host of issues during the meeting of floor leaders chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

Congress leader K Suresh said the party would raise the issue of unemployment, high inflation, agrarian distress, and the situation in ethnically violence-hit Manipur during the session.

Trinamool Congress leader Sudip Bandyopadhyay said the Finance Minister should include the pending dues to West Bengal on account of various Central schemes in the Interim Budget.

Continued on Page 8

SP names 16 candidates for LS polls

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Samajwadi Party on Tuesday announced 16 candidates for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. SP leader and Mainpuri MP Dimple Yadav has been fielded from Mainpuri constituency and Ravidas Mehrotra from Lucknow.

Other candidates include Akshay Yadav (Firozabad), Dharmendra Yadav (Budaun), Shafiqur Rahman Barq (Sambhal), Devsh Shakra (Etah), Utkarsh Verma (Kheri), Anand Bhadoria (Dhaurahra), Annu Tandon (Unnao), Dr Naval Kishore Shakra (Farrukhabad), Raja Ram Pal (Akbarpur), Shivshankar Singh Patel (Banda), Awadhesh Prasad (Faizabad), Kajal Nishad (Gorakhpur), Lalji Verma (Ambedkar Nagar), and Ram Prasad Chaudhary (Basti).

SP president Akhilesh Yadav is likely to contest from Kannauj. Akhilesh had debuted in politics from Kannauj after contesting the first Lok Sabha election from this seat in 1999. He contested the 2019 Lok Sabha election from Azamgarh. However, he resigned from this seat in March, 2022 following his election to UP assembly from Karhal assembly seat in Mainpuri district.

BJP thrashes AAP, Congress in Chandigarh Mayor Polls

RAJESH KUMAR ■
DELHI/CHANDIGARH

In a major setback to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Congress, the BJP swept the Chandigarh Mayoral polls on Tuesday, retaining the three top posts in a setback to the AAP and the Congress which had contested the elections as allies.

BJP candidate Manoj Sonkar defeated the AAP's Kuldeep Kumar for the

Mayor's post, polling 16 votes against the 12 won by his rival. Eight votes were declared invalid. BJP nominees Kuljit Sandhu and Rajinder Sharma were declared elected to the posts of senior Deputy Mayor and Deputy Mayor, respectively.

AAP leader Raghav Chadha said they will approach the Punjab and Haryana High Court seeking fresh elections.

The AAP has allied with the Congress for this civic poll — pitched as the first real



BJP's Manoj Sonkar being greeted by party councillors after he won the post of Mayor in the Chandigarh municipal corporation polls in Chandigarh

PTI

electoral test of the INDIA bloc ahead of a Lok Sabha election in less than three months' time but the alliance failed to deliver.

The loss has further weakened the Opposition group, which is already on the edge of collapse after two of its biggest members — Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool and Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) walked out. In Punjab, the AAP and the Congress have indicated that they are reluctant to contest

the Lok Sabha polls together even though they are both in the INDIA grouping. But they agreed to contest together in Mayoral elections in Chandigarh, the Union Territory that serves as the Capital of both Punjab and Haryana.

As part of the alliance in Chandigarh, the AAP contested for the Mayor's post while the Congress fielded candidates for the two other posts.

Continued on Page 8

Two CoBRA Commandos among three killed in Naxal attack

PTI ■ RAIPUR

At least three CRPF personnel, including two commandos of its elite jungle warfare unit CoBRA, were killed and 14 others injured in an encounter with Naxalites along the border of Sukma and Bijapur districts of Chhattisgarh on Tuesday, police said. Among the three slain personnel, two belonged to the CoBRA's 201st battalion and one to the CRPF's 150th battalion.

The Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) is the elite jungle warfare unit of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The exchange of fire occurred near the Tekalgudem village when a joint team of security personnel was out on a search operation, Inspector General of Police Sundarraj P said.

On Monday, a new camp of security personnel was set up in Tekalgudem, a Maoist stronghold along the inter-district border, around 450 km away from Raipur, he said.

After setting up the camp, the personnel of the STF, District Reserve Guard and CoBRA, were carrying out a search in nearby Jonaguda-Aliguda villages when Naxals opened fire, he said.

India saves Iran vessels from pirates

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Indian Navy came to the rescue of an Iranian-flagged fishing vessel and rescued 19 crew members, including Pakistanis, after pirates attacked the ship.

Coincidentally, it was the second such effort by the Indian Navy warship INS Sumitra in the last 36 hours in the east of Somalia. The first rescue also involved an Iranian fishing vessel, Iman, on Monday.

In a similar action, the Indian Navy responded to the hijacking of a Sri Lankan fishing vessel in collaboration with Seychelles defence forces and the Sri Lanka Navy, officials said here on Tuesday.



An anti-piracy operation by the Indian Navy's INS Sumitra, rescuing Fishing Vessel Al Nazeemi and her Crew (19 Pakistani Nationals) from 11 Somali Pirates off the East Coast of Somalia

PTI

This action was also undertaken off Somalia. Providing details, they said a hijacking incident was reported onboard the Sri

Lankan-flagged multiday fishing trawler Lorenzo Putha 04 about 955 nautical miles east of Mogadishu, Somalia. Three pirates had

boarded and hijacked the fishing trawler on January 27. The Indian Navy deployed INS Sharada to locate and intercept the hijacked fishing vessel.

Additionally, efficient operational coordination and information sharing through the Sri Lanka and Seychelles International Liaison Officers at IFC IOR, New Delhi, resulted in the interception of the hijacked fishing vessel by SCGS Topaz in Seychelles EEZ on Monday.

The three pirates surrendered to the Seychelles Coast Guard (SCG), and all six crew members are safe, and the vessel is being escorted to Mahe, Seychelles.

Continued on Page 8

BJP walkathon yet to pick up steam

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The walkathon led by K Surendran, president of the Kerala BJP, which began in Kasaragod on January 27, is yet to garner any response from the State's electorate. The Pada Yatra (walkathon) serves as a prelude to the BJP's campaign for the upcoming Lok Sabha election and revolves around the theme 'Modi's Guarantee,' a term coined by the Prime Minister during his visit to Thrissur on January 3.

The poor turnout at meetings addressed by Surendran highlights the fact that the Kerala BJP, without Prime Minister Narendra



Modi, lacks significant support in the State. The public meeting took an unexpected turn on Monday evening when film actor Suresh Gopi, who addressed the Kannur stretch of the Yatra, announced that the Uniform Civil Code would be implemented immediately after the results of the 2024 polls are declared.

Continued on Page 8

Bharat pays tribute to the Father of the Nation

DEEPAKJ KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

While the thoughts and vision of Mahatma Gandhi remain the wisdom for governance across the world, the paths he took around the globe are remnants that millions and millions of his followers cherish, particularly on the occasion of his martyrdom, observed as Martyrs' Day, on Tuesday.

One such memory from the past, rarely read or known about, is the place where Mahatma Gandhi, on August 16, 1908, led 3,000 Muslims, Hindus, and Christians outside the Hamidia Mosque at Johannesburg in South Africa, where they burned their passes — documents classified as "non-white" by the Government.



President Droupadi Murmu, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and others pay homage to Mahatma Gandhi on Martyrs' Day, observed to mark the death anniversary of the father of the nation, at Rajghat in New Delhi

PTI

The punitive action by the British included imprisonment. The huge bonfire, lit in a cauldron, marked the first burning of passes in South Africa and the beginning of Gandhi's satyagraha, or passive resistance, campaign. The place has been built as "Truth" by senior IFS officer Anju Ranjan during her posting (2019-2023) as Consul General in South Africa and is now thronged by visitors who relive the places in South Africa where Gandhi spent his early years and transformed himself to lead India towards Independence four decades later. "I came to know about the importance of the venue where the passes were burnt by Gandhiji. With the help of locals, I managed to raise money for developing the Truth pillar as well as

the Tolstoy farm," said Anju, currently serving as Deputy Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), New Delhi.

The 2002 batch IFS officer was also instrumental in revamping and redevaluing the entire Tolstoy farm, including the library, among several other perspectives related to Gandhi. As per various reports, the entire area of historical importance was vandalised in the 1970s. Besides the revival of the Tolstoy farm in Johannesburg, Anju was instrumental in generating awareness, organising for 75 prominent Indian community members — a Gandhian trail (Tolstoy to Phoenix) for the first time to mark the places of Gandhian importance in South Africa.

Continued on Page 8

Ladakh prime sanctuary for endangered snow leopards

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

India is home to 718 endangered snow leopards, as revealed by a first-of-its-kind scientific survey spanning five years between 2019 and 2023 across the Himalayan range. The high-altitude region of Ladakh emerged as the prime sanctuary for the elusive majestic cats, boasting the highest number at 477 individuals.

State-wise population estimates further indicate 124 snow leopards in Uttarakhand, 51 in Himachal Pradesh, 36 in Arunachal



Pradesh, 21 in Sikkim, and 9 in Jammu and Kashmir.

The much-anticipated Status Report of Snow Leopards in India was released on Tuesday.

Continued on Page 8



NOTICE

Notice

I am Dharmadevi, wife of Late Suresh Jaiswal, resident of Rasoolpur Hetam Post Kutlupur, Police Station Dewar Barabanki. I read number 210/21 Area 0500 hectares. The land which is situated in Rasulpur Hetam was given to Kutlupur Fatehpur resident Om Karon of Bhagirthi, Brijesh son of Bhagirthi, Ashok son of Bhagirthi, Ram Singh son of Bhagirthi, Dilip son of Bhagirthi and elder wife Late Bhagirthi's hand deed has been purchased on 19/1/19 at serial no. 184 till page 113 of 5177 we 2th 1984. The last page of the above deed has been lost somewhere. Using it in any way would be illegal.

Dharmadevi wife late. Suresh Jaiswal Rasoolpur Hetam Post Kutlupur Police Station Dewar Barabanki

PNS ■ **LUCKNOW**

NOTICE
I have changed my name from
MOHAMMAD ILYAS SYED to
MOHD ILYAS SYED. MOHD
ILYAS SYED S/o RASHEED
UL HASAN R/o 105/196-A,
Chamanganji, Kanpur

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The dialogue focused on the development of Uttar Pradesh in Yogi government, connecting migrants, regional coordinators, and state BJP convenors via video conference. Pathak highlighted the achievements in medical, education, infrastructure, and law & order in Uttar Pradesh, including details about the Mission Niramaya Medical scheme and Ram temple inauguration. Presided over by BJP state convener Rajeshwar Singh, the programme emphasised on regular dialogues with the diaspora, featuring past speakers like Union minister Smriti Irani. Special guest Dr Vijay

Identified as Preeti (30) of Pakka Bagh locality, she allegedly took the extreme step on Monday night. Her husband Phoolchand is a tea vendor and the couple also have two sons, one of them is seven years old and the other is five months old. It was alleged that she ended her life due to financial crisis. However, police claimed that she ended her life over some domestic discord. The police sent the body for autopsy and started further investigations.



Traffic movement came to a halt at Hazratganj in Lucknow after a siren was sounded on Tuesday morning for a two-minute silence for Mahatma Gandhi as a mark of respect on his martyrdom day

Addressing the investors after the event, Jacob expressed appreciation for their significant investments in these previously unsold properties. She assured them that the LDA administration was committed to going out of its way to support their projects and ensure their success.



उत्तर प्रदेश साहस्र शिक्षा योजना

असतत प्रवेश आधारित एवं विद्यार्थी सहायता योजना

आवेदन प्रारम्भिक परीक्षा तिथि/आवेदन की तिथि/असतत प्रवेश की तिथि

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SAFE DEPOSIT LOCKER BREAK OPEN PUBLIC NOTICE

The following hirers have availed safe deposit locker facility from Kanpur branch and failed to renew the same within the stipulated time, in spite of repeated notices issued to them by **The Karur Vysya Bank Ltd.** Since the hirers have failed to pay the locker rent dues, we are constrained to break open of the said locker. "Fifteen days later from the date of the Publication (i.e 15.02.2024)" at the concerned branch premises at 11 AM This Public Notice is to the hirers' legal heirs of the hirers if applicable. Further, **The Karur Vysya Bank Ltd** has the authority to change the Break Opening Date without any prior notice.

Sl No	HIRER'S NAME	LOCKER NO	AMOUNT DUE (Rs)
1	JAYA KUMARI JAKHODIA	4404001F075	Rs. 42,480
2	SAKSHI AGARWAL	4404003D022	Rs. 5,900
3	VIJAY PRATAP CHANDRAN SINGH	4404002B020	Rs. 10,974

Date: 31/01/2024 KANPUR

Branch Head-Karur Vysya Bank

DELAY IN COMPENSATION TO FARMERS

CM Yogi seeks explanation from officials of 17 dists

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has expressed dissatisfaction with the negligence in distribution of compensation for crop damage and sought explanation from officials in 17 districts.

Recently, the chief minister conducted a review of compensation and other relief measures for crops affected by various disasters. He expressed dissatisfaction with the carelessness in re-verifying crop losses due to errors and not providing compensation.

Yogi directed the officials concerned to swiftly rectify technical deficiencies and verify cases and ensure that the affected farmers promptly received compensation.

During the review meeting, Yogi came to know that thousands of farmers who suffered crop damage in the financial years 2021-22 and 2022-23 had not received compensation due to issues with Aadhaar, bank account numbers, and duplication in the data-feeding process.

Despite instructing officials to re-verify and provide assistance to farmers excluded from compensation, several district officials in the state failed to conduct surveys on the farmers affected by crop damage. As a result, the farmers were not able to receive



C Yogi Adityanath with the Ayodhya's Ram temple postal stamp, launched by PM Narendra Modi, at his official residence in Lucknow on Tuesday

compensation on time. Expressing dissatisfaction, he sought explanation from 17 ADMs (finance and revenue) and called for strict action against them.

Following the displeasure of the CM, the officials took action and demanded a budget from the government by conducting a second survey of the farmers deprived of compen-

sation in their respective districts. Additional Chief Secretary (Revenue) Sudhir Garg said that funds to the tune of more than Rs 35 crore have been disbursed so far for compensation of farmers. Along with this, various district magistrates have been instructed to verify the farmers left out and provide guidance on the demand for funds,

ensuring that no farmer remains deprived. The additional chief secretary said that explanation had been sought from 17 ADMs for negligence. These districts include Aligarh, Hathras, Barabanki, Mau, Bareilly, Budaun, Ambbedkar Nagar, Shahjahanpur, Mahoba, Deoria, Kushinagar, Maharajganj, Jhansi, Lalitpur, Ghaziabad, Bijnor, and Kaushambi.

All the ADMs have been directed to submit their explanations to the government within one week. The report, incorporating the explanations from all ADMs, will be presented to the chief minister for further action.

Relief Commissioner GS Navin said that more than 33 per cent of the farmers affected by crop losses due to floods, hailstorms and unseasonal rainfall were being compensated. In compliance with CM Yogi's directions, compensation funds are being transferred to the farmers' accounts through DBT within 24 hours of the survey. It was further mentioned that in the financial year 2021-22, assistance funds exceeding Rs 5,08,31,80,715 were provided to over 13,97,480 farmers in 75 districts of the state.

In the year 2022-23, assistance funds exceeding Rs 4,25,22,41,276 were provided to over 10,44,387 farmers.

Republic Day parade: UP tableau gets second prize

Lucknow (PNS): In the Republic Day parade on Kartavya Path in New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh's tableau based on the 'Viksit Bharat-Samriddh Virasat' theme received the second prize. Minister of State for Defence Ajay Bhatt presented a commendation letter and memento to Shishir, the director of Information and Public Relations department of Uttar Pradesh, in New Delhi on Tuesday.

Notably, 25 tableaux of 16 states and union territories, along with nine different ministries and departments, were displayed on January 26 last. UP's tableau secured second place on the basis of people's choice. The tableau, adorned with the theme of the recently-inaugurated Ram temple in Ayodhya, captivated the onlookers. It depicted a five-year-old Ram Lalla holding a bow. The tableau showcased the magnificence of Sanatan Dharma and Mahakumbh featuring sages. Additionally, it offered glimpses of Uttar Pradesh's self-reliance, showcasing the Rapid Rail and BrahMos missile technology.

UP has been honoured for the fifth consecutive year for its tableau in the Republic Day parade this year. UP's tableau got the second prize in 2020, and the first prize in 2021 and 2022. The state had received recognition for its tableau in the people's choice category in 2023.

UP likely to get another acting DGP today

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Speculations are rife that Uttar Pradesh would again get an acting director general of police (DGP) for the fourth consecutive time. The current acting DGP, Vijaya Kumar, is set to retire on January 31.

UP Police sources say the state is likely to get an acting DGP for the fourth consecutive time. However, in the wake of concern for appointment of acting police chiefs in many states, including UP, there is a buzz that Kumar would hand over his charge to DG (Law and Order) Prashant Kumar till a full-time DGP is finalised by the government.

In 2022, a Delhi-based lawyer named Brajesh Singh challenged the appointment of acting DGPs, calling it a violation of a Supreme Court order.

In the contempt petition filed before the apex court, Singh challenged the appointment of acting DGPs in UP and Punjab.

"In 2006, the Supreme Court had said in one of its judgments that there was no such 'concept' of an 'acting DGP'. Moreover, the apex court had stated that DGPs should have a minimum tenure of two years as it was necessary to protect the DGP office from political influences," the petition stated.

Sources said that if the UP government wanted to appoint a full-time DGP on the basis of seniority and other criteria, they would suggest the names of three senior most IPS offi-

cers and a name had to be finalised within 72 hours of the DGPs retirement.

A 1987-batch IPS officer of UP cadre, Mukul Goel tops the list of those who fit the bill. However, after UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath removed Goel from the post on May 11, 2022 for inefficiency and negligence, he was considered out of contention, the sources said.

Going by the present situation, 1988-batch IPS officer Anand Kumar, who is currently serving as the Director General of Crime Branch (CB), CID, is being seen as the topmost contender. Kumar is scheduled to retire on April 30, 2024. The sources said he had served as the additional director general of police, law and order, for a long time under the present UP government. However, with less than six months left for retirement, he could only be made an acting DGP.

On the basis of seniority, another name on the list is that of 1989-batch IPS officer PV Ramasastry, who is currently posted as the DG of Border Security Force (BSF). Earlier, he served as the ADG, law and order. The date of his superannuation is May 31, 2025.

Ramasastry is originally from Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. He handled the responsibility of inter-agency training for the CBI director's position for years.

However, the sources said he would not like to come to UP after heading the topmost

paramilitary organisation.

Next in line is 1990-batch IPS officer SN Sabat, who is currently posted as DG, Jails.

The sources said that being the blue-eyed boy of the current dispensation, Prashant Kumar, an IPS officer from the 1990 batch presently posted as the DG, law and order, might take over as the acting DGP, and would also oversee the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, if the Election Commission did not raise any objection.

It may be mentioned that Prashant Kumar received the Tamil Nadu cadre after he was chosen for the IPS, but he was moved to the UP cadre in 1994 after marrying IAS officer Dimple Verma, who is also from the UP cadre.

Vijaya Kumar, who is retiring on Wednesday, succeeded Dr Raj Kumar Vishwakarma, who had been the acting DGP since March 31, 2023.

Vishwakarma also served as the Chairman of UP Police Recruitment and Promotion Board. Vishwakarma had taken charge from then acting DGP Devendra Singh Chauhan, who served for almost 11 months before his retirement.

The Yogi government had appointed Chauhan after removing Goel following charges of inaction and lack of interest towards work. Goel, the last regular DGP in the state, is presently posted as the DG, Civil Defence, and he is set to superannuate in February.

'Brand UP' set to go global

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

In a bid to position Uttar Pradesh as a premier global tourist destination, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's government is set to showcase 'Brand UP' and 'Destination UP' at 12 major international trade fairs and travel expos.

The extensive promotion strategy involves utilising various channels, including organising roadshows and wide-spread campaigns, with the overarching goal of elevating the state's visibility on the global tourism stage.

Among them, Japan, Israel, China, America, France, Singapore, Britain, Australia, Germany, Russia and the UAE are prominent. Simultaneously, a detailed plan has been devised to highlight Uttar Pradesh as a tourist hotspot at the various events in nearly 50 cities across 28 countries, including India.

The Uttar Pradesh Tourism department has initiated action on these plans, with ongoing efforts to engage agencies for international brand building, marketing, publicity, and operations, with a focus on organising national and international roadshows.

"A detailed action plan has been prepared to project Uttar Pradesh as 'Brand UP' and as the most favourite tourist destination nationally and internationally. The plan focuses primarily on the significant role of international trade shows, travel fairs, and expos in achieving this objective," a government spokesman said.

The international events that will be targeted through this process include ITB Asia (Singapore), IFTM Top Resa Paris (France), JATA Tokyo (Japan), WTM London (UK), USTOA, FITUR Madrid (Spain), AIME Melbourne (Australia), IMTM Tel Aviv (Israel), MITT Moscow

(Russia), ATM Dubai (UAE), and COTTM Beijing (China).

As per the action plan, international roadshows are scheduled for cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham, and Glasgow in Britain; Madrid, Bilbao, and Barcelona in Spain; Rome & Milan in Italy; and Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt in Germany.

Similarly, roadshows will be held and stalls will be set up at the exhibitions to be held in Lisbon in Portugal, Oslo in Norway, Stockholm in Sweden, Paris in France, The Hague in the Netherlands, and Helsinki in Finland.

"Brand UP" and Uttar Pradesh tourism will also receive extensive promotion in major American cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Additionally, international roadshows are planned for Buenos Aires (Argentina), Brasilia (Brazil), Shanghai & Beijing (China); and Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane (Australia).

In the Gulf countries, the outreach will cover Dubai (UAE), Muscat (Oman), Doha (Qatar), Kuwait City (Kuwait), Beirut (Lebanon), Moscow (Russia), and Tel Aviv (Israel).

Among South-East Asian countries, the promotional activities have been planned for Singapore, Bangkok (Thailand), Tokyo (Japan), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Manila (Philippines), Hanoi (Vietnam), Jakarta (Indonesia), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Seoul (South Korea), Colombo (Sri Lanka), Thimphu (Bhutan), and Kathmandu (Nepal). As part of the global promotion plan for Uttar Pradesh tourism and 'Brand UP', efforts would be made to ensure that branding activities in foreign countries take place in areas with maximum footfall, a government official said.

Boney Kapoor-Bhutani Group-backed firm wins bid to develop Film City near Noida

PNS ■ LUCKNOW/ GREATER NOIDA

Bayview Projects, backed by filmmaker Boney Kapoor and real estate developer Bhutani Group, on Tuesday bagged a contract to develop the International Film City near the upcoming Noida International Airport in Uttar Pradesh, according to officials. Bayview Projects beat competitors like T-Series and firms backed by superstar Akshay Kumar and filmmaker KC Bokadia to clinch the project. The financial bid for the greenfield project was opened on Tuesday afternoon by the Yamuna Expressway Industrial Development Authority (YEIDA), which functions under the Uttar Pradesh government.

"M/s Bayview Projects LLP (Boney Kapoor and Bhutani Group) will develop the International Film City in the

Yamuna Expressway area after making the highest bid for the Film City," YEIDA said in a statement.

UP Industrial and Infrastructure Commissioner Manoj Kumar Singh and Director (Information) Shishir Singh joined Tuesday's programme virtually, along with YEIDA's CEO Arun Vir Singh, when the bid was opened in front of the PPP Bid Evaluation Committee (BEC) as per guidelines for projects worth over Rs 1,000 crore.

The selection of the concessionaire remains to be approved by the UP government before land is allotted to it for the development of the project, OSD Bhatia said, adding that the approval from the state cabinet is expected in the next 15 days.

Bayview Projects offered the highest revenue share of 18 per cent to the state government for the Film City, which will be built under the public-

private partnership (PPP) model, according to YEIDA.

Bayview Projects was competing against Super Cassettes Industries Private Limited (T-series), Supersonic Technobuild Private Limited (backed by film star Akshay Kumar, Maddock Films, and others), and 4 Lions Films Private Limited (backed by filmmaker KC Bokadia and others) to develop the film city, considered as a pet project of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

The second highest revenue share of 15.12 per cent was offered by 4 Lions Films, followed by 10.80 per cent by Supersonic Technobuild, while T-Series offered the lowest share of 5.27 per cent, the YEIDA said.

"Bayview Projects has formed a consortium with two more companies for the projects. These companies are Parmesh Construction Company Limited and Noida

Cyberpark Private Limited.

"Bayview Projects (operations and maintenance) has 48 per cent equity in the consortium while Parmesh Construction (financial) and Noida Cyberpark (technical) have 26 per cent equity each," the authority said.

The Film City is to be built in a public-private partnership over 1,000 acres (230 acres in the first phase) of land in Sector 21 of YEIDA, along the Yamuna Expressway near Noida. Of the proposed development in 1,000 acres, 220 acres is for commercial use and 780 acres for industrial use.

This was the third time that a tender was floated for the project. A global tender was launched on November 23, 2021, and the second on July 11, 2022, but no investor expressed interest on both occasions. It was again floated for the third time on September 30, 2023, with a deadline of January 4, 2024.

Cong remembers Gandhi, takes jibe at govt

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Congress leaders on Tuesday paid tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his death anniversary on Tuesday. They also attacked the BJP-led UP government for not allowing them to take out a 'prabhat pheri' to mark the day.

"At the behest of the government, the administration stopped Congress leaders from taking out a 'prabhat pheri'," UP Congress president Ajay Rai alleged. He said Gandhi's ideas were not going to die down due to the BJP government's dictatorship. "The party which hails the killer of Mahatma Gandhi will not succeed in stopping the Congress from spreading the message of love, peace and



brotherhood given by Bapu," he added.

Earlier on Tuesday morning, Rai, along with general secretary in charge of UP Avinash Pandey and hundreds of party workers and leaders, visited the GPO Park and garlanded the statue of Mahatma Gandhi. They paid rich tributes to Gandhi and also sang Ramdhun.

"The thoughts of Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi are immortal, his principles are still a source of inspiration for the youth and the entire world, including India," Pandey said.

"Bapu's principles can never be irrelevant because these are the ideas of nature, and they will continue to be relevant all over the world," he added.

BJP prepares for Rajya Sabha election, social engineering key factor

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

As the date for voting on 10 Rajya Sabha seats was announced on Monday, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gears up for a significant overhaul in its representation in the upper house. With the tenure of nine of its Rajya Sabha members coming to an end on April 2, the BJP strategises to secure seven out of the 10 seats, ushering in a wave of new faces. The voting will be held on February 27.

According to senior party sources, the selection of candidates for the Rajya Sabha elections will be meticulously crafted to align with the social engineering dynamics pivotal in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

"Out of the current Rajya Sabha members whose tenure is expiring, only two are likely to be retained, while the rest will be replaced to accommodate new faces," a senior BJP leader told The Pioneer.

Among the potential candidates speculated for renomination are Sudhanshu Trivedi and Anil Jain. However, the party is poised to drop several incumbents, considering factors such as their resonance within the social equation and their impact in society. Names like GVL Narasimha Rao and Dr Anil Aggarwal may face exclusion, paving the way for new entrants.

In an effort to maintain caste equilibrium, the BJP plans

to field candidates representing diverse backgrounds, including Brahmins, Vaishyas, Kshatriyas as well as individuals from backward and Dalit communities. The party's strategy hinges on balancing caste equations to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters.

"The BJP is likely to prioritise leaders associated with the party organisation for Rajya Sabha nominations. With a pool of potential candidates from both the state and national organisations, the party aims to consolidate its internal leadership while infusing fresh talent into the legislative body," the BJP leader said.

The selection process for Rajya Sabha candidates is expected to culminate in the first week of February, with the BJP core committee convening to finalise nominations. The committee will scrutinise candidates based on caste dynamics, track record, and potential political messaging, ensuring that the chosen representatives resonate with the electorate.

A party source said: "For the BJP, the composition of its Rajya Sabha nominees holds strategic significance, aiming to garner support from key demographic segments ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. With a focus on constituencies dominated by Brahmins, Jats, and OBCs, the party aims to consolidate its voter base while adapting to the evolving political landscape of Uttar Pradesh."

UP renews pledge to combat NTDs

Lucknow (PNS): On the occasion of World Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) Day, Uttar Pradesh has renewed its pledge to combat NTDs, a cluster of preventable illnesses, including lymphatic filariasis (hathipaon-), visceral leishmaniasis (kala-azar), leprosy (kush-t-rog), dengue, chikungunya, snakebite, rabies, which annually account for millions of lives in India.

"Aligned with the WHO-NTD Roadmap 2021-2030, India's resolve against NTDs finds an echo in Uttar Pradesh's commitment to achieving the nation's NTD elimination targets," said Dr Ramesh Singh Thakur, the state programme officer for vector-borne diseases at the department of Health and Family Welfare. Emphasising on the state's resolve, he stated, "In line

with India's pledge to eradicate filariasis and recognising the significance of sustained public health endeavours, UP is launching mass drug administration (MDA) rounds in endemic districts, divided into two phases. The inaugural phase of MDA is scheduled to commence on February 10, followed by the second phase on August 10."

As of June last year, the state has identified 51 filariasis endemic districts, with a total of 90,768 lymphatic filariasis and 21,131 hydrocele patients.

Highlighting the severity of filariasis as a public health concern, director of the department of Health and Family Welfare Dr BP Singh Kalyani said it poses a significant health threat and is ranked among the primary causes of enduring disability worldwide.

10 DMs among 19 IAS officers shifted

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

In a late night development on Monday, the state government ordered the shifting of 19 officers, including ten district magistrates.

Rakesh Kumar Singh, DM and Vice-Chairman of Ghaziabad Development Authority, will be the new DM of Kanpur Nagar, replacing Vishakh G, who has been transferred to Aligarh in the same capacity. Aligarh DM Indra Vikram Singh has been shifted to Ghaziabad in the same capacity.

Rampur DM Ravindra Kumar Mandar has been transferred to Jaunpur in the same capacity, while Amethi DM Rakesh Kumar Mishra-

II has been shifted to Lucknow as Special Secretary, Housing and Urban Development. Kaushambi DM Sujit Kumar has been posted as Special Secretary, Infrastructure and Industrial Development, while Farrukhabad DM Sanjay Kumar Singh-I has been sent to Pilibhit in the same capacity. Secretary, UP Building and Construction Employees Welfare Board, Nisha has been sent to DM as Amethi. She was replaced by Municipal Commissioner, Saharanpur, Gazal Bhardwaj.

Municipal Commissioner, Moradabad, Sanjay Chauhan has been transferred to Saharanpur in the same capacity. Special Secretary, Food Security, Divyanshu Patel has been

made Moradabad Municipal Commissioner.

Vice-Chairman of Bareilly Development Authority Joginder Singh has been made Rampur DM, while Chief Development Officer of Agra Manik Nandan has been made Vice-Chairman of Bareilly Development Authority.

Joint Magistrate, Amroha, Pratibha Singh has been made Chief Development Officer of Agra. Special Secretary, Home, Rajesh Kumar Rai has been made Kaushambi DM. Special Secretary, Namami Gange Project, Praveen Mishra M has been made Mau DM, while State Revenue Officer VK Singh has been made Farrukhabad DM.

CHC superintendent removed after video of man taking mother's body in cart goes viral

Pilibhit (PTI): The in-charge of a community health centre in Bilsanda of Pilibhit district and a pharmacist have been attached to the district headquarters while a ward boy has been suspended after a video of a man taking his mother's body home in a hand-driven cart on non-available of vehicle went viral on social media, officials said on Tuesday.

Taking cognisance of the viral video, Community Health Centre (CHC) Superintendent Dr Manish Raj Sharma and pharmacist AN Ansari were removed and attached to the district headquarters. Chief Medical Officer Dr Alok Kumar told reporters. Wardboy NK Pandey has been suspended, he

added. The chief medical officer said the hut of Devki Devi (92) caught fire on January 26 and she died in the incident. Her son Vijaypal did not go for a post-mortem examination, he added. The police brought the elderly woman's body to Bilsanda CHC to complete the formalities on January 27 after which the body was handed over to the family members. Vijaypal alleged that CHC superintendent and the staff refused to give an ambulance to take the body home despite repeated requests. Eventually, Vijaypal took the body on a hand-driven cart and the people made video of it and uploaded it on social media. The CMO also said that a panel has been formed to probe the matter.

‘Animal Care Unit’ established

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

‘Animal Care Unit’ has been established by the National Sugar Institute (NSI) to take care of helpless animals and provide them proper shelter. This ‘Animal Care Unit’ firstly will work to prepare the database of animals living in the institute premises. Also, it will be the responsibility of this unit to keep records of whether all the animals have been vaccinated or not and in case they have not been vaccinated, it will help in making arrangements for their vaccination. Providing as much fodder or food as possible and allocating space for animals that are not domesticated will also be a priority of the care unit. Director Prof Narendra Mohan said under the ‘Animal Care Unit’, an ‘Animal Welfare Group’ comprising employees and students of the institute has also



been formed which apart from helping in all these works will organise seminars from time to time so that different sections of the society can be made aware of the provisions in the law related to prevention of cruelty to animals and seeking their involvement in this campaign.

Senior Administrative Officer Brijesh Kumar Sahu said a programme outline has been prepared on this subject under which other institutions will also be included to create awareness on the subject of animal welfare.

BATTERED TO DEATH:

A youth allegedly battered his cousin to death over a petty dispute in Mardankheda village of Makhi police station area in Unnao late on Monday night. The police sent the body for an autopsy and carried out a probe in the matter. Sarvesh Lodhi of Mardankheda village had an argument with his cousin Manna over some petty issue. Soon they indulged in a scuffle, exchanged sticks and Sarvesh fell unconscious and succumbed to his serious head injury on the spot. The deceased was the elder brother

of Chandan and was married to Gudiya one year ago. SHO Sandeep Kumar said Sarvesh was killed in a scuffle. A probe was on in the matter.

In another incident after losing ₹50,000 from father's account in online game, a teenaged boy had committed suicide by jumping into Ramganga canal in Dadanagar under Govind Nagar police area. He had gone missing from the house on January 15. While leaving the house, he had left a letter in which there was a mention about his committing suicide by jumping into a canal. The body recovered from the canal on Sunday was identified on Monday. Nitesh Kumar, a native of Chhapra (Bihar) lives with family in Armapore. His son Nitin (17) was addicted to playing online games. While playing on father's mobile phone, he had lost ₹50,000 and had gone into depression and went missing on January 15.

Steps to strengthen counselling service

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

IT Kanpur has always recognised the importance of supporting their student community and encouraged them to put their well-being first and prioritise their mental health and needs. With a culture that encourages personal growth and development, the institute goes beyond academics, supporting holistic development of their students. The institute has a dedicated centre, Institute Counselling Service (ICS) that comprises six professional counsellors who are all clinical psychologists and a dedicated group of student volunteers and faculty advisors. Apart from this, the institute is affiliated with three recognised psychiatrists. There is a weekly visit by the psychiatrists to the campus where students requiring medication are referred to them. Following the recent tragic incidents, the institute has taken steps to strengthen its

counselling service by hiring a few more professionals, including additional counsellors and hostel managers to take care of medical needs of the students.

The institute has started additional welfare initiatives for the students which include: Strengthening the PG core counselling team to respond faster and also provide individualised mental health support to students, regular discussions at the department levels to identify issues of academic stress, isolation and other difficulties faced by the students. These will help in addressing any issues being faced by the students at an early stage, Senior PG students will handhold new students to ease the transition and reduce any feeling of alienation, a faculty guide will keep informal channels of communication open for non-academic matters and help to foster a supportive environment outside academia, interactive hostel-level

events will keep students engaged in a positive and interactive environment and build community support and mental health awareness programmes will be conducted for every semester.

In addition a review committee with five members has been formed. The committee is tasked with addressing and promptly resolving student issues with an empathetic approach to student concerns. The committee has already received specific inputs from individual departments based on their interaction (Open House) with students. It is also getting feedback from alumni and other stake holders and will make specific recommendations to the administration, Senate and or to the Board through appropriate bodies.

The past year has also seen the institute putting in place academic reforms, especially for post graduate students, to enhance the students' experi-

ence and support them at each step in their learning journey. These include a flexible PhD programme with admissions open through the year, enhanced financial assistance for PhD students, reduction of mandatory PhD courses from six to four, a committee to regularly meet and guide PhD students, faster processing of a thesis in three months as against six months earlier and options for PhD students to exit the programme with a MS degree. Other steps include a streamlined post-graduate admission process, freedom of choice between a thesis or a project in the MTech programme, English language learning and more.

The institute is committed to work towards a supportive, inclusive and academically empowering environment that prioritises the mental and emotional well-being of every individual in the student community.

Sparsh leprosy campaign starts

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

On the occasion of the death anniversary of the ‘Father of the Nation’ Mahatma Gandhi, Anti Leprosy Day (Leprosy Prevention Day) was observed in all the community and primary health centres and Leprosy Seva Ashrams of the district here on Tuesday. Sparsh leprosy awareness campaign was also started. This campaign will run till February 13. For this the administration and health department will make people aware at their respective levels. The Health department will run a special campaign to search for such patients. During this time the health team will make the people of the district aware about leprosy. CMO Dr Sandeep Chaudhary said even today there are many misconceptions in the society regarding leprosy, due to which leprosy patients have to face discrimination. “Efforts are being made to remove these misconceptions and create public awareness about leprosy”, he said, adding that Leprosy Prevention Day is celebrated on 30th January to bring awareness about this disease. “Due to these misconceptions and fear of discrimination, people do not expose this disease. Although leprosy is an infectious disease, if it is detected in time and treatment is started,



it can be cured,” the CMO said.

On the day District Leprosy Officer (DLO) Dr Rahul Singh remembered Mahatma Gandhi by paying floral tribute at the Ganga Leprosy Ashram located at Rajghat and Leprosy Ashram located at Sankat Mochan. He also administered the oath to eradicate leprosy. Along with this, MCR slippers were also distributed to all the leprosy patients present there apart from providing necessary medicines and fruits. He said this disease is not a stigma, but a chronic infectious disease, which is spread by a bacterium called Mycobacterium leprae. If leprosy is not identified and treated promptly, it causes permanent disability. He said important messages for the eradication of leprosy were also given by holding public awareness rallies at all CHCs and PHCs. The DLO said last year 100 leprosy patients were found, out of which treatment of 89 leprosy patients has been

completed. So far this year, 118 patients have been identified, out of which treatment of 75 leprosy patients has been completed. At present 106 patients are undergoing treatment in the district which also includes old patients. He said by February 13, the aim of the campaign is to find and confirm the symptoms of leprosy patients and start feeding them medicines as soon as possible so that the patient can be saved from disability.

Meanwhile, under the chairmanship of DRM of North Eastern Railway (NER) Vineet Kumar Srivastava, Martyrs' Day was celebrated with full reverence and respect at the DRMs office on Tuesday, on the occasion of the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Additional Divisional Railway Manager (Operations), ADMR (Infrastructure), Chief Project Manager (Gati Shakti) and officers and employees working in the division observed two-minute silence in their respective offices.

BSBS SF Express extended up to Ballia

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The process of giving more stoppages of trains as well as extension ahead of 2024 Lok Sabha elections continued by the Railway administration. In this direction for the convenience of passengers, especially from adjoining districts of Ballia and Ghazipur, the route of 12581/12582 Banaras-New Delhi-Banaras Express, popularly known as BSBS SF Express, has been extended up to Ballia and on Tuesday the train was flagged off by Ballia MP Virendra Singh in a function organised at Ballia station which was also attended by senior officials and local public representatives.

Now the 12581 Banaras-New Delhi Express will originate from Ballia on every Tuesday and Wednesday and depart at 7.30 pm and reach Banaras stopping at Ghazipur City, Aunrihar and Varanasi Junction (Cantt). In the return journey, the 12582 New Delhi-Ballia Express will depart from New Delhi at 10.50 pm on Tuesday and Monday, stopping apart from earlier stoppages at Varanasi Jn at 10.45 am, Aunrihar at 11.27 am, Ghazipur City at 12.15 pm and terminate at Ballia at 1.35 pm. From June 1 this year, Ballia-New Delhi Express will operate with converted train num-



MP Virendra Singh 'Mast' addressing the flagging off ceremony at the Ballia railway station of Varanasi Division (NER) on Tuesday.

ber 22581/ 22582.

Earlier, in order to meet the demand of the local public, the Railway administration has started the two-minute experimental stoppage of 15021/15022 Gorakhpur-Shalimar-Gorakhpur Express at Belthara Road railway station falling on the Varanasi-Bhatni section. Just a few days ago, the same Shalimar Express was given a stoppage at Salempur station of the same route. The train 15022 Gorakhpur-Shalimar Express was flagged off at 3.40 pm at

a function organised at Belthara Road railway station by Salempur MP Ravinder Kushwaha. Addressing the programme, Kushwaha said that he always tried to provide maximum facilities to the general public and as a result 18 trains have been given stoppages at various stations, including Salempur, Belthara Road and Bhatni falling in his parliamentary constituency.

“The BJP government is working to strengthen the rail, road, health and education systems,” he said.

Enumerating the achievements of the central and state governments, he said today in the hands of BJP our nation is not only safe and secure but is also setting new records of development. “The doubling of Bhatni-Aunrihar section of Varanasi Division of North Eastern Railway (NER) with electrified lines will be completed in a few months. After which more trains will be available to go everywhere at Belthara Road and Salempur stations,” he said, adding that the work of redevelopment of Belthara

Road railway station is being carried out at a rapid pace under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme at a cost of approximately ₹16.40 crore.

Before this Additional Divisional Railway Manager (ADRM/ Infrastructure) Roshan Lal Yadav, welcoming the guests, said the Varanasi Division of NER is a passenger-oriented division which is continuously striving to provide advanced comfort facilities to its passengers. For this, various development works have been done on the Belthara Road railway station. Assistant Divisional Engineer SK Pandey, Assistant Commercial Manager Prashant Kumar, divisional NER officers and local public were also present. The programme was conducted by Public Relations Officer (PRO) Ashok Kumar.

Besides, in the same NER division the 13019/13020 Howrah-Kathgodam-Howrah Bagh Express, on experimental basis, was given a stoppage at Kopa Samhota station every day from Monday till further notice. The train was flagged off from Kopa Samhota station by MP Maharajganj (Bihar) Janardan Singh Sigiwal in a programme organised there. The function was attended by ADMR Rajesh Kumar Singh.

Awareness programme on World NTD Day

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

An awareness programme on World Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) Day was organised with children at Jagdishpur primary school and Chandravati Devi Inter College in Chhapra on Tuesday. Rallies and painting activities were organised under the leadership of principals Sushil Kumar Giri and Bhimraj Pathak.

On this occasion children demonstrated painting on the symptoms and prevention of filariasis. Indrajit and Sita Devi, members of the Filariasis Patient Platform, motivated others to take the medicine to prevent filariasis in the upcoming IDA campaign. Indrajit said due to lack of information we did not take the medicine for filariasis so we got infected with it. Now we are taking medicine but it can be controlled only by taking medicine. Now, to ensure that no other person gets this disease, take the medicine in front of a health worker. On the occasion school teachers, ASHA workers and representatives of CIJFR were present.



A rally being taken out on World NTD day in Varanasi on Tuesday

Meanwhile, under the auspices of Department of Microbiology, Institute Medical Sciences, Banaras Hindu University, (IMS-BHU), World NTD Day was also observed. This day holds importance as to create better awareness on the devastating impact of NTDs on the poorest populations around the world and also celebrate those who are engaged in tackling their burden

and the accomplishments of the global NTD community and gather more support towards their control, elimination and eradication. On the occasion the Department of Microbiology, IMS-BHU took an opportunity to call on the departmental team to support the growing momentum for the control, elimination and eradication of these diseases which includes cysticercosis, soil

transmitted helminth infections, echinococcosis, food-borne trematodiasis, lymphatic filariasis and many more through poster presentation and a short skit play for the students of Kendriya Vidyalaya, BHU about the NTD. Considering hand hygiene as an important preventive measure, the students were made to perform all the steps of appropriate hand hygiene.

One held with 10 kg ganja

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The sleuths of the Government Railway Police (GRP) nabbed a smuggler with 10 kg of ganja at the Prayagraj Junction. A trolley bag and a bag have also been recovered from him. He was carrying ganja in the bag. He was going to board a train but on the basis of suspicion was arrested by the GRP team on Monday. A case was registered against him under relevant sections of law.

GRP inspector Rajiv Ranjan Upadhyay said he along with sub-inspector Ghulam Khan and the team of Lucknow Intelligence had launched a drive at the junction during which information was received that a smuggler was carrying ganja and he was arrested and preparations are being made to send him to jail after taking legal action. He was identified as Angad Kumar of Siswa Bazar, Kushinagar. GRP inspector said ganja in 10 bundles was recovered from his bag.

Students’ Gymkhana, Think India sign MoU

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Students’ Gymkhana (official student body that serves as a platform for students to showcase their talents and skills beyond academics) of the Indian Institute of Information Technology, Allahabad, (IIIT-A) and Think India on Tuesday signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aiming at developing nationalistic spirit and inspiring young India to be of service to the society. Think India – a pan India initiative to bring together the best talents of the country and to infuse in them a ‘Nation First’ attitude. It is a platform for the “Leaders of Tomorrow” where they deliberate on issues of national importance, raise their concerns and offer innovative solutions to the problems faced by India.

Sumit Pandey, national convener of Think India at Jhalwa campus said the Think

India felt the need to bind the students with an Indian nationalistic string to harness this part of national treasure in furthering our aim of national reconstruction. Students from IISC, IIMB, NIMHANS and NLSIU joined together to create a joint forum for the students from premier institutes of India in 2006. A formal forum took place at the Art of Living Ashram, Bengaluru, in 2007.

The MoU was signed by office bearers of Students’ Gymkhana, IIIT-A and convener of Think India to better facilitate its internship, guest lecture and other activities in the nature of academic curricular and co-curricular events in the best interest of students.

Associate Dean (Manpower), IIIT-A, Dr Ashutosh Singh, said: “Our endeavours extending well beyond the confines of the classroom will aim to enhance public welfare and our attempts to spread knowledge

will spread to a greater multi- and cross-disciplinary platform to conduct research, discovery, technology development, service to industry and entrepreneurship in consonance with India’s aspirations to be a welfare state.”

He said the MoU will be in effect from the date of signing and remain in force until three years. The MoU may be renewed after three years based on satisfactory review of progress/execution. Separate agreements will be prepared and signed by both parties in case a project proposal succeeds and receives funding. The exact terms and conditions of future cooperation will be deliberated and documented in more specific national/international collaboration agreements. On the occasion Prof Ranjit Singh, Dean Student Affairs, Prabhakar, Dr Shashikant Rai, Rohit Kumar Soni, president of Students’ Gymkhana, Aditya and other students were present.

Knowledge of Vedas eternal: MGCU V-C

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Vice-Chancellor (V-C) of Mahatma Gandhi Central University (MGCU), Motihari (Bihar) Prof Sanjay Srivastava, discussing the Vedic scientists Sushruta, Kanad, Varahamihir, Charak, Bhaskaracharya etc, said the knowledge of Vedas is eternal hence we should learn how it can benefit the society and the nation in today’s perspective. He was speaking as the chief guest in the concluding session of the three-day international seminar on ‘Vedic Science: Global Applications’ organised by the Centre for Vedic Science at Sudharma Hall, BHU. Appreciating the government’s proposal of Indian knowledge tradition, Prof Srivastava said the concept

of experimental side of the centre will get strength from such seminars. He said the centre is one of the few such centres in the country which is doing the noble work of disseminating Vedic knowledge across the country. The function started with the recital of Vedic Manglacharan by Ankit and Devraj. The guests were welcomed by centre coordinator Prof Upendra Kumar Tripathi and the summary of the seminar was presented by Dr Mamta Mehra of BHU.

The guests of honour were Prof Ulrich Burke from Germany and Prof Hriday Ranjan Sharma from Sanskrit Vidya Dharma Vigyan (SVDV) Faculty, BHU. While highlighting the specialty of the funeral rites, Prof Sharma said the

soul has three births and death is the third birth of the soul, because the soul never dies. He said there is no mention of death in the Vedas. While throwing light on the great purpose and importance of the metaphysical, metadivine and spiritual Vedas, Prof Burke said from the Vedas, every diagnosis of types of pollution is possible. Prof Hariram Mishra (JNU) discussed the global application of Vedic science and its tools and explained how the basic knowledge and science of the Vedas can be further disseminated. He gave a unique analysis of Vedic knowledge through various contexts of grammar. In the presidential address, Dean of SVDV Faculty, BHU, Prof Kamlesh Jha said this Centre for Vedic Science is moving

towards its original objectives and in the coming times, it will become a major centre of research and teaching. On the occasion the book ‘Yoga Vidya ki Vikas Yatra: Itihasik Singhavalochan’, written by the centre’s guest teacher Dr Krishna Murari Tripathi who was also the former director, Yoga Sadhana Kendra, Malviya Bhawan, BHU, was also released. The co-coordinator of the programme Dr Chandan Upadhyay, School of Materials Science and Technology, IIT (BHU), conducted the session. The vote of thanks was proposed by programme coordinator Prof Mrityunjay Dev Pandey, Department of Chemistry, BHU. Earlier in the morning, two main sessions and two parallel sessions were

conducted. Speakers in the first session included Dr V Ramanathan, Department of Chemistry, IIT-BHU, Prof Surendra Kumar Trigun, ex-head, Department of Zoology, Institute of Science, BHU, and online speaker Prof Debi Prasad Mishra, Director, National Institute of Technical Teacher Training and Research, Kolkata. The session was presided over by Prof Uma Pandey, Head, Department of Obstetrics, IMS-BHU and Prof Vindhyaachal Pandey, Department of Geophysics, BHU. It was conducted by Dr Dheeraj Kumar Mishra, Central Sanskrit University, Gangahat Jha campus, Prayagraj. Dr Narayan Prasad Bhattarai, SVDV, BHU, was the speaker in the second session.

Motorcyclist killed in road mishap

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A motorcyclist died after being knocked down by a speeding car on the Jhansi-Kanpur highway near Nagar Palika turn, Pukhrayan under Bhognipur Kotwali police station area of Kanpur Dehat late on Monday night. The doctors declared him dead at the community health centre (CHC).

According to a report received here, Ankit Rathaur (21) of Shahjahanpur, Satti (Kanpur Dehat) was employed in a private firm in Gujarat. He had recently come to the village. On Monday evening he had gone to Pukhrayan for train reservation for Gujarat. While returning to the village late at night, he was knocked down by the speeding car on

the highway due to which he fell on the road and was seriously injured.

The police informed the kin and sent him to Pukhrayan community health centre where Dr Rajvir in the Emergency Ward declared him dead. His uncle Hriday Narain Rathaur and other family members rushed to the CHC when they came to know about Ankit’s death. Pukhrayan outpost incharge Dharendra Singh sent the body for an autopsy. He said raids are on to nail the car driver.

SUICIDE: A 20-year-old girl committed suicide by hanging herself under mysterious circumstances in Manpur village in the Shivrajpur police station area on Monday night. When the family members

returned from the field they found her hanging. On being informed the police rushed to the spot and carried out a probe.

According to Manju Devi, wife of Santosh Kamal, all the family members had gone to the field on Monday evening. Her daughter Krishna (20) was alone in the house. On return they found her hanging from the ceiling hook.

Station House Officer (SHO) Subodh Kumar rushed to the spot with force and sent her body for an autopsy. He said the reason for the suicide could not be ascertained.

Her kin did not blame anybody for the incident. Further action will be taken in the matter on receipt of the autopsy report, he added.

Neighbours need each other: Jaishankar on Maldives row

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As diplomatic tension simmers between India and Maldives, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Tuesday said at the end of the day neighbours need each other. He also said "history and geography are very powerful forces. There is no escape from that," Jaishankar said in the backdrop of "India out" campaign in the island nation.

In another development, since the diplomatic spat erupted three weeks ago, from being the top tourist group visiting Maldives, Indians have slipped to the fifth position, according to Maldives official data.

Amid a diplomatic row that erupted after Maldivian politicians posted derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Jaishankar said that neighbours need each other.

On the 'India out' campaign in the Maldives, Jaishankar, during an interaction at IIM-Mumbai, said, "History and geography are very powerful forces. There is no escape from that." His remarks came in the backdrop of Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu earlier urged the Indian government to withdraw its military personnel from the Maldives on or before March 15. This was a part of the 'India out' campaign by the Maldives amid a diplomatic row.

Besides, President Muizzu, considered pro-China, has been reviewing bilateral agreements signed with India by the previous regime in the island nation.

Meanwhile, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), an opposition party, has collected signatures needed to initiate a no-confidence motion to launch impeachment proceedings against the Muizzu government. The

impeachment motion is likely to be introduced in the Maldives parliament soon.

From being the top tourist group visiting Maldives, Indians have slipped to the fifth position in the last three weeks, amid a diplomatic row between New Delhi and Male, according to official data.

Official figures released by the Maldives Ministry of Tourism showed a notable drop in the number of Indian travellers visiting the island nation.

Over 2 lakh Indians visited Maldives annually in the last three years, the highest from any country post-COVID 19 pandemic, the data showed.

However, the travel hotspot for Indians is now facing a backlash after three ministers from the Maldives cabinet made derogatory comments against Prime Minister Modi following his visit to Lakshadweep earlier this month.



According to the statistics, Maldives received over 1.74 lakh tourists till January 28 this year, of which only 13,989 were Indians. Russia topped the chart with 18,561 tourists from the country visiting Maldives, followed by Italy (18,111),

China (16,529) and UK (14,588). Germany is at the sixth spot followed by USA, France, Poland and Switzerland.

Over 17 lakh tourists visited the island nation in 2023, of which maximum were Indians

(2,09,198) followed by Russians (2,09,146) and Chinese (1,87,118).

The number of Indian visitors to Maldives was more than 2.4 lakh in 2022 and over 2.11 lakh in 2021. The Maldives was also one of the few

countries open for international tourists during the pandemic and nearly 63,000 Indians visited that country during 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 1.66 lakh Indians visiting that country.

Many netizens on social media claimed that they have cancelled their scheduled trips to the Maldives because of the row, with the hashtag "Boycott Maldives" trending on X for several days this month.

Joining the 'boycott campaign', EaseMyTrip, an online travel aggregator, had announced it has suspended all flight bookings to the island nation on its website "in solidarity" with India.

Meanwhile, the government of the Maldives had suspended three of its deputy ministers 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. The Maldivian foreign ministry had said the government is aware of the derogatory remarks made on social media platforms against foreign leaders and that their personal views do not represent the country's position.

Situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean, the Maldives is home to nearly 1,200 tiny coral islands that stretch along a length of 871 kilometres. From personalised spa treatments to adventure sports activities to world-class cuisine, the island nation offers myriad experiences, making it a great choice for visitors.

The beautiful beaches and the island experience, coupled with affordable airfare that is even cheaper than the cost of travel to some Indian cities, have been a big draw for Indian tourists.



Defence MoS Ajay Bhatt during the presentation of the Republic Day parade 2024 best marching contingent trophy to Delhi Police Women among the CAPF and others auxiliary forces in Judges Choice category, in New Delhi

RS chairman revokes suspension of 11 Opposition MPs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Rajya Sabha Privileges Committee on Tuesday held 11 suspended opposition MPs guilty of breach of privilege and contempt of the Council of States, but Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar revoked their suspension allowing them to attend the Budget session, sources said.

In its report to the Rajya Sabha chairman a day before the session starts on Wednesday, the committee also recommended that the period of suspension already suffered by the members be treated as "sufficient punishment" for the transgression.

The MPs held "guilty of breach of privilege and contempt of the Council" of States are Jebi Mather Hisham, I Hanumanthaiah, Neeraj Dangi, Rajmani Patel, Kumar Ketkar, G C Chandrashekhar, Binoy Viswam, Sandosh Kumar P, M Mohamed Abdulla, John Brittas and A A Rahim.

The committee presented the report to Dhankhar, taking note of the situation that the suspended members would not be able to attend the special address of President Droupadi Murmu to both Houses of Parliament, the first address in the new building of Parliament, on Wednesday.

The committee usually submits its recommendations to the House.

The sources said the chairman invoked the authority vested in him under the rules of procedure to revoke their suspension enabling the members to attend the special address by the president.

The matter of 11 MPs suspended by the chairman during the Winter session of Parliament were referred to the Privileges Committee.

REPUBLIC DAY PARADE Delhi Police all women contingent gets best marching award

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Minister of State for Defence Ajay Bhatt on Tuesday here gave away the best marching contingents and tableaux awards for this year's Republic Day parade. Delhi Police women marching contingent bagged the best marching award amongst the paramilitary forces while the Sikh Regiment got the award in the services category.

The colourful tableau of Odisha that showcased women empowerment in the state as well as its rich handicraft and handloom sector has bagged the first prize among the tableaux showcased by various states and UTs, officials said on Tuesday.

Gujarat's tableau showcasing Dhordo tourism village has earned the first place in the people's choice category. Culture Ministry's tableau themed 'Bharat: Mother of Democracy' bagged the first prize among tableaux which were displayed by various ministries and departments during the ceremonial parade. Ministry of Home Affairs

tableau depicting 'vibrant villages' has won the second prize.

A total of 16 tableaux from states and Union territories, and nine from central ministries and departments had rolled down the Kartavya Path during the grand celebrations which was graced by French President Emmanuel Macron.

The states and Union territories which presented their tableaux included Arunachal Pradesh, Haryana, Manipur, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Ladakh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Meghalaya, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana.

Three panels of judges were appointed for assessing the performance of Marching Contingents from three Services, Marching Contingents from Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF)/other auxiliary forces and tableaux from various States/Union Territories and Ministries/Departments.

India ranks 93 among 180 nations on corruption index

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India ranked 93 out of 180 countries on the corruption perceptions index for 2023 as its overall score remained largely unchanged, according to a Transparency International report.

The index, which ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption according to experts and business people, uses a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean. In 2023, India's overall score was 39 while in 2022, it was 40. India's rank in 2022 was 85.

"India (39) shows score fluctuations small enough that no firm conclusions can be drawn on any significant change. However, ahead of the elections, India sees further narrowing of civic space, including through the passage of a (telecommunication) bill that could be a 'grave threat' to fundamental rights," the report said.

In South Asia, both Pakistan (133) and Sri Lanka (115) grapple with their respective debt burdens and ensuing political instability, it said.

"However, the two countries have strong judicial oversight, which is helping to keep the government in check. The Supreme Court of Pakistan strengthened citizens' right to information by expanding this right under Article 19A of its Constitution to previously restricted institutions," it said.

The report said as Bangladesh (149) emerges from the least developed country (LDC) status, with economic growth supporting a continued reduction in poverty and improving living conditions, the flow of information on the public sector is hindered amidst an ongoing crackdown against the press.

Noting that China (76) has made headlines with its aggressive anti-corruption crackdown by punishing more than 3.7 million public officials for corruption over the last decade, the report said a closer study of the cases with guilty verdicts found that public officials often use corruption as a way to drive up their income.

However, the country's heavy reliance on punishment rather than institutional checks on power raises doubts over the long-term effectiveness of such

anti-corruption measures, the report said.

The report said as the Asia Pacific region faces a big 2024 election year, with people coming out to vote in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Solomon Islands, South Korea and Taiwan, the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) reveals another year of little to no meaningful progress towards curbing corruption.

"For five years in a row, the average CPI score for the region stagnates stubbornly at 45 out of a possible 100. Very few countries show sustained turnarounds that indicate significant changes in corruption levels and several historically at the top are slowly declining," it said.

Seventy-one per cent of the countries across Asia and the Pacific have a CPI score below the regional average score of 45 and the global average of 43 out of 100. These weak scores reflect the lack of delivery by elected officials on anti-corruption agendas, together with crackdowns on organised civil society and attacks on freedoms of press, assembly and association, the report said.

Prenatal exposure to air pollution can cause respiratory distress in newborns

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prenatal exposure to air pollution specifically fine particulate matter (PM2.5) and nitrogen dioxide (NO2) increases the risk of severe respiratory distress in newborn babies, according to a study, thus revealing a better understanding of infant respiratory distress, the leading cause of admission in neonatal intensive care units and death among infants worldwide.

Mothers' exposure to air pollution while pregnant is known to be associated with adverse long-term respiratory issues, such as asthma, in their children. However, what we didn't know is that maternal exposure to air pollution could cause babies to suffer severe respiratory distress soon after

birth, said Chintan K Gandhi, assistant professor of pediatrics at Penn State and corresponding author of the paper, about the need to conduct the study. It is published in the journal Environmental Health Perspectives

To conduct their study, the researchers analyzed data from the Maternal-Infant Research on Environmental Chemicals (MIREC) Study led by Health Canada. The MIREC Study team estimated the women's exposures to PM2.5 and NO2 beginning three months prior to pregnancy through the end of the third trimester by using models based on satellite information and ground-level air quality monitoring devices.

The MIREC team found that during the study period,



the women were exposed to PM2.5 concentrations ranging from 1.47 to 23.71 micrograms per cubic meter of air (µg/m3), with a median of 8.81 µg/m3, and NO2 concentrations ranging from 1.72 to 53.10 parts per billion (ppb), with a

median of 18.02 ppb. To provide context, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency provides standards for maximum annual exposures of 9.0 to 10.0 µg/m3 for PM2.5 and 53 ppb for NO2.

However, Gandhi said,

"There really is no safe level of air pollution."

Using data from the MIREC study, the team led by Penn State researchers examined associations between the mothers' exposure to air pollution and physician-diagnosed respiratory distress in newborns. The examination extended beyond diagnosis to encompass the severity of respiratory distress, quantified by the necessity for oxygen, mechanical ventilation and systemic antibiotics in the infants.

"This nuanced approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between maternal air pollution exposure and the varying degrees of respiratory distress observed in newborns," Gandhi said.

NMC bars medical college Profs from private practice during duty

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a move aimed to weed out ghost faculty, the National Medical Commission (NMC) has barred the faculty in medical colleges from engaging in private practice during college hours and made 75 per cent attendance mandatory for them. The medical regulator issued the "Minimum Standard of Requirements for Postgraduate Courses-2023 (PGMSR-2023)" guidelines last week.

"Faculty shall be full-time and shall not engage in private practice during college hours. It shall be mandatory to have at least 75 per cent attendance of the total working days for the required number of faculties," as per the guidelines.

It also stipulated that 80 per cent of hospital beds should be occupied throughout the year by patients requiring inpatient care and minimum 15 per cent of the total beds in the department imparting post-graduate training should be Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds/high dependency unit (HDU) beds exclusively of that department.

"Hospital building shall



conform to existing national building norms and various local statutory regulations for hospitals taking into consideration requirements of the hospital as a service provider, including administration, registration, records storage, out-patient and inpatient areas, operating theatres, ICU, radiology and laboratory services and emergency areas, etc."

There shall be an increase in the faculty, infrastructure and other staff in subjects of radio-diagnosis, anaesthesia, pathology, microbiology, and biochemistry with the increase in the number of beds in the hospital. Also, there shall be an increase in the faculty and infrastructure, if workload in the department is more, the guidelines said. Post-graduate medical colleges or institutes

started under Section 3.1(iii) of PGMER-23 (Standalone post-graduate medical college/institute) will have minimum 220 beds and will compulsorily have the functional departments of biochemistry, pathology, microbiology, radio diagnosis, anaesthesiology (when there are surgical speciality).

The institution shall have adequate in-house laboratory and imaging facilities for training of post-graduate students, which should be fully run by the respective department.

There shall be digital data of records of investigations done in various departments and laboratories besides a well-equipped air-conditioned blood bank capable of providing component therapy, as per the guidelines.

UGC removes 'de-reservation' draft guidelines amid backlash

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The University Grants Commission (UGC) on Tuesday removed from its website, the draft guidelines suggesting "de-reservation" of reserved posts if enough candidates from the SC, ST and OBC categories are not available, amid a controversy over the issue.

The commission chairman, M Jagadesh Kumar, however, said "the guidelines have been removed from the website as the time period for stakeholders to submit their feedback is over".

A controversy erupted on Sunday over UGC's draft guidelines proposing that any vacancy reserved for SC, ST and OBC candidates can be "declared unreserved" if enough candidates from these categories are not available, with the Congress terming it a conspiracy to do away with quota in higher education institutions.

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan clarified that not a single post will be de-reserved and there is no scope for ambiguity about reservations after the introduction of the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Teachers' Cadre) Act, 2019.

University Grants



Commission (UGC) Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar also made it clear that there has been no de-reservation of reserved category positions in Central Educational Institutions (CEI) in the past and there is "going to be no such de-reservation".

The draft guidelines have drawn flak from several quarters. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the BJP is "only busy snatching the jobs of youths".

The JNU Students' Union (JNUSU) also staged a protest against the UGC chairman on the issue on Monday.

Stepping up an attack, the Congress on Monday demanded the dismissal of UGC Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar over the draft guidelines for "de-reservation" of posts in higher education institutions, with party leader Rahul Gandhi alleging it was a "conspiracy" to end the reservation given to SC, ST and OBC categories.

Pradhan, however, hit back at Gandhi saying his politics is completely based on lies.

Make all hospitals disabled friendly: DMs in Delhi told

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD) has directed all District Magistrates across the national capital to ensure all hospitals under their jurisdiction to be made fully accessible for persons with disabilities (PwDs) under a mission mode. The directive likely includes measures to enhance physical accessibility, such as ramps, elevators, and other facilities that facilitate the movement and comfort of PwDs. Additionally, it may involve training hospital staff to provide better assistance and support to individuals with diverse needs.

SCPD Ranjan Mukherjee directed the District Magistrates to submit an action taken report in the matter within 90 days from the issue of the order delivered on January 25th, 2024.

The direction came in response to a petition filed by Dr Satendra Singh, Coordinator, Enabling Unit, University College of Medical Sciences, Delhi and Member, Advisory Board, SCPD who had pointed out that despite legal

mandates under concerned legislation and central programme Accessible India Campaign, the hospitals of Delhi Government remain inaccessible.

The SCPD Mukherjee also took exception to the delay saying that despite several reminders in the past on various occasions, the authorities have failed to ensure such important institutions are friendly to the sector.

In his order, the SCPD further said, "All Directors/Medical Superintendents of all hospitals of GNCT of Delhi are directed that each and every department/lab/other rooms/drinking water/toilets etc. are made accessible for persons with disabilities and action taken report be submitted to this Court within 90 days from the issue of this order.

"Also, Engineer-in-Chief, Public Works Department (PWD) should direct all Executive Engineers of PWD that all out efforts be made with the concerned hospitals authorities to make each and every place of the hospitals accessible for persons with disabilities," says the order.

In his PIL, Dr Singh who is also a



vocal activist in the sector pointed out that even as the deadline to make all public places including hospitals accessible under the central flagship Accessible India Campaign by 15 June 2022 and despite the progressive legal mandate, the hospitals under Delhi Government remain inaccessible to PwDs including patients, faculty with disabilities, and staff with disabilities.

For instance, he pointed out at the Maulana Ajad Medical College (MAMC) Hospital, the auditorium is not accessible, reserved parking not close to the entrance, and the library

not being accessible. The BSA Hospital's Physiology department and academic block do not have a lift despite this medical college being the newest one to be built.

Similarly, the GTB Hospital, of which the petitioner is the nodal officer, has written multiple times to the Public Works Department to share access audits but it hasn't been done so. Moreover, the new hospital building at GTBH and other hospitals are under progress and they should follow the accessibility standard right from the beginning with the involvement of administrators or doctors with disabilities.

Singh further said that even though the Union Health Ministry has framed Accessibility Standards for Healthcare in 2022, the hospitals are slow to follow it in letter and spirit.

Responding to the order, Dr Singh said, the mission mode approach implies a targeted and time-bound strategy to expedite the process of making hospitals more accessible, emphasizing the urgency and importance of this initiative.

Win some, lose some

Nitish switching sides leaves the INDIA bloc in confusion but limits his own bargaining power

In a move that did not leave many seasoned politicians flabbergasted, JD(U) leader Nitish Kumar has executed a somersault by rejoining the BJP alliance barely 18 months after he walked out of the NDA, spilling bad blood all around. Importantly, his latest move saw Nitish abandoning the plank of Opposition unity, which he was passionately championing until very recently. In fact, he was the de facto convener of the INDIA bloc, which has been cobbled together to take on the BJP's national might. As a prime mover of the INDIA bloc, Nitish's departure puts a cloud over the coalition's future, which may have to undergo a realignment, potentially impacting its cohesiveness and effectiveness. However, there is more to this development than meets the eye: While it certainly is a major setback for the Opposition, what with Mamata Banerjee and Bhagwant Mann already having announced to go it alone in their respective States of West Bengal and Punjab, it provides an obvious edge to the BJP while straitjacketing Nitish from performing any more antics, at least till the Bihar Assembly elections next year.



The lack of communication between Bihar Chief Minister Nitish and his deputy, RJD's Tejashwi Yadav, is said to have compounded their unease with each other. Matters did not help when Central agencies started questioning Tejashwi's mother and sister in the alleged land-for-jobs scam. The BJP's inclination towards a representative from an extremely backward caste or a prominent Other Backward Classes (OBC) group adds complexity to the situation. Nitish has the additional duty of ensuring that Bihar adds

handsomely to the NDA's kitty in the general elections. Nitish's decision to realign with the BJP has far-reaching consequences, influencing not only his political trajectory but also the future dynamics of the NDA and INDIA bloc. Interestingly, the Bihar developments coincide with Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra entering the State. It is sure to have a dampening effect on the Congress' campaign and lower its confidence considerably. However, nothing can be said with finality about Nitish. It will all depend on the understanding he has with the BJP and how the latter treats him. His switch was ostensibly prompted by the treatment he received from his INDIA partners. During alliance meetings, clashes of aspirations and perceived attempts by the RJD to expand its influence within the JD(U) hint at a shifting power dynamic. Nitish's political somersault and his realignment with the BJP have unleashed a series of ripple effects that extend far beyond the borders of Bihar. The departure of this seasoned politician from the INDIA bloc has injected an element of uncertainty into the political equations, casting shadows over the future cohesion and effectiveness of the coalition. The nation observes closely as this strategic realignment unfolds, shaping the future contours of Indian politics.

PICTALK



Artistes perform during the presentation of the best tableau in the Republic Day parade, in New Delhi

PTI

A father's courageous fight against girl's sexual assault

Despite threats and coercion, Ranjit, supported by his resilient daughter, pursued justice with unwavering courage

When Ranjit took on the might of the powerful in his tribal village in Ranchi district, Jharkhand, to pursue action against the rapists of his 13-year-old daughter, he didn't think he would get justice. But he was still determined to go ahead. So, even though the village mukhiya was unsupportive and the police inspector on duty refused to file an FIR, Ranjit didn't give up. He called up the Superintendent of police who came to the station to help him file the case under the POCSO Act, leading to the arrest of the three perpetrators.

Thereafter began the real battle. Pressure was mounted from all sides to compromise by offering money to withdraw the case and, marriage to one of the perpetrators. Threats were made to burn their home, kill Ranjit and cause other physical harm to the family. Somehow he braved the storm, riding on the extraordinary and unwavering courage of his daughter, (the sexual assault survivor), who stood firm in her fight for justice.

After a year of struggle, including withstanding



humiliation in court from the public prosecutor, Ranjit and his daughter were vindicated when the verdict came in their favour and the three were sentenced to 25 years of rigorous imprisonment. In a country where rape is reported every 20 minutes and conviction rates are less than 30%, this success inspired filmmaker Nisha Pahuja to document Ranjit and his daughter's dogged fight for justice. To Kill A Tiger, which took eight years to film, has been nominated for the Best Documentary Feature for the 2024 Oscar awards.

The survivor, who is now 20, went on to complete school. She hopes to show other survivors like her, that girls are not to blame for sexual assaults and that is why she agreed to reveal her face in the

film. But had her father Ranjit not stood up for her, she may have remained just another statistic in crime records. Ranjit attributes his ability to withstand all pressures and to raise his voice for justice to the training he received through an intervention engaging men as responsible partners and caring fathers in the context of gender equality and child rights.

Initiated by the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) in Jharkhand in 2015, this program developed innovative ways to work with men and boys on issues of masculinities. Implemented in three districts in partnership with NGOs Srijan in Ranchi, Chotanagpur Sanskritik Sangh (CSS) in Gumla and Sahyogini in Bokaro, the intervention was able to reduce gender differences in the burden of household and care work and, reduce gender disparities in education, according to an independent evaluation of the programme. Importantly, it reduced gender-based violence in families and villages engaged in the intervention. This assessment found positive mindset changes in atti-

tudes towards child marriage sexual harassment of women/girls and policing of sisters/daughters by brothers/fathers. Male members of the program questioned their violent masculinities, began exercising less 'power over' their women relatives supported them more, and started challenging norms on masculinities.

This initiative, coupled with government and other NGO interventions, has helped to change two important community norms. It now believes that investment in education, especially girls' education and an increase in age at marriage is necessary. Initiatives like these engaging men and boys have shown that the journey towards more gender-transformative masculinities is possible. What makes it imperative to scale such interventions urgently is the disturbing increase in the incidence of rape between 2020 and 2022. In Ranjit's Ranchi district, figures suggest that approximately every 1.75 days there is an incident of rape.

(The writer is a senior journalist; views expressed are personal)



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

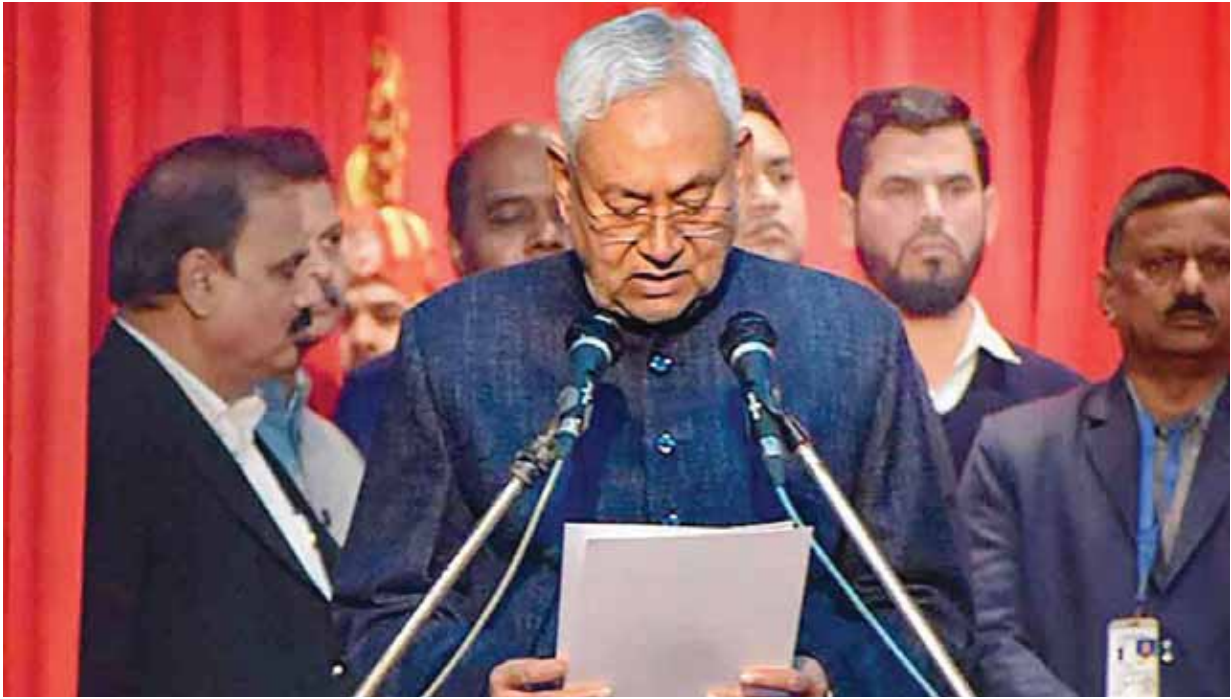
Masterstroke or political Harakiri?

Nitish Kumar has rejoined forces with the BJP, cementing his reputation as a leader known for frequent shifts in political alliances for personal benefit

On Sunday, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar threw a bombshell by leaving the ruling Mahagathbandhan in Bihar and returning to the NDA. He also quit the opposition coalition which he had built eight months ago. This dismantling of the bloc has dealt a significant blow to the INDIA bloc at the national level. They missed the slim chance of defeating the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. It is worth exploring how Bihar's politics may affect the national landscape. Kumar's decision to return to the NDA, fold could benefit the BJP but weaken the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress in Bihar. It could ultimately impact the opposition bloc at the national level. This BJP- J.D. (U) partnership could improve the chances of the BJP winning more seats in the upcoming 2024 general elections and help Modi achieve a hat trick.

The BJP tried to break the opposition coalition and partner with the J.D. (U) alliance. The Party sees Nitish Kumar as a critical ally in Bihar and believes their partnership can win in the 2024 elections. Kumar has only 45 seats in the current Assembly, while the RJD and BJP have 78 and 79 seats, respectively. Despite this, Nitish managed to continue as the chief minister. Did the Congress party have a hand in Nitish Kumar's departure from the IN.D.I.A. opposition bloc? The reason behind this setback was the decision to sideline Nitish and promote Congress. Kumar accused the Party of being responsible for the failed alliance, arguing that the situation arose due to poor communication.

KC Tyagi of the Janata Dal United (JDU) has levelled accusations against the Congress party that it conspired to dominate the Opposition bloc. On January 13th in Mumbai, the Chief (CPI-M) Sitaram Yechori proposed Nitish Kumar as the convener of the bloc. This suggestion was supported by most of the other leaders present. However, Rahul Gandhi voiced his disagreement. Mamata



Banerjee subsequently proposed the name of Congress chief Kharge as the coalition chief, a move Tyagi claims was part of a broader conspiracy. Tyagi stated that Nitish Kumar mobilised an alliance that united all non-Congress parties. However, it is now disintegrating. The situation in Punjab and Bihar is on the verge of collapse, and the coalition in West Bengal is also falling apart. Nitish confirmed that he left the INDIA alliance because it didn't meet his expectations. He felt he was the only one working towards the coalition's goals. Although the partnership has brought together all non-Congress parties, the alliance disintegrated in West Bengal and almost collapsed in Bihar and Punjab.

There is also an untold story. Lalu Yadav, the leader of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), encouraged Nitish Kumar to form an opposition coalition at the national level to aim for the position of Prime Ministerial candidate. The purpose of this plan was to pave the way for Lalu Yadav's son to become the Chief Minister. However, the plan

LALU YADAV, THE LEADER OF THE RASHTRIYA JANATA DAL (RJD), ENCOURAGED NITISH KUMAR TO FORM AN OPPOSITION COALITION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL TO AIM FOR PRIME MINISTERSHIP

failed when Mallikarjun Kharge was chosen as the leader of the new coalition. Consequently, Nitish Kumar sided with the (BJP).

Kumar's credibility has been tarnished because of his unwavering desire to hold power, regardless of the repercussions. He has changed political allegiances several times, always for his benefit, and currently holds the title of Chief Minister with the longest tenure. Nitish's track record shows that after exploring other options in 2013, Nitish Kumar left the BJP and allied with the RJD, and Congress. After the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, he aligned with the BJP again and became the Chief Minister in 2020. However, two years later, Kumar left the BJP and formed a new government with the RJD, and Congress. Now he has dumped the RJD. That is why he is called Palti Ram. Despite being an experienced politician, Nitish Kumar's frequent changes in stance have cost him the chance to be considered as a prime ministerial candidate for the opposition party, especially at

the age of 72. The BJP's dismantling of the INDIA bloc may facilitate Prime Minister Modi to win his third term. In Bihar, mobilising OBC votes to achieve electoral success is imperative. In November 2023, Bihar increased the reservation for Scheduled Castes and Extremely Backward Castes. It is unclear how long the Nitish and the BJP partnership will last.

They may work together until the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, but what will happen afterwards is uncertain. The Bharatiya Janata Party may support Nitish only until the Lok Sabha polls and their support could decrease afterwards-some question whether the alliance will continue until the 2025 Bihar Assembly polls. Nitish has shown that it's possible to retain power by using clever bargaining skills and winning a few seats, even if only 4% of the electorate belongs to their caste. But one thing is sure: Given Nitish's track record, there could be other flip-flops.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE BEHAVIOUR OF BUREAUCRATS

Sir — The idea of bureaucrats embodying exemplary conduct for the public takes a blow when incidents like the Singrauli SDM episode surface. His act of having a female employee tie his shoelace in public triggered outrage, highlighting the stark contrast between expected behaviour and reality. The swift transfer in response to public outcry via social media underscores the need for greater accountability and sensitivity among those entrusted with positions of power.

Such blatant abuse of authority cannot be tolerated, especially in public spaces. Moving forward, the government must prioritize not only competence but also ethical conduct when selecting officials for crucial roles. Common courtesy and respect for basic human dignity should be non-negotiable, forming the bedrock of every bureaucrat's interaction with the public. Only then can we rebuild trust and pave the way for a government that truly serves its people.

N Mateeni | Mumbai

DILAPIDATED POST OFFICES

Sir — People are infuriated over the lackadaisical attitude of authorities towards improving the condition of the post offices in the country which has been lying in a dilapidated condition for a long. Residents have complained that even the name of the post office has not been displayed properly at most of the places. Moreover, the internet services fail to provide connectivity during peak hours. A member of the grievances redressal committee said higher authorities of the postal department had not shown any interest in improving the condition of the post office. The infrastructure of the post office needs to be improved.

There is a need to beautify the staff counters to give a neat and clean look to these counters. There is also a need to provide better seating arrangements. There was also a need to recruit more staff at the post offices. Retires invest their hard-earned money, wait for hours and then become

IMD completes 150 years



Recently, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) celebrated its 150th year of establishment and service to the nation. On this memorable occasion, the IMD has launched several initiatives, such as 'The Weather Analysis and Forecast Enabling System

(WAFES Framework of Climate Services (NFCS)). Over the years, the IMD has been playing a significant role in weather forecasting and monsoon predictions. It plays a multidimensional role in the country's major affairs, conducting general elections, the launch of ISRO missions, and the growth of infrastructural and agricultural sectors.

The IMD faces a lot of challenges posed by changing climates and the ever-increasing demand for accurate and timely weather information. As the country navigates the complexities of its diverse weather patterns, perhaps the fusion of AI and traditional meteorological methods may well be the key to a more adaptive and efficient forecasting system, ultimately safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of the people of the country.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

disappointed without getting their hard-earned money. It is high time to heed the fact that the residents living in pensioner's paradise are put to the test every time they go to pick up their monthly earnings. It is time to have better working conditions in Post Offices.

C K Subramaniam | Chennai

UGC DEGREE IN MARATHI

Sir — The University Grants Commission has taken major steps to provide degree and post-graduate education in other languages along with the Marathi language. Accordingly, a master's training program has been organized next month for professors to create educational materials. As a result of this, students will get a great opportunity to learn the local language in the coming academic years. Local language has been given priority in the national education policy. But the necessary educational materials are not available. As a result, many rural students are unable to study in the local language. Even during the three years of implementation of NEP, many course materials are not available in the

Marathi language. It will also be given. The support of the Indian Language Committee will be taken for this. Overall, this is good news in the background of the strangulation of the Marathi language going on in all areas. Today, children are not given education in their mother tongue in many places. If education is given in the mother tongue, children understand quickly and they understand anything immediately. Recently the volume of English has increased in all areas. In many places, Marathi schools are on the verge of closure. Even today, despite fulfilling all the conditions, the Marathi language does not get the status of the Abhijit language from the Centre. For that, it is necessary to try at all levels. Overall, it is necessary to give priority to Marathi in all fields. It is good news that Marathi is being included in degree and post-graduate education. It is expected to be implemented as soon as possible.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

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FIRST COLUMN

AHIMSA: THE PATH TO PEACEFUL EXISTENCE

Buddhism’s essence lies in non-violence, compassion and enlightenment

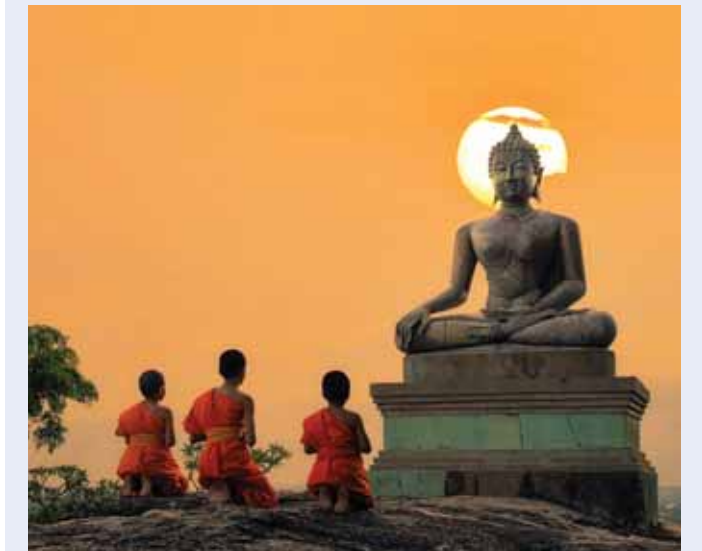


BHIKKHU SIRI SIVALI **ABHASARO**

Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama, commonly known as the Buddha, is a philosophy and way of life that places great emphasis on the alleviation of suffering and the pursuit of enlightenment. Central to the teachings of Buddhism is the principle of non-violence, or "ahimsa," which holds a profound and essential role in shaping the ethical framework of this ancient spiritual tradition.

The Essence of Non-Violence in Buddhism:

- **Compassion and Interconnectedness:** Buddhism teaches that all beings are interconnected and share a common desire for happiness while seeking to avoid suffering. Non-violence stems from the understanding that causing harm to others ultimately results in harm to oneself. Compassion, a key tenet of Buddhism, encourages followers to cultivate empathy and extend benevolence to all living beings.
- **The First Precept:** The Five Precepts form the ethical guidelines for Buddhist practitioners, with the first precept explicitly stating, "I undertake the precept to refrain from taking life." This foundational principle underscores the sanctity of all life and emphasizes the commitment to non-violence as a fundamental aspect of ethical conduct.
- **Karma and Consequences:** Buddhism teaches the concept of karma, the law of cause and effect. Engaging in violent or harmful actions generates negative karma, which can have repercussions in this life or future lives. By practicing non-violence, individuals seek to break the cycle of negative karma, promoting a path towards enlightenment and liberation from suffering.



- **Mindfulness and Contemplation:** Buddhist practices, such as mindfulness meditation, cultivate awareness and self-reflection. Non-violence is not only manifested in physical actions but also in the thoughts and intentions of individuals. By developing mindfulness, practitioners strive to eliminate harmful thoughts and cultivate a mindset of kindness and non-harming.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Non-violence plays a crucial role in conflict resolution within Buddhist communities. Rather than resorting to aggression or retaliation, followers are encouraged to seek peaceful solutions through dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation. This approach aligns with the Buddha's teachings on skillful means to address conflicts without causing harm.
- **Example of the Buddha:** The life of the Buddha serves as a profound example of non-violence. From his renunciation of the royal life to his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha consistently demonstrated compassion and refrained from causing harm to any being, even in the face of adversity.

Non-violence, deeply rooted in the core principles of Buddhism, is a guiding force that shapes the ethical conduct of its followers. Through the practice of compassion, mindfulness, and the observance of the Five Precepts, Buddhists strive to create a world free from violence and suffering. By embracing the philosophy of non-violence, individuals embark on a transformative journey towards personal well-being, social harmony, and the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

(The writer is a Buddhist monk and spiritual guide, views are personal)

Charting a course for India’s maritime security

To strengthen its standing as a global leader in maritime security, it is imperative to adopt a robust Maritime Domain Awareness framework

The adoption of a robust Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) framework is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by maritime-dependent industries and nations worldwide. In order to demonstrate the necessary commitment towards the protection of marine infrastructure and maritime domains, India must strengthen its maritime security programmes by keeping the rapidly changing maritime geopolitics and emergence of diverse threats in attention. By prioritising research and development funding and promoting international MDA partnerships, India can position itself as the global leader in maritime security.

India's Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) concepts



PADMALOCHAN **DASH**

must undergo a significant transformation, shifting from traditional water surface-centric initiatives to embrace space-based monitoring and AI-driven Operational Technology (OT) systems. The focus on maritime security needs to extend beyond territorial limitations to encompass regional and global perspectives, recognizing the heightened competition in seas. Given India's substantial glob-

al role in maritime affairs, effective MDA models must be prioritized as a fundamental component of the maritime security outlook. This evolution is essential to proactively address emerging threats, enhance surveillance capabilities, and foster international collaboration in securing maritime interests.

In the context of multilateral Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) cooperation, the Maldives' geographical proximity to China's expansion goals and the rising maritime incidents underscore the critical need for vigilant maritime monitoring. Proactively addressing China's increasing influence in the South China Sea is imperative. Given its status as the largest stakeholder and the key actor in the Indian

Ocean Region, India must take the lead in institutionalizing MDA. Recognising the inadequacy of limited national capacity to protect vast water expanses, this necessitates fostering multilateral cooperation, promoting inclusivity, and leveraging sophisticated technologies. As one of the largest maritime operators strategically positioned in the region, India should formalize a framework for multilateral MDA cooperation involving relevant parties. This initiative can facilitate access to robust yet affordable MDA resources, while also fostering intelligence sharing and joint exercises to collectively address diverse maritime security challenges. India has demonstrated a strong commitment to

enhancing its Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities, particularly in the aftermath of the "26/11" attacks. Notable initiatives, such as the National Marine Domain Awareness (NMDA) project and the collaboration with France on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) satellite constellation, highlight India's proactive efforts to create an integrated MDA network. To ensure a cohesive and successful MDA approach, there must be a focus on establishing a specialised coordination body, conducting regular audits, and evaluating past initiatives. Recognizing the dynamic nature of maritime threats, the involvement of multiple stakeholders and adaptability to evolving scenarios are emphasized, contributing to the

resilience and effectiveness of the MDA framework. Integrating current unmanned technology with human intelligence transforms marine security. India can lead maritime security by integrating these technology into marine plans faster. Real-time threat identification, thorough monitoring, vessel vetting, due diligence, and AI insights to optimise the MDA framework are required. Technology, especially AI, improves Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) for countries like India. For early threat detection, deliberate investments in cutting-edge surveillance and intelligence technology like ASVs, UAVs, and UUVs are necessary. Autonomous systems like ASVs, UAVs, and UUVs improve reaction and marine

security. Initiatives such as the National Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence (NC3I) network demonstrate the scope of MDA operations. Succinct and adaptable MDA is the result of periodic revisions in response to emerging threats and the active participation of experts from diverse disciplines. For autonomous system integration and preparation against emerging threats, a specialised task force, learning processes, and technology infrastructure updates are essential. It is imperative that collaborations be formed with academic institutions, research centres, and technological firms. Cybersecurity and interoperability assure MDA unmanned system security

and efficiency. Regular cybersecurity audits strengthen MDA systems against evolving cyber threats. India must modernise its technology and form new cybersecurity alliances to handle marine security issues. Since the "26/11" event, India's Navy and MDA have increased maritime security initiatives, demonstrating a commitment to securing the whole maritime domain. Recent successes in right-time detection and fast eradication of varied marine threats highlight MDA's naval operating concept evolution. Investment in naval personnel training and cutting-edge technology would help the Indian Navy meet MDA goals.

(The Author is working with an Independent Think Tank; views are personal)

Drones can revolutionise the agriculture sector



AS **MITTAL**

The Government’s inclination towards precision agriculture implies that drones are poised to become an integral component of cultivation practices



In Punjab, where drones remain associated mostly with dropping drugs and arms from Pakistan in border areas, now they are poised to gain a new skyline to revolutionise the agriculture sector.

Kiranpal Kaur of Sekha village in Barnala district, who has only completed her education up to class 10 and has never travelled in a plane, is now a trained drone pilot. She travels across the district to provide rental services for spraying fertilisers and pesticides and undertaking surveys to check for any crop damage in the fields. These Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) are the cutting-edge solution for driving agriculture towards higher efficiency, sustainability and profitability.

To further empower rural women Self Help Groups (SHGs), the subsidised 'Namo Drone Didi' Scheme was launched in December last year with an outlay of Rs.1261 Crore for the period from 2024-25 to 2025-26. The scheme aims to equip and train at least 15,000 women SHGs. Kiranpal is among the first batch of 22 rural women SHGs in Punjab, out of 300 women SHGs across the country, to be equipped with Kisan drones.

Potential: The market cost of a high-end drone that can perform multiple tasks is approximately Rs 15 lakh. However, the government has introduced subsidised schemes that offer subsidies of Rs 4-8 lakh on each drone and a 3% interest subvention on loans. This initiative is expected to have a significant impact on the Indian agriculture drone market, which is projected to grow at an annual average rate of over 25% from 2024 to 2026. Additionally, the global market for agricultural drones is expected to reach USD 4.7 billion by the end of 2026, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 31.3% during the forecast period of 2024 to 2026. The increasing demand for agricultural drones, which have several applications such as field mapping, automated seeding, fertilizer sprayers, crop analysis, and imaging, is expected to propel market growth in the coming years.

The adoption of drone technology serves as an advanced decision support system



THE USE OF DRONES, EQUIPPED WITH HYPERSPECTRAL IMAGING TECHNOLOGY, HAS BROUGHT ABOUT A REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN HOW WE PERCEIVE CROP HEALTH

that facilitates targeted intervention and reduces the wastage of critical resources such as water, chemicals, and fertilizers. The high-resolution imagery obtained from drones can provide valuable insights that enable targeted intervention and prevent the unnecessary application of treatments across the entire field. Moreover, drones can help convert the abstract concept of precision agriculture into multifaceted approaches through compelling data and actionable insights.

Remote sensing and monitoring: Effective monitoring of crop health is crucial for farmers to achieve maximum yield and profits. The use of drones equipped with hyperspectral imaging technology has brought a revolutionary change in how we perceive crop health. In a recent study, it was revealed that drones can detect pest infestations up to 2 weeks earlier than traditional monitoring methods. This early detection can potentially save up to 30% of the harvest that might otherwise be lost.

Precision crop management: Finding a balance between agricultural production and environmental preservation is crucial. The excessive use of chemicals and water scarcity can lead to environmental degradation, which is a pressing concern that the agriculture sector must address. Drones can play a vital role in solving these issues by accurately identifying areas that require water. By doing so, farmers can reduce water usage by approximately 25%, thereby promoting sustainable agriculture.

Drones are not only useful for surveillance purposes, but when equipped with the right analytical capabilities, they can also provide actionable insights for real-time crop management. For example, by utilizing data collected and analyzed by drones, farmers can reduce fer-

tizer usage by an average of 26% by applying it only where needed. This is not only beneficial from a financial perspective but also contributes to sustainable agriculture that reduces environmental impact. Efficient field scouting: Given India's vast geographical expanse, monitoring remote or hard-to-reach farms is a unique challenge. Here, drones are an asset, reducing the hours of manual labour involved in field scouting to mere minutes. According to recent estimates, drones can cover 200 acres in just 30 minutes, offering timely and accurate data. It is valuable for smallholder farmers, who make up close to 68% of the Indian farming community, enabling them to act before a problem like a pest infestation becomes economically damaging. This efficiency in field scouting allows farmers to stay ahead of potential issues, even in remote or less accessible parts of their farms. Instead of labour-intensive, time-consuming manual inspections, drones provide a cost-effective and timely alternative. According to the estimates prepared by IFFCO, a drone takes just around 8-10 minutes to spray one acre.

Data-driven decision-making: We are in an era where data-driven strategies are not the exception but the rule, and agriculture is keeping pace. Drones generate extensive datasets that offer an in-depth look into crop health, growth patterns, and other variables. For example, a farmer can now optimise planting densities of sugarcane-based on drone-collected data, potentially increasing yields by up to 10%. Imagine a farmer in the heart of Punjab who can now use drone-acquired data to optimise planting densities, manage nutrients effectively, and plan their harvest with precision. Such data-driven decisions can lead to higher yields and, consequently, better profits.

Cost savings: In a sector where profit margins can be wafer-thin, drones serve as a cost-effective ally. Early detection of potential issues allows for timely and, therefore, less costly interventions. By helping farmers make data-backed decisions, drones help avert financial setbacks. By advising on agri-input use before visible crop issues occur, they can prevent the need for expensive interventions later during the crop cycle.

Weather forecasting: For a good yield, optimum weather remains crucial. Equipped with weather monitoring technology, drones can serve as weather stations in the sky, providing real-time data on the weather. This information is invaluable for planning farm operations and responding to changing weather patterns. In India, where monsoons can be a farmer's best friend or worst enemy, having up-to-the-minute weather data is a game-changer. It allows farmers to make informed decisions about when to plant, irrigate, or harvest, ultimately improving farm resilience.

Conclusion: The government's shows a growing affinity for precision agriculture suggests that drones are set to become an integral part of crop cultivation practices. By blending traditional farming expertise with advanced technology, farmers can anticipate a more optimistic and fruitful future. Moreover, the government can offset the 80% cost of drone adoption through significant savings on fertilizers and pesticides subsidies, as the use of drone technology leads to reduced consumption.

(The Author is vice-chairman of Sonalika Group and vice-chairman of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council. Views expressed are personal)

BJP begins poll campaign in JK

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU



The Jammu and Kashmir unit of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) Tuesday sounded the poll bugle by inaugurating six election offices for the five Parliamentary constituencies. In contrast, the main constituents of the INDIA alliance namely the National Conference and Peoples Democratic Party are yet to finalise their seat-sharing formula.

The core group of PDP that met under the chairmanship of Mehbooba Mufti on Monday brainstormed on the Lok Sabha elections, especially on the five J&K seats.

The JKDPDP spokesperson in a press statement said that during the core group meeting, the PDP leaders reiterated their commitment to the unity of purpose and objectives under the banner of the INDIA alliance of which it's a part.

On the other hand, JKNC leaders Dr Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah are cur-

rently performing a pilgrimage away from Jammu and Kashmir.

In the Jammu region, the Congress party is out on the streets and organizing regular mass contact programs to regain its lost ground and build up a campaign. BJP, which won two Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls is eyeing at least three Lok Sabha seats to improve its tally. The party is expected to introduce some new faces in the poll arena to ensure the victory of all party candidates in the fray.

J&K BJP Chief Ravinder Raina accompanied by a sitting

parliamentarian Jugal Kishore Sharma inaugurated the office in the Bakshi Nagar area of Jammu.

Addressing party workers on the occasion Raina said that from today onwards, all the activities for the upcoming Parliamentary elections will be coordinated through these offices. He, on the occasion, also e-inaugurated the rest of the five offices for the four Parliamentary constituencies of Udhampur, Srinagar, Baramulla, and Rajouri-Anantnag.

Raina announced similar election offices will be opened up in the 90 Assembly Constituencies as well.

J&K BJP General Secretary (Org.) Ashok Koul along with Veer Saraf and other leaders inaugurated the Parliamentary Election office in Anantnag.

Union MoS Dr Jitendra Singh along with J&K BJP Chief Spokesperson Adv. Sunil Sethi and other leaders inaugurated the Parliamentary Election office in Udhampur.

CBI files closure report in Param Bir Singh case

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Eight months after the Maharashtra Government withdrew all the cases against him, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has filed a closure report in an eight-year-old extortion case against the former Police Commissioner of Thane and Mumbai Police Param Bir Singh and others.

In a closure report filed before the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Thane Court, the CBI stated that the facts and circumstances that emerged during the investigations do not substantiate the allegations or disclose any incriminating evidence for launching prosecution against any of the accused persons.

In its closure report, the CBI provided a detailed report of its deep investigations into the case, plus all the documentary evidence and list of 23 witnesses therein as part of the closure report.

Opposition gains momentum in Maharashtra

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In a boost to the Opposition unity ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) – which is the INDIA block in Maharashtra –has formally inducted the Prakash Ambekar-led Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (MVA) into its fold.

Confirming the development, VBA chief Prakash Ambekar said here on Tuesday that he would join the seat-sharing talks for the Lok Sabha polls,

from the next meeting onwards.

It may be recalled that Ambekar, who is the grandson of late B R Ambedkar had on January 25 rejected the invitation extended to it by the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) for seat-sharing talks for the Lok Sabha polls. He had also accused Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee president Nana Patole asking him “not to play mind games” with the people of Maharashtra.

Subsequently, the Opposition

MVA – which comprises the Congress, Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (Sharad Pawar) – had sent him an olive branch and prevailed upon him to join its fold.

After the reconciliation with him, the MVA, in its letterhead signed by state Congress President Nana Patole, his NCP counterpart Jayant Patil and Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut, sent a formal letter to Ambekar, inducting him in the MVA.

“The country is going

through a very serious situation. A country with a great democratic tradition is turning to dictatorship,” the MVA stated in its letter.

“People suspect in 2024 (Lok Sabha polls), if there is a different result in the country (and BJP comes to power again), this will probably be the last election. We know that the Maha Vikas Aghadi was established to change this situation and bring about change in the state and the country,” the MVA said.

Mamata holds road show on Rahul route

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The so-called Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance continued to lose its glue in Bengal as there was no sign of ice melting between the Congress and the Trinamool Congress.

Instead of accommodating each other both the parties continued to beat the other down even as Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday

embarked on road shows on routes that had earlier been traversed by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi who too drew massive crowd in his trail.

Looking right through the repeated invites sent by the Congress leadership to join Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra that was presently passing through her State Banerjee walked about five km at Islampur town in North Bengal even as thousands of people followed her.

TMC seeks apology from BJP leader for misogynist remark

PNS ■ KOLKATA

The Trinamool Congress on Tuesday slammed the BJP demanding immediate apology from its leadership for its alleged “misogynist” remarks after Bengal BJP president Sukanto Majumdar used “derogatory” remarks against Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee asking the people to “slap” her for ruining the state's education scenario.

Slamming the Chief Minister for pursuing a wrong education policy he allegedly told in a rally at Mathurapur in South 24 Parganas that “people should slap Mamata Banerjee and not the students” if they fail in their studies.

Demanding apology from the State BJP president, Bengal Minister Shashi Panja said that “he is using derogatory words and provoking the public to slap Mamata Banerjee.

BJP walkathon...

From Page 1

While the BJP in the State is a latecomer to the election campaign, facing a host of issues such as group rivalries (as per a party veteran, there are more groups in the Kerala BJP than leaders) and mutual mistrust among its leaders, Shobha Surendran (who is not related to Surendran) is kept away from the leadership hierarchy despite being active in party matters.

With 20 Lok Sabha seats in Kerala, the party's chances of winning even a single seat from this pool of 20 appear bleak due to the absence of effective leaders within the Kerala BJP. However, this has not deterred the State party in-charge, Prakash Javadekar,

from claiming that the BJP will secure at least five seats in the state. The BJP's best performance in the State to date was during the 2019 Lok Sabha polls when it secured 13 per cent of the votes. However, in the 2021 Assembly election, the Hindutva party faced a setback at the hands of the LDF and UDF, managing to secure less than 12 per cent of the votes. Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ability to draw large crowds wherever he goes, it cannot be considered as support for the BJP in Kerala. The reality is that there are no State-level leaders in Kerala capable of translating Modi's popularity into votes.

Rajan Paul, a former executive engineer with the Kerala Government, expressed his frustration,

saying, “We are seeing the same old mediocre faces in the party who are incapable of thinking outside the box.” He dismissed the notion that Christians are likely to vote for the BJP, citing the Manipur incident as a stain on the goodwill enjoyed by the party. KT Pally, a retired Railway official and community leader, echoed this sentiment, saying, “The BJP has done nothing to dispel the apprehensions in our minds.”

Sitaram Yechury, CPI(M) general secretary and a figure with a cult following, disapproved of the BJP's actions, including Pragna Pratishtha. He said on Tuesday that the BJP is consistently against the Constitution of India and should be prosecuted for polarising society.

Ladakh prime...

From Page 1

The report, stemming from the Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAII) Programme spanning between 2019 and 2023, was released by Union Minister of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, Bhupendra Yadav at the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) meeting here.

Known as the ‘Ghost of Mountains’ for their elusive and mysterious nature, snow leopards have long been a symbol of the pristine and harsh landscapes they inhabit.

The findings of this first-of-its-kind survey not only shed light on their endangered status but also emphasise the importance of preserving their

delicate habitats, being an indicator of the health of the Himalayan ecosystems in terms of climate change and biodiversity.

The comprehensive assessment of the survey spanning approximately 1,20,000 square kilometers across the trans-Himalayan region was led by The Wildlife Institute of India (WII), with the collaboration of all snow leopard range states, the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysuru, and WWF-India.

Prior to this study, the snow leopard's range in India was largely undefined, with significant portions of their habitat unexamined. However, recent surveys have expanded our knowledge, now covering preliminary information for 80 per cent of their range.

India saves Iran vessels...

From Page 1

Giving details about the latest action involving the Iranian vessel, Navy officials said INS Sumitra deployed for anti-piracy and maritime security operations in the east of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, responding immediately to the distress call by vessel Al Naemi.

In yet another successful anti-piracy operation off the East Coast of Somalia, INS Sumitra rescued the fishing vessel and its 19 crew members from 11 Somali pirates on Monday, Navy spokesperson Commander Vivek Madhwal said.

“INS Sumitra, over the course of less than 36 hours, through swift, persistent, and relentless efforts, has rescued two hijacked fishing vessels along with 36 crew (17 Iranian and 19 Pakistani) in the Southern Arabian Sea approximately 850 nautical miles West of Kochi,” Madhwal said.

He said the Indian Navy has once again

proved its commitment in the region to act against all maritime threats to ensure the safety of all mariners and vessels at sea.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Tuesday said India's greater capability, the country's current interests, and reputation today justify that it actually helps in difficult situations, in reference to the Indian Navy's deployment of warships in the Red Sea region to deal with attacks on merchant navy vessels.

The Indian Navy has deployed 10 of its ships in the region, Jaishankar said, responding to a question during an interaction with students at the Indian Institute of Management Mumbai.

“India's greater capability, our own interest, and our reputation today warrant that we actually help out in difficult situations,” he said. Jaishankar said there is a problem of piracy as well as drone attacks on merchant navy ships in the Red Sea region.

President for...

From Page 1

“It is unfortunate that a Chief Minister has to sit on a dharna to demand timely allocation of Central dues to the state,” he said.

Samajwadi Party leader S T Hassan demanded steps to strengthen the Places of Worship Act that freezes the status of religious places of worship as they existed on August 15, 1947, and

prohibits their conversion while ensuring the maintenance of their religious character.

Hassan's demand came in the wake of demands to hand over the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi to the Hindu community.

Emerging from the customary all-party meeting, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Joshi described the interaction as “very cordial” and said the Government was ready to discuss every

issue during the brief session.

Joshi said the Government did not have any legislative agenda for the Budget Session and its thrust would be on the President's Address, debate on the Motion of Thanks, presentation of the Interim Budget, and the budget for Jammu and Kashmir.

“They have given suggestions, but since this is the last session of the present Lok Sabha, we have said we

will give them an opportunity in the next session,” Joshi said.

NCP president Sharad Pawar, JD(U)'s Ram Nath Thakur, and TDP's Jayadev Galla were among the leaders present at the meeting at the Parliament House complex.

Congress Deputy Leader in the Rajya Sabha Pramod Tiwari, who represented the Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge, said he raised the

issue of the “violent attack” on the Bharat Jodo Yatra led by Rahul Gandhi in Assam and the State Government's curbs on it.

An “unwritten dictatorship” prevails in the country, he said, and accused the Central Government of misusing probe agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate to target opposition leaders such as Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren and

RJD supremo Lalu Prasad.

Tiwari said he raised these issues after consulting Opposition parties.

It is customary practice ahead of every session to convene a meeting where leaders of different parties highlight the issues they want to raise in Parliament, and the Government offers them a glimpse into its agenda and seeks their cooperation.”

Meanwhile, fourteen opposition MPs, who were

suspended during the last Session and their case referred to privilege committees, will return to attend Parliament's Budget session, with Joshi saying the Chairs in the two Houses have agreed to the Government's request to this effect.

While a total of 146 opposition MPs, 100 in Lok Sabha and the rest in Rajya Sabha, were suspended for bringing placards into the chambers and frequently

disrupting parliamentary proceedings, the transgressions by these 14 were considered more serious.

He, however, asserted that leaders of different parties who attended an all-party meeting ahead of the session were told that they should follow the decision that MPs should not bring any placards or similar materials inside chambers during the session or else the Chairs will be forced to take action.

POLITICAL TURMOIL...

From Page 1

The phones of several people part of his staff are switched off. His driver has also been questioned, but to no avail.

The agency seized Rs 36 lakh in cash and a Haryana registered BMW car under a name that the ED considers as ‘benami,’ and some ‘incriminating’ documents after it searched his house at 5/1 Shanti Niketan building in South Delhi on Monday and camped there for almost 13 hours to question him in a money-laundering case linked to an alleged land deal case of Jharkhand, but he was not found at his Delhi homes or at Jharkhand Bhavan in Delhi. Sources said the ED has informed state authorities and central security forces about the composition of its team that will move from its zonal office on Airport Road in Ranchi to Soren's camp office at his residence on January 31 before 1 pm, the sources said.

The questioning will

continue from where it ended on January 20. About 16-17 questions were put across to Soren, and his statement was recorded, in a written and audio-video format, under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), the sources said. The ED investigators had spent about seven hours at the CM residence that day.” Soren, having reached Ranchi on Tuesday, has informed the ED that he is ready to depose before them on Wednesday at his residence in the state capital around 1 pm. While expressing his readiness to cooperate, Soren asserted that the timing of the inquiry appears to be politically motivated, intending to disrupt the functioning of his Government. Soren's letter to the ED's Ranchi office stated, “You are well aware that the Budget Session of the Legislative Assembly will be held between February 2 and 29, 2024, and the undersigned will be preoccupied with preparations for the same apart from other prior scheduled official engagements.”

Soren reached his official residence here past midnight,

the source said. In photographs and videos shared by the CMO on X, a large number of MLAs and Ministers were seen greeting Soren before taking part in the meeting. The CM's wife was also present in the meeting. Amid the development, the BJP started claiming that the Chief Minister was ‘on the run.’ State BJP chief Babulal Marandi also put out an advertisement, seeking information about Soren and announcing a cash prize of Rs 11,000 for credible information.

The ED has so far arrested 14 people in the case, including 2011-batch IAS officer Chhavi Ranjan, who served as the director of the state's Social Welfare Department and deputy commissioner of Ranchi. An employee of the Jharkhand land revenue department, Bhanu Prasad Prasad, was also arrested by the agency in the case. The ED investigation pertains to ‘huge amounts of proceeds of crime generated by manipulation of official records by showing dummy sellers and purchasers in the guise of forged/bogus documents to acquire huge parcels of land having value in crores.

Bharat pays...

From Page 1

Tolstoy Farm is situated in the southwestern corner of the Johannesburg municipal area, approximately 35 km from Johannesburg.

The name is derived as Gandhi was inspired by the writings of Russian Leo Tolstoy, who advocated non-violence as an appropriate response to aggression and foregrounded the need for equitable treatment of the poor and working class. Thus the farm was named Tolstoy Farm due to Gandhi and Kallenbach's deep admiration for Count Leo Tolstoy.

As CG Johannesburg, she also successfully handled the Vande Bharat flights and helped evacuate stranded Indians in South Africa during the Covid lockdown.

Ranjan used her Covid pandemic lockdown period to engage with the members of Mahatma Gandhi Remembrance Organisation (MGRO) in SA and worked for redeveloping and reliving the places associated with the journey of making of the Mahatma.

Severe cold wave grips north

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

A bitter cold, brought on by a sharp dip in the minimum temperature across north India, compounded the woes of commuters already affected by poor visibility. The bone-chilling cold disrupted daily life across States. The 40-day harsh winter period, known as ‘Chilla-i-Kalan,’ ended on Tuesday with no snowfall in the plains of Kashmir and below-normal precipitation in the higher reaches of the valley. While there was light to moderate snowfall in the higher reaches at the fag-end of the 40-day period, most of the Chilla-i-Kalan, when the chances of snowfall are maximum and most frequent, remained dry. The valley witnessed a prolonged dry spell this winter, with no snowfall in the plains. During the 40-day harsh winter period, a cold wave sweeps the region, and temperatures drop considerably, leading to the freezing of water bodies and water in supply pipes. The cold conditions continue in even after the culmination of ‘Chilla-i-Kalan’ with a 20-day ‘Chilla-i-Khur’ (small cold) and a 10-day ‘Chilla-i-Bachha’ (baby cold).

On the other hand, a day after bright sunshine, dense fog shrouded Delhi and its adjacent areas on Tuesday amid the prevailing cold conditions as the minimum temperature was recorded at 8.7 degrees Celsius while the maximum temperature settled at 21.4 degrees Celsius. Jafarpur weather station recorded the maximum temperature at 13.4 degrees Celsius, the lowest in the city. At 5:30 am, visibility plummeted to a mere 50 meters, leading to cancellations of at least 14 flights from Delhi airport, officials said. The inclement weather resulted in the delay of 82 flights and the cancellation of five flights at arrivals, officials said. The departures were also significantly affected, with 222 flights getting delayed and nine being cancelled, noted Flightradar24. Owing to the dense layers of fog and the resulting low visibility, both flight and train operations have been affected. In a statement on X, Delhi Airport said, “While landings and take-offs continue at Delhi Airport, flights that are not CAT III compliant may get affected. Passengers are requested to contact the airline concerned for

updated information. Any inconvenience caused is deeply regretted.” Notably, the CAT III instrument is an anti-fog landing system that helps planes land in low-visibility conditions, such as dense fog, snow, and rain. It allows for landing with a minimum visibility of up to 50 meters.” Delhi's Palam and Safdarjung areas recorded visibility at just 50 metres Janpath Road, Anand Vihar, Ridge, Mehrauli, Aruna Asaf Ali Marg, and Nirankari Colony were covered under a thick blanket of fog this morning. The Delhi airport also issued an advisory for passengers as several domestic and international flights were delayed owing to the fog conditions. Delhi got no sunlight as a thick and dreary fog, coupled with shivering winds, with a light drizzle adding to the chill on Tuesday. Across the national capital, people on the streets were pictured huddling around bonfires while commuters struggled in the face of the biting chill and poor visibility. The minimum temperature in Lodhi Road was recorded at 8.4 degree Celsius, Ridge at 8.8 degree Celsius.

BJP thrashes AAP, Congress in Mayor Polls

From Page 1

The BJP has 14 Councillors in the 35-member Chandigarh Municipal Corporation. The AAP has 13 Councillors and the Congress seven.

The Shiromani Akali Dal has one Councillor. After the loss, the AAP and the Congress hit out at the BJP

alleging “shameless capture” of the democratic system in the country and termed it black day for democracy while the BJP rubbished the allegations. The AAP and the Congress accused presiding officer Anil Masih of making some marks on the ballots during the counting, rendering them invalid. They argued that the “invalid” ballots tilted the balance in the BJP candidate's favour.

Congratulating his party unit for the victory, BJP chief JP Nadda said the defeat of the INDIA Bloc candidate in the Chandigarh mayoral polls has shown that neither their arithmetic is working nor

their chemistry.

Commenting on the development, Nadda wrote on X, “Congratulations to the Chandigarh BJP unit for winning the Mayor election.” Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, the Union Territories have witnessed “record development”, the BJP chief said.

“That the INDI Alliance fought their first electoral battle and still lost to BJP shows that neither their arithmetic is working nor their chemistry,” Nadda said taking a dig at the opposition unity.

While Kejriwal alleged the BJP indulged in “hooliganism” during the Chandigarh

Mayoral polls, and called the series of events during the election a “black day for democracy”.

Addressing a Press conference here, the AAP national convener said the entire country saw what happened in the Chandigarh Mayoral polls.

“It is a black day for democracy. Everyone saw how they stole votes and forcibly made their candidate win. The issue is not who becomes Mayor but the country should not lose and the democracy should not lose. Mayors come and go, parties come and go,” he said.

“The AAP-Congress alliance had a clear majority

and it was a straight election. Eight votes or 25 per cent of the total votes were declared invalid. What kind of election was this? The Mayoral poll result shows there is something wrong and at a large scale, they can go to any extent in national polls,” he alleged. Kejriwal said the BJP-led Centre is “resorting” to extreme actions to target opposition leaders, breaking parties and toppling Governments.

“Brazen, shameless capture of the democratic system. Declaring Opposition votes invalid to win the Mayor Election in Chandigarh shows that it is second nature for the

BJP to override the democratic mandate,” AICC general secretary K C Venugopal said in a post on X.

“First they abruptly postponed the elections, and then devised a way to capture it. This is a warning for all those who are deluded into thinking that the Modi-led BJP will allow democracy to function if they win in 2024,” he said.

The polls, being held following the directions of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, assumes significance with Opposition INDIA Bloc members Congress and AAP joining hands to contest the elections. Tight security arrangements are in place for

the Mayoral polls. Around 700 police personnel, along with those from paramilitary forces, have been deployed for maintaining law and order during the election at the municipal corporation building, officials said.

In its January 24 order, the High Court directed the Chandigarh administration to hold the Mayoral polls at 10 am on January 30. It also quashed the administration's January 18 order postponing the elections while holding it “unreasonable, unjustified and arbitrary”.

The High Court had also directed that the Councillors who come to cast their votes

shall not be accompanied by any supporters or security personnel belonging to any other State. The Chandigarh Police will ensure security to the Councillors, the court had said.

Elections to the three posts are held every year during the House's five-year term. The Congress had abstained from voting in 2022 and 2023, leading to the BJP's victory in the polls. The election of the Mayor is done through secret ballots.

For this year's elections — the third for this term — the Mayor's seat has been reserved for the Scheduled Caste category.

Imran, Qureshi sentenced to 10-year prison term

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan was sentenced to 10 years in prison by a special court on Tuesday for leaking state secrets, in a major blow to his bid to return to power in the February 8 general elections.

The decision to sentence Khan and ex-foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was announced by special court Judge Abul Hasnat Zulqarnain during the hearing of the case held at the special court in Adiala Jail at Rawalpindi established under the stringent Official Secrets Act.The 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician is already serving a three-year jail term after being convicted of corruption.

Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has faced numerous troubles starting with the denial of its election symbol, the cricket bat, to the rejection of nomination papers of Khan, Qureshi, 67, and a number of other party leaders. The controversy first emerged on March 27, 2022, when Khan — less than a month before his ouster in April



Gauhar Bano Qureshi, left, daughter, and Mehriene Qureshi, wife of Shah Mahmood Qureshi, a deputy leader of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan's 'Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf' party, speak with media following a special court decision, outside the Adiyala prison, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan on Tuesday. A Pakistani court on Tuesday sentenced former Prime Minister Khan and one of his party deputy Qureshi to 10 years in prison each, after finding them guilty of revealing official secrets. **AP/PTI**

2022 — while addressing a public rally waved a letter before the crowd, claiming that it was a cipher from a foreign nation that had conspired with his political rivals to have his government overthrown.

Khan did not reveal the contents of the letter nor did he mention the name of the nation it came from. But a few days later, he accused the US of conspiring against him and alleged that Assistant Secretary of State for

South and Central Asia Affairs Donald Lu had sought his removal. The cipher was about former Pakistan ambassador to the US Asad Majeed's meeting with Lu. The case was filed against Khan and Qureshi on August 15 last year by the Federal Investigation Agency, which accused both of violating the secrecy laws while handling the cable sent by the Pakistan embassy in Washington in March 2022.

The verdict comes nine days before the February 8 general elections, which the PTI is contesting amid a state crackdown and without an electoral symbol.

Both Imran and Qureshi have been in jail in the run-up to the elections. While Imran's candidature was rejected, Qureshi was cleared to run for an NA seat from Thar. But today's conviction means that both of them have been disqualified from contesting elections for the next five years, the Dawn newspaper reported.

Both Khan and Qureshi had pleaded not guilty to their involvement in the offence related to the alleged misuse of

diplomatic cable for political purposes.

The PTI leaders confirmed the development by saying that it was a 'sham case with no access to media or public.'

"Legal team will challenge the decision in a higher court and hopefully will get this sentence suspended, given the poor proceedings of a case when Islamabad High Court had annulled proceedings twice, ordered access to media and public but on the contrary, access of legal team was denied, and a decision reached in a haste," the party said in WhatsApp message. "God willing kaptaan and vice kaptaan will be back soon, and this sentence will be (thrown) in the dustbin in the appeal stage," the party said. This is Imran's second conviction as he was also convicted in the Toshakhana corruption case on August 5, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. It was Qureshi's first conviction.The Islamabad High Court had suspended his sentence. However, a division bench had later rejected Imran's petition seeking the suspension of the conviction.

At today's hearing held in the Adiala Jail, Khan and Qureshi were given a questionnaire under Section 342 (power to examine the accused) of the Code of Criminal Procedure.

After Imran recorded his statement, the court asked him about the whereabouts of the cipher (diplomatic cable), to which the former prime minister replied: "I have said the same in my statement that I do not know. The cipher was in my office." The judge then sentenced the two leaders to 10 years in jail in the case. After announcing the verdict, the judge stepped out of the courtroom, at which Qureshi protested that his statement was not recorded. PTI leader Gohar Khan said that the special court judge had announced the verdict in haste, adding that proceedings were not being conducted in accordance with the law and the Constitution. "He asked questions himself and the way our witness was cross-examined, you cannot find any such examples in history," he said while speaking to the media outside the Islamabad High Court.

Northern Ireland political party agrees to end 2-year boycott

AP ■ LONDON

Northern Ireland's largest British unionist party has agreed to end a boycott that left the region's people without a power-sharing administration for two years and rattled the foundations of the 25-year-old peace. The breakthrough could see the shuttered Belfast government restored within days. After a marathon late-night meeting, Democratic Unionist Party leader Jeffrey Donaldson said Tuesday that the party's executive had backed proposals to return to the government. He said agreements reached with the UK government in London "provide a basis for our party to nominate members to the Northern Ireland Executive, thus seeing the restoration of the locally elected institutions".

The breakthrough after months of inconclusive negotiations came after the UK government last week gave Northern Ireland politicians until Feb 8 to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly and the local government or face new elections. "All the conditions are in place for the Assembly to return," Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris said. He said he would publish details of the UK government's new proposals on Wednesday, after briefing all of Northern Ireland's main political parties.

The DUP walked out in February 2022 in a dispute over post-Brexit trade rules. Ever since, it has refused to return to the government with the Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein. Under power-sharing rules established as part of Northern Ireland's peace process, the administration must include both British unionists and Irish nationalists.

The walkout left Northern Ireland's 1.9 million people without a functioning administration to make key decisions as the cost of living soared and backlogs strained the creaking public health system. Amid mounting public frustration, teachers, nurses and other pub-

lic sector workers staged a 24-hour strike this month calling on politicians to return to the government and give them a long-delayed pay raise. The British government has agreed to give Northern Ireland more than 3 billion pounds (\$3.8 billion) for its public services, but only if the executive in Belfast gets back up and running.

The political impasse in Northern Ireland stems from the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union and its borderless trading bloc after decades of membership. The DUP quit the government in opposition to new trade rules put in place after the UK left the EU in 2020 that imposed customs checks and other hurdles on goods moving to Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK.

The checks were established to maintain an open border between the north and its EU neighbour, the Republic of Ireland — a key pillar of the peace process that ended decades of violence in Northern Ireland. The DUP, though, says the new east-west customs border undermines Northern Ireland's place in the UK.

In February 2023, the UK and the EU agreed on a deal to ease customs checks and other hurdles for goods moving to Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK. But it was not enough for the DUP, which continued its government boycott. Donaldson said further measures agreed by the British government will "remove checks for goods moving within the UK and remaining in Northern Ireland and will end Northern Ireland automatically following future EU laws".

The DUP's decision faces opposition from some hard-line unionists, who fiercely guard Northern Ireland's place in the UK and say even light-touch post-Brexit checks create a de facto internal trade barrier. Dozens of protesters gathered outside the DUP meeting venue outside Belfast late Monday, waving placards saying, "Stop DUP sellout".

Philippines, Vietnam agree to cooperate on disputed SCS

Hanoi (Vietnam): The Philippines and Vietnam signed an agreement Tuesday on preventing and managing incidents in the disputed South China Sea during Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.'s visit to Hanoi. Several countries, including the Philippines and Vietnam, are locked in maritime disputes with China over its claims of sovereignty over virtually the entire South China Sea, one of the world's most crucial waterways for shipping, and high-seas face offs between Chinese and Philippine ships have intensified over the past year in the contested waters, fuelling fears of a wider conflict.

The Philippines and Vietnam agreed Tuesday to increase coordination on maritime issues and work to promote trust and confidence, the Philippine government said in a statement. They didn't release

details about what actions they would take under the agreement. "Vietnam remains the sole strategic partner of the Philippines in the ASEAN region," Marcos said during a meeting with his Vietnamese counterpart, Vo Van Thuong, referring to the regional grouping of Southeast Asian nations.

He added that while maritime cooperation was the "foundation" for this partnership, relations between the two nations had expanded. The two countries also signed a deal on Tuesday for Vietnam to supply the Philippines with 1.5 million to 2 million metric tons (1.6 to 2.2 million US tons) of rice each year at affordable prices.

Vietnamese rice accounts for 85 per cent of imported rice in the Philippines and the two countries agreed to create a framework for ensuring stable supplies. **AP**

Israeli undercover forces kill 3 militants

AP ■ JENIN

Israeli forces disguised as civilian women and medical workers stormed a hospital on Tuesday in the occupied West Bank, killing three Palestinian militants in a dramatic raid that underscored how deadly violence has spilled into the territory from the war in Gaza. The Palestinian Health Ministry said Israeli forces opened fire inside the wards of the Ibn Sina Hospital in the town of Jenin. The ministry condemned the raid and called on the international community to pressure Israel's military to halt such operations in hospitals. A hospital spokesperson said there was no exchange of fire, indicating that it was a targeted killing. The military said the militants were using the hospital as a hideout, without providing evidence. It alleged that one of those targeted in the raid had transferred weapons and ammunition to others for a planned attack, purportedly inspired by the Hamas assault on southern Israel on October 7 that triggered the



Smoke rises following an Israeli bombardment in the Gaza Strip, as seen from southern Israel on Tuesday. **AP/PTI**

war in Gaza.

Footage said to be security camera video from the hospital that circulated on social media showed about a dozen undercover forces, most of them armed, dressed as women with Muslim headscarves or hospital staff in scrubs or white doctor's

coats. One in a surgical mask carried a rifle in one arm and a folded wheelchair in the other. The forces were seen patting down one man who knelted against a wall, his arms raised. The Associated Press has not independently verified the footage, but it is in line with its

reporting. Meanwhile, fighting continued in the Gaza Strip, even as talks inched forward on a cease-fire to pause the war, which began when hundreds of Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel, killing about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting about 250 others.

In response, Israel launched a blistering air, sea and ground offensive that killed more than 26,700 people in Gaza, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory. The ministry count does not distinguish between fighters and noncombatants, but it says about two-thirds of the dead are women and minors. The conflict has also levelled vast swaths of the tiny coastal enclave, displaced 85 per cent of its population, and pushed a quarter of residents to starvation. That humanitarian crisis may soon be exacerbated, the UN has warned, after several countries froze funding to the main aid provider to Palestinians in Gaza following Israeli claims that a dozen of its workers participated in the October 7 assault.

US, Chinese officials hold meeting in Bangkok: WH

Washington (PTI): US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi held more than 12 hours of meetings in Bangkok, the White House said Monday. "Over the weekend, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan held more than 12 hours of meetings in Bangkok with his counterpart from the People's Republic of China, Director Wang Yi," John Kirby, NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the White House told reporters at a news conference here.

"Sullivan and Director Wang took stock of progress on key issues following the meeting between President (Joe) Biden and (Chinese) President Xi (Jinping) back in November. Now, that includes discussing efforts to resume military-to-military communication, which has occurred; addressing artificial intelligence safety and risks; and advancing bilateral counter-narcotics cooperation," Kirby said.

In fact, the launch of a working group on counter-narcotics will begin Tuesday in Beijing. The US delegation will be led by Deputy Homeland Security Advisor Jen Daskal.

"The two sides also held constructive discussions on global and regional issues, including those related to Russia's war against Ukraine; the Middle East, of course; the DPRK; the South China Sea; and Burma. And they also discussed cross-strait issues," Kirby said.

At a separate news conference with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed that the United States and other allies engage with China in dialogue on issues of mutual concern, like climate change and arms control.

China protests deportations of its students

AP ■ BEIJING

The Chinese government has protested to the United States over the treatment of Chinese arriving to study in America, saying some have been interrogated for hours, had their electronic devices checked and in some cases were forcibly deported from the country. Xie Feng, the Chinese ambassador in Washington, said dozens of Chinese holding valid visas have been denied entry over the past few months when returning to school from overseas travel or visiting relatives in China, according to a post on the Chinese Embassy website.

"When they landed at the airport, what awaited them was an eight-hour-long interrogation by officers who prohibited them from contacting their parents, made groundless accusations against them and even forcibly repatriated them and banned their entry," he said on Sunday at an event at



the embassy on student exchanges. "This is absolutely unacceptable." The protest comes as the US and China try to boost student and other exchanges to shore up their relations, which have turned confrontational in recent years over trade, technology, human rights and, more fundamentally, the future direction of the world. Nearly 290,000 Chinese students are in the US, about one-third of the foreign students in the country, according to the embassy post. China has

more than 1.3 million students studying abroad, more than any other country, it said.

In a separate online statement, the Chinese Embassy said it had made "solemn representations" to the US government about the treatment of students arriving at Dulles airport in Washington, D.C. The statement reminded Chinese students to be cautious when entering through the airport.

It wasn't clear whether Xie's comments referenced cases only at Dulles or at other

entry points as well. China's state media have reported at least three cases since November at Dulles where Chinese students lost their valid student visas, received a five-year entry ban and were repatriated following long hours of interrogations.

They were asked if their studies were financed by the Chinese government, if they were members of the Chinese Communist Party or its youth arm, and if their research was linked to the Chinese government, the Chinese military or key state laboratories. The students were headed to the National Cancer Institute, Yale University and the University of Maryland respectively.

At least eight Chinese entering the US with valid documents were repatriated since November, according to state media reports. The US Department of Homeland Security and the American Embassy in Beijing did not respond to requests for comment.

Macron gets ceremonial welcome in Sweden

AP ■ STOCKHOLM

French President Emmanuel Macron was welcomed on Tuesday with pomp and ceremony at the start of a two-day state visit to Sweden during which he will meet Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and the Scandinavian country's monarch, King Carl XVI Gustaf.

Macron and his wife, Brigitte, were greeted by the king in the inner courtyard of the downtown Stockholm royal castle that is the official residence of the Swedish royals. There, Macron and Carl Gustaf reviewed members of the Grenadier Guards that had lined up.

Macron noted that it had been too long since a French president visited Sweden — the last time was in 2000, when Jacques Chirac traveled to the Scandinavian country. "My visit is therefore first and fore-

most to renew our friendship, our partnership in the European Union, and as Sweden prepares to join NATO, our alliance," Macron said. Later Tuesday, Macron is to discuss the future of European security at a military academy in Stockholm, together with Kristersson and the king. Russia's war on Ukraine and Sweden's NATO application are likely to be on the table.

After more than a year of delays, Turkey earlier this month completed its ratification of Sweden's bid to join NATO, meaning Hungary is now the last member of the military alliance not to have given its approval. All NATO countries must agree before a new member can join the alliance. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Sweden and neighbouring Finland abandoned their traditional positions of military nonalignment

to seek protection under NATO's security umbrella. Finland joined the alliance last year.

On Wednesday, Macron and his wife are to travel to Malmö, Sweden's third largest city, in southern Sweden, where they will visit a European multidisciplinary research facility under construction and visit a company to discuss green technologies. At home, Macron's government faces angry farmers who have camped out around Paris. They demand better pay, fewer constraints and lower costs. On Monday, they encircled Paris with traffic-snarling barricades, using hundreds of tractors and hay bales to block highways leading to the capital. The French president initially was to travel to Sweden in late October, but the visit was postponed due to the Gaza war that began with Hamas' attack in southern Israel on October 7.

Indian student who went missing at Purdue University confirmed dead

Washington (PTI): An Indian student pursuing a double major at the prestigious Purdue University in the US state of Indiana, who went missing on Sunday, has been confirmed dead, the university has said.

Tiptecanoe County Coroner's Office officials were called around 11:30 a.m. on Sunday to 500 Allison Road in West Lafayette for a possible dead body. Upon arrival, a "college-aged male" was found deceased outside Maurice J. Zucrow Laboratories on Purdue's campus. Neel Acharya went missing on Sunday. "It is with great sadness that I inform you that one of our students Neel Acharya has passed away. The leadership in the Department of Computer Science expresses our profound sorrow for his passing. I

am deeply saddened by his loss. My condolences go out to his friends family and all affected," Chris Clifton, interim head of the university's Computer Science Department, said in an email to the department on Monday.

Clifton said Neel was a driven individual and academically talented. He pursued a double major in computer science and data science and was a John Martinson Honors College student. "He aspired to pursue numerous academic achievements and shared profound connections with friends. He was very proud of and cared deeply for his brothers at Triangle Fraternity. Neel could be counted on to reach out to others and make them feel included. He was an achiever and an includer, with

his: most notable qualities being genuine kindness and unwavering compassion," Clifton said. Clifton told the local Purdue Exponent newspaper that he received an email from the Office of the Dean of Students confirming Acharya's death. "A deceased person was found that matched Neel's description and had Neel's ID on (him)," he said.

Goury Acharya, the mother of the dead student, in a post on X on Monday, said: "Our son Neel Acharya has been missing since yesterday January 28 (12:30 AM EST) He is studying at Purdue University in the US. He was last seen by the Uber driver who dropped him off at Purdue University. We are looking for any info on him. Please help us if you know anything."

'Universe chants Jai Shree Ram' aerial banner enthrals Indian-Americans

Houston (PTI): "Universe Chants Jai Shree Ram" aerial banner across the US city of Houston enthralled Indian Americans as the excitement of the inauguration of the Ram Mandir continues to thrill the community members days after the spectacular ceremony in Ayodhya. After recent freeze and rain, devotees dressed in ethnic wear, waving saffron flags and chanting "Jai Shree Ram", gathered at the Gufjat Samaj of Houston and other venues on Sunday to watch the spectacle.

The pilot of the aircraft on which the banner was flown was also greeted by resounding chants of "Jai Shri Ram". The organisers spread the word about the first-of-its-kind aerial banner crossing across Houston on Sunday between 1-3 p.m. through a flier "Embracing the

Skies, the Universe Chants Jai Shri Ram". The devotees stayed glued to the sky across the city as the flier read: "Keep an eye on the sky and chant Jai Shri Ram when you see the plane in your area with the above message." Umang Mehta, the organiser of the aerial show, told PTI: "The project was designed to celebrate the opening of Shri Ram Temple after 500 years of long struggle of sacrifice and determination and send a refreshing message that resonated with members of the Hindu community in a captivating and unforgettable way." Besides being the first word heard from the moon, Houston earned another feather in the cap, with this aerial banner. It was an effective way to share our joy with the world, as this is probably the first time in history that an aerial banner

hailing Shri Ram was flown anywhere in the world," Dr Kusum Vyas, another organiser helping the project, said.

The aerial banner project was conceived by Umang Mehta and assisted by Dr. Kusum Vyas, Saurabh Shandilya, Achalesh Amar, and Anant Srivastava with support from the International Hindi Association (IHA). "The clear skies were lit up with Shri Ram chants, a proud divine moment, which amalgamated culture and Indian pride, on the occasion of Pran Pratishtha in Ayodhya," said Swapan Dhairyan, trustee IHA.

Capturing rare moments of the view, Saurabh Shandilya said: "The city experienced an enchanting view as the banner adorned the skies, contributing a cultural vibrancy to our diverse atmosphere."

Indian-origin couple convicted in UK

London (PTI): An Indian-origin couple in the UK, whose extradition was sought by India, has been convicted of exporting more than half a tonne of cocaine to Australia after an investigation found that they were behind a front company that had sent the drugs by plane under a cover load of metal toolboxes.

Arti Dhir, 59, and Kavaljitsinh Rajpada, 35, from Hanwell in Ealing were identified by the National Crime Agency (NCA) investigators after Australian Border Force intercepted the cocaine worth 57 million pounds upon its arrival in Sydney in May 2021, the agency said in a statement on Monday.

India seeks investments from Switzerland

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has sought investment commitments from Switzerland under the proposed free trade agreement with the four-nation EFTA bloc, a top government official said on Tuesday.

The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) members are Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

The official also said negotiations for the pact are at an advanced stage and both sides are trying to conclude it fast.

The investment commitment would help India balance Switzerland's decision to remove customs duties on most of its goods.

When asked if this move would have an implication on the agreement, the official said that it can be bargained against many other things.

"We have told them that we will be requiring commitments on investments so that this zero duty on goods can balance more investments and more manufacturing in



the country," the official told PTI.

The Indian negotiators are also trying to see how the Swiss companies can come and manufacture in India so that it gives a boost to Make in India programme and also helps in raising the domestic manufacturing power.

When asked about the demand for duty cut in gold by some EFTA members, the official said "that is part of it, but our major focus is on non-

gold issues."

Switzerland is the largest source of gold imports, with about 41 per cent share during April-October this fiscal, followed by the UAE (about 13 per cent) and South Africa (about 10 per cent). The precious metal accounts for over 5 per cent of the country's total imports.

Switzerland has large historical accumulations of gold and it primarily refines imported gold.

In 2022-23, India's imports from Switzerland stood at USD 15.79 billion, in stark contrast to its exports of USD 1.34 billion, leading to a substantial trade deficit of USD 14.45 billion. India received about USD 10 billion foreign direct investments from Switzerland during April 2020 and September 2023.

India and EFTA have been negotiating the pact, officially dubbed as Trade and Economic Partnership

Agreement (TEPA), since January 2008 to boost economic ties.

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal recently held a meeting with Swiss Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin in Mumbai.

Parmelin, in a social media post on X, had said that officials are working round the clock to settle last details so that it can be signed as soon as possible.

"At the last-minute invitation of my Indian counterpart @PiyushGoyal, I travelled directly from the WEF in Davos to Mumbai/India. After 16 years of negotiations, we found balanced solutions to the main open issues of the EFTA-India trade agreement," Parmelin had said. The last round of talks between the countries concluded on January 13 here.

Negotiations are held on various chapters, including trade in goods, rules of origin, intellectual property rights (IPRs), trade in services, investment promotion and cooperation, trade and sustainable development, and trade facilitation.

EFTA has 29 free trade agreements (FTAs) with 40 partner countries, including Canada, Chile, China, Mexico, and Korea.

Under free trade pacts, two trading partners significantly reduce or eliminate customs duties on the maximum number of goods traded between them, besides easing norms to promote trade in services and investments.

EFTA countries are not part of the European Union (EU). It is an inter-governmental organisation for the promotion and intensification of free trade.

It was founded as an alternative for states that did not wish to join the European community.

India's exports to EFTA countries during 2022-23 stood at USD 1.92 billion against USD 1.74 billion in 2021-22.

Imports aggregated at USD 16.74 billion during the last fiscal compared to USD 25.5 billion in 2021-22.

The trade gap is in favour of the EFTA group, according to the data of the commerce ministry.

Sebi bans Growpital

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Cracking the whip on unauthorised investment schemes by an agricultural investment platform, Sebi has barred Farm Tech Silo LLP, also known as Growpital, related entities and their directors from collecting money from investors and prohibited them from the securities market till further directions.

Also, they have been directed to "cease and desist" from floating any collective investment scheme (CIS) directly or indirectly in any manner. Additionally, they have been stopped from collecting money from partners or investors through existing schemes.

These directions will be in force until further orders, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said in an interim order passed on Monday.

In its probe, the regulator found that Growpital is a platform that is offering various investment plans to the public in the agricultural sector. It also claimed to offer fixed tax-free profits in the range of 11 to 14 per cent through investments in the agriculture sector.

When an investor invests through the Growpital platform, the investor becomes a partner in a Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) and the amount invested is treated as capital contribution to the



LLP. It was revealed that multiple LLPs have been incorporated for this purpose, prefixed with the name of ZF Project — ZF Project 1 LLP, ZF Project 2 LLP and ZF Project 3 LLP.

As per the bank statement of Growpital, over Rs 184 crore has been mobilised from various sources as of December 31, 2023, Sebi found.

"The activities of Growpital...Show that prima facie a CIS is being operated. However, no material is available on record to indicate that any of the entities involved in the instant arrangement has formed a Collective Investment Management Company that has obtained a certificate under CIS Regulation," Sebi said.

The regulator said the amount of money, prima facie, observed to have been mobilised in the Growpital escrow account of over Rs 184 crore indicates the magnitude of the prospective threat of investors getting lured to the unregistered activities being carried out by the entities.

Glenmark, Ichnos Sciences ink pact for new drug discovery

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Glenmark Pharmaceuticals Ltd and Ichnos Sciences Inc announced an alliance to accelerate new drug discovery in cancer treatment.

The alliance, 'Ichnos Glenmark Innovation (IGI)' combines Glenmark's research and development proficiencies in small molecules with those of Ichnos in novel biologics to continue developing cutting-edge therapy solutions that treat hematological malignancies and solid tumors, the two companies said in a joint statement.

It features a robust pipeline of three innovative oncology molecules targeting multiple myeloma, acute myeloid leukemia and solid tumors currently undergoing clinical trials.

"Two of these molecules have received orphan drug designation from the USFDA. Additionally, IGI has two autoimmune disease assets that have been out-licensed to leading companies," the statement said. Glenmark Pharmaceuticals Chairman and Managing Director Glenn Saldanha said, "...Through IGI, we are confident of getting closer to our quest to develop a novel



cancer drug for the world. Additionally, this will also enhance shareholder value by optimising the cost of development."

Ichnos Glenmark Innovation President and CEO Cyril Konto said, "Ichnos Glenmark Innovation is a collaborative venture backed by a strong, collective pipeline of novel multi specifics and small molecules."

The alliance seeks to accelerate drug development by combining technologies, expertise, and forces while leveraging Glenmark's footprint in India, he said, adding, "We look forward to joining hands with other like-minded entities, including biotech companies and academia."

IGI will leverage the capabilities of its three global centres of innovation with over 150 scientists. These centres comprise Ichnos' headquarters in New York, which is focused on clinical development; the biologics research centre in Lausanne, Switzerland, and Glenmark's small molecule research centre at Mahape in Mumbai, the statement said.

ZEE-Sony merger: NCLT issues notice to Sony

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) on Tuesday accepted a petition by a Zee Entertainment shareholder seeking the merger of its Indian entity with Sony, which was called off last week despite regulatory approvals.

The Mumbai-bench of

NCLT issued a notice on a petition moved by Mad Men Film Ventures, a shareholder of Zee Entertainment Enterprises (ZEEL), directing Sony Pictures Network India, now known as Culver Max, to file a reply within three weeks.

Mad Men Film Ventures on Tuesday filed the petition requesting both ZEEL and

Sony to implement the merger as it was approved by the NCLT in August 2023.

The tribunal did not agree to the arguments made by the counsel stating that the approval by NCLT was conditional and depended on various conditions, which may be fulfilled or waived off in writing. NCLT has kept the

next date of hearing on this matter on March 12.

Last week, the Sony Group Corp called off the merger with ZEEL following a stalemate over who will lead the merged entity.

This merger could have otherwise created a USD 10 billion media enterprise in the country.

Tata Motors becomes most valuable auto firm by mcap

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tata Motors on Tuesday became the country's most valuable auto company by market capitalisation, combining the company's valuation as well as the DVR shares, racing past Maruti Suzuki India.

Shares of Tata Motors climbed 2.19 per cent to settle at Rs 859.25 apiece on the BSE. During the day, it jumped 5.40 per cent to reach its 52-week high of Rs 886.30.

Tata Motors Ltd - DVR stock gained 1.63 per cent to Rs 572.65. However, shares of Maruti dipped 0.36 per cent to Rs 9,957.25. The combined market valuation of Tata Motors (Rs 2,85,515.64 crore) and Tata Motors Ltd - DVR (Rs 29,119.42 crore) stood at Rs 3,14,635.06 crore. This was Rs 1,576.56 crore more than Maruti's Rs 3,13,058.50 crore valuation. Tata Motors was the biggest gainer among the Sensex and Nifty firms.

DVR (Differential Voting Rights) shares are like ordinary equity shares but with differential voting rights. Companies issue DVRs for several reasons such as prevention of a hostile takeover and to bring in retail investors.



Sensex tanks over 1 per cent on selling in Reliance

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices declined on Tuesday, a day after recording sharp gains, with the BSE Sensex falling over 1 per cent due to selling in Reliance Industries, ITC and Bajaj Finance.

The 30-share BSE Sensex fell by 801.67 points or 1.11 per cent to settle at 71,139.90. During the day, it plummeted 865.85 points or 1.20 per cent to 71,075.72. The Nifty declined 215.50 points or 0.99 per cent to 21,522.10. Among the Sensex firms, Bajaj Finance fell by 5.03 per cent after its December quarter earnings failed to cheer investors. Titan, UltraTech Cement, Bajaj Finserv, Reliance Industries, ITC and NTPC were among the other major laggards.

Tata Motors, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever, Power Grid, Tech

Mahindra and Tata Consultancy Services were the gainers.

"Selling intensified towards the fag end as investors further slashed their positions in key stocks ahead of the Budget while weakness in several Asian indices also contributed to the overall fall.

"With just one day left for the Budget, investors want to play it safe although there would not be any big-bang announcement by the government in this budget. Focus would rather shift to US Fed policy but indications are that it may maintain the status quo on interest rates, which could unsettle investors further," said Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge declined 0.53 per cent while smallcap index climbed 0.18 per cent.

Consumer durables declined 2.40 per cent, capital goods dipped 1.24 per cent, power (1.12 per cent), FMCG (1 per cent), utilities (0.92 per cent) and industrials (0.77 per cent).

Realty emerged as the only gainer.

In Asian markets, Tokyo settled in the positive territory while Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower.

European markets were trading with gains. The US markets ended higher on Monday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.21 per cent to USD 82.57 a barrel on Tuesday.

The BSE benchmark jumped 1,240.90 points or 1.76 per cent to settle at 71,941.57 on Monday. The Nifty climbed 385 points or 1.80 per cent to 21,737.60. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 110.01 crore on Monday, according to exchange data.

Dr Reddy sees 11 per cent rise in Q3 profit

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Dr Reddy's Laboratories on Tuesday posted an 11 per cent increase in consolidated net profit at Rs 1,379 crore for the third quarter ended December 2023, driven by higher market share in existing products in North America and growth in Europe.

The Hyderabad-based drug major had reported a net profit of Rs 1,247 crore for the October-December quarter of the last fiscal. Consolidated revenue rose to Rs 7,215 crore in the third quarter of the current financial year as against Rs 6,770 crore in the year-ago period, according to a regulatory filing.



"We delivered another quarter of highest ever sales and robust financial performance aided by new products performance and base business market share gain in the US, new products launch momentum and strong performance in Europe," Dr Reddy's Co-Chairman and MD GV Prasad said.

The drug maker continues to strengthen its core businesses and invest in innovative products in strategic collaborations for novel molecules to meet unmet needs of patients, he added.

Dr Reddy's said its revenues in North America grew 9 per cent year-on-year to Rs 3,349 crore in the third quarter.

Lahoti appointed TRAI Chairman

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former Railway Board Chief Anil Kumar Lahoti has been appointed as the chairman of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). The top position at TRAI fell vacant after the tenure of former chairman PD Vaghela ended about four months back.

"The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has approved the appointment of Anil Kumar Lahoti, Former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Railway Board,



Department of Personnel and Training.

The industry meanwhile welcomed the appointment of the new TRAI Chief and expressed optimism that it would mark a period of growth and advancement of India's dynamic telecom sector.

"We are optimistic that the growth and advancement of India's dynamic telecom sector will find new impetus and gain profoundly from his rich experience and guidance," industry body COAI's Director General, SP Kochhar said.

Ministry of Railways ... As Chairman, TRAI for a period of three years from the date of assumption of charge of the post or until he attains the age of 65 years or until further orders, whichever is earlier," a notification by the

Ikea adds doorstep delivery facility in 62 new markets

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Leading furniture retailer Ikea has introduced doorstep delivery facility in 62 new markets in India, and the company expects online demand to go up in the coming years, the company's India CEO Susanne Pulverer said.

At present, Ikea India gets around 25 per cent of its sales through online channels. The company will soon launch its

Shop By Phone assistance service, she said.

This is part of the approach of the entire Ikea brand evolving towards an omnichannel approach globally, acknowledging the challenges of people having less time and the importance of convenience in their purchasing decisions, said Pulverer.

"It (online sales) is around 25 per cent of our total turnover. We believe there is

potential for further growth both in terms of market share and overall sales," Pulverer told PTI.

The 62 new markets are spread across Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, which would be served from its nearby stores.

The nature of Ikea business is such that customers seek touch-and-feel products, which necessitate physical meeting places and stores.

Digi Yatra to be introduced at 14 more airports

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government plans to roll out Digi Yatra at 14 more airports in the coming months and make the facility available for foreign citizens as well, according to officials.

Currently, Digi Yatra, which provides for contactless, seamless movement of passengers at various check points at airports based on Facial Recognition Technology (FRT), is available at 13 airports for domestic passengers.

Plans are afoot to introduce Digi Yatra at 14 airports, including Chennai, Bhubaneswar and Coimbatore, by March this year.

Other airports are Dabolim, Mopa Goa, Indore, Bagdogra, Chandigarh, Ranchi, Nagpur, Patna, Raipur, Srinagar and Vishakhapatnam, the officials said on Tuesday.

Further, they said that Digi Yatra will be implemented at 11 more airports in 2025.

Among other plans, the government intends to put in place e-passport based enrolment that will also allow foreign citizens to avail Digi Yatra facility, the officials said.

Citing available data, they also said there has been a significant growth in the total number of Digi Yatra app users during the period from December 2022 to November 2023. As per an analysis, the app has also helped in reducing the processing time taken for passengers at entry gates and boarding gates, the officials said. Digi Yatra was introduced in December 2022. At present, it is available at 13 airports — Delhi, Bengaluru, Varanasi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Vijayawada, Pune, Mumbai, Cochin, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Jaipur and Guwahati.

The data shared by a passenger for Digi Yatra is stored in an encrypted format. For availing the service, a passenger has to register his or her details on DigiYatra app using Aadhaar-based validation and a self image capture. In the next step, the boarding pass has to be scanned and the credentials are shared with the airport. At the airport e-gate, the passenger has to first scan the bar-coded boarding pass and the facial recognition system installed at the e-gate will validate the passenger's identity and travel document. Once this process is done, the passenger can enter the airport through the e-gate.

BUSINESS BRIEF

UK JOURNAL ACCEPTS GILOY USEFULNESS IN LIVER DISEASES
Hariidwar/National: The hepato protective (ability to keep the liver healthy) and other beneficial effects of Giloy (Tinospora cordifolia) have now been accepted by the United Kingdom as well and this has been published in the famous research journal 'Journal of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain' published by Oxford University Press. The research on Giloy has found that it is helpful in keeping the liver healthy as well as in preventing the degradation of body cells and providing protection to the liver. Giloy also increases the immunity of the body. Acharya Balkrishna said that Giloy can be used as a food supplement that protects the liver. He further informed that Giloy was traditionally used since ancient times for blood purification and increasing immunity.

HURT F1 DREAM ENDED SO QUICKLY: NYCK

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hurt that his dream of racing in Formula 1 ended "prematurely", Dutch racer Nyck de Vries is busy charting the next chapter of his life as the former champion returns to the Formula E series buzzing with positive energy.

The 28-year-old was axed by F1 team AlphaTauri after just 10 races as he failed to score points in his rookie F1 season last year.

"Of course it hurts in a way to end your dream so quickly and prematurely but I have been able to reflect on it well," De Vries told PTI.

De Vries had entered F1 on the back of championship-winning stints in F2 and

Formula E and a long-time F1 reserve role, which meant there was more pressure on him to perform compared to other rookies.

"There was always pressure and I don't think I was necessarily in an easy situation and it didn't quite work out for various reasons. But pressure is relative, everyone experiences it. I'm thankful for the opportunities."

"I see life as a journey, it was a chapter in my journey and now I continue my journey elsewhere. When a door closes it always opens a new one," he added.

After the F1 snub, the Dutch racer has returned to the familiar all-electric Formula E series, signing up with India's Mahindra Racing.

"The transition (from F1 to FE) happened really quick. Quite shortly when it happened I travelled to London for the final round of the championship last year to be back in the paddock, in the environment, to see if there was a spot available for me this season."

"Even though I took a bit of time out I also quickly focussed on building my program for this year. I'm very happy to be back in Formula E. I had a good break, good time off and now I'm full of positive energy," he added.

Though he won the 2021 Formula E world championship, De Vries still has a lot to catch up on as the series has moved on from the Gen 2 to Gen 3 cars.

"It was almost like 14-15



months ago that I last drove the Formula E car and that was a Gen 2, I had a couple of brief experiences in a Gen 3 car but a lot has developed since then," he said.

De Vries finished 15th in the season-opening Mexico City race and also in the Diriyah E-Prix. Given Mahindra's struggle with reliability and efficiency with the Gen3 car, he has realistic expectations from this season.

"It's about managing expectations. If people expect us to dominate this year they are dreaming. We collectively know where the team was at the end of last year."

"The hardware didn't really change, that doesn't mean we can't make a lot of progress and improvements but we have to

be realistic," he said.

"It's more about building process in the moment collectively and getting ready for building a solid structure for the near future when things do change and we start to fight in front," he added.

Much to the disappointment of the Indian fans, the second edition of Hyderabad E Prix was scheduled to be held on February 10 was cancelled by Formula E due to an alleged breach of contract by the new Telangana government.

"India is a big part of our (Mahindra) DNA. I would have been happy to meet our colleagues in India and hopefully make them proud in their home country. It wasn't meant to be this year but hopefully in the future we will get to do it."

Avani eyes one more shot

PTI ■ PATTAYA (THAILAND)

India's Avani Prashanth is looking forward to a packed calendar over the next few weeks as she criss-crosses across the continent in search of golf glory at one of the world's best amateur events.

The 17-year-old Bengaluru golfer, who started 2024 with two weeks in Australia while getting close to winning at one occasion, is now all set to tee off at the Women's Amateur Asia Pacific (WAAP) golf.

Avani will make her fourth appearance at this event which carries extra significance, since the winner gets to seal a berth in three of the five women's Majors. On her part, Avani feels this event owes her one good finish before she moves on in her career.

Avani was also thrilled for receiving a special invite to the Augusta National Women Amateur championships, which is held a week before the storied Masters at the Augusta National. Immediately after the 2024 WAAP, Avani will be off for the Kenya Ladies Open on the Ladies European Tour, wherein she finished in the top 10 last year.

The next on her schedule is another well-known amateur event, the Sage Valley Invitational. She started 2024 with a runner-up finish at the Australian Masters of Amateurs and missed a top 10 by a whisker at the Australian Amateur Championships.

The focus for Avani and her five teammates, who have been fielded by the Indian Golf Union, is the WAAP.

Her teammates are Vidhatri Urs, Mannat Brar, Keerthana Rajeev Nair, Saanvi Somu and



Heena Kang. They will tee off at the Siam Country Club.

The team is accompanied by former national champion Vandana Agarwal.

The top stars this week will include world No 4 Minsol Kim of Korea, Japan's Hinano Muguruma (22nd), Sayaka Teraoka (23rd), Mamika Shinchi (33rd), Rin Yoshida (38th) and defending champion from Thailand Eila Galitsky (40th). India's Avani is 42nd and Rianne Malixi from the Philippines is 43rd.

While this is the fourth appearance at WAAP for Avani, it is the second time for Vidhatri and Mannat. The other three, Keerthana Rajeev Nair, Saanvi Somu and Heena Kang are making their debut at WAAP.

Interestingly, Ceerat Kang's sister Heena played at the WAAP in 2022 at the same course. Vidhatri's cousin Pranavi Urs, now a pro on the LET, has also played at the

WAAP in the past.

Avani, coming off her nine-hole practice round just before the rains arrived, said, "Somehow I have not managed to finish better than T-16."

Avani won the 2023 Queen Sirikit Individuals besides picking a title on a women's pro event in Europe. She has multiple top 10s on Ladies European Tour events.

"Many of these girls I have been playing with over the years are here. We are all close to finishing with our amateur careers. It is great to be here once again," she said.

"I have known Eila (Galitsky) since we were about nine. We played together in US Kids Golf, then at various other events. Now we will be playing at Sage Valley and ANWA together. We have also roomed together, and stay in touch," Avani added.

"I also know others like Rianne (Malixi), Minsol and many others. So it is great to see

everyone here. It's a great event and I really want to do well, maybe win it once, before I turn pro," she said.

PRIZES AND FIELD: The prizes are considered as the very best in amateur golf for women. The winner gets starts at three major championships in 2024 — Women's Open, the Evian Championship and Chevron Championship.

In addition, the winner will get invitations to play in the 121st Women's Amateur Championship, Augusta National Women's Amateur Championship, the Hana Financial Group Championship and Women's Australian Open.

The field is made up of 90 players from 22 countries and only those in the World Amateur Golf Ranking (WAGR) list are eligible to play. The leading 50 players (plus ties) progress past the 36-hole cut and play the final two rounds.

Sneha, Hitaashee prepare for another battle in 3rd leg

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Sneha Singh and Hitaashee Bakshi, who had finished in the top two in both the two earlier legs in the ongoing Women's Pro Golf Tour season, will be back for another shot at the third event which begins at Tollygunge Club here Wednesday. Sneha and Hitaashee were tied for second when amateur Nishna Patel won the opening leg. In the second leg, Sneha edged out Hitaashee, who finished runner-up. Sneha, winner of the 2023 Hero Order of Merit, has taken the early lead once again, with Hitaashee chasing her.

It has been a good start for Hitaashee, who was injured last year. Besides finishing second in the opening two legs, she won the Thailand Tour's LPGA Qualifying Tour, granting her access to pro tourna-



ments in Thailand.

Amandeep Drall, Ridhima Dilawari and Seher Atwal will be among the other leading contenders in the third leg.

Some of the other leading stars of Hero WPGT are going to South Africa for the Sunshine Ladies Tour starting next month, including Vani Kapoor, Tvesa Malik and Neha Tripathi. Besides, a few others like Amandeep and Seher will also be joining them for some events.

An interesting feature of both the events held so far this season has been that at least the top three finishers have totalled under-par scores, underlining the tremendous improvement in the quality of women's golf in India.

A total of 29 girls will tee off in the third leg, and the field includes two amateurs — Anaahat Bindra and Sinjini Mukherjee.

India lose to Netherlands in quarterfinals

PTI ■ MUSCAT

Mohammed Raheel's hat-trick went in vain as India suffered a 4-7 defeat to the Netherlands in the quarterfinals of the FIH Hockey5s Men's World Cup here on Tuesday.

Apart from Raheel (1', 7', 25'), Mandeep Mor (11') scored for India. For the Netherlands, Sander de Wijn (4', 15'), and Alexander Schop (10', 26') scored a brace each, while Lucas Middendorp (12'), Jamie van Aart (13'), and Pepijn Reyenga (20') also found the net.

The match started on a promising for India as Raheel showcased his skills with a remarkable field goal in the very first minute, setting the tone for an intense competition.

However, the Netherlands swiftly responded to India's



early lead, with de Wijn (4') levelling the score. Undeterred by the quick equaliser, India intensified their offensive strate-

gies, leading to another goal by Raheel.

Despite the renewed lead, the Netherlands, demon-

ing resilience, managed to equalise once again, courtesy of a goal by Schop. The back-and-forth nature of the match continued, with Mandeep reclaiming the lead for India.

Nevertheless, the Netherlands countered with a rapid succession of goals, as Middendorp and van Aart skillfully found the back of the net, swinging the momentum in favour of the Netherlands.

Heading into half time, de Wijn delivered a crucial challenge goal, leaving India behind. The second half witnessed the Netherlands asserting their dominance, as Reyenga and Schop extended their lead.

Despite a valiant effort by Raheel, who scored again to complete his hat-trick, India fell short. India will next play against Kenya in the 5-8th place match later in the day.

Divya alleges sexism by spectators at Tata Steel Masters

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian chess player Divya Deshmukh has alleged that she endured sexist behaviour from spectators at the recently-concluded Tata Steel Masters in Wijk Aan Zee, Netherlands, saying they "focused on irrelevant things like her hair, clothes and accent" during the tournament.

The 18-year-old International Master from Nagpur, who won the Asian women's chess championship last year, shared a lengthy social media post calling out the misogyny that women players face routinely while elaborating on her unpleasant experience in Wijk Aan Zee.

"I have been wanting to address this for a while but was waiting for my tournament to be over. I got told and also myself noticed how women in

chess are often just taken for granted by spectators," Deshmukh said.

"Most recent example of this on a personal level would be in this tournament, I played a few games which I felt were quite good and I was proud of them. "I got told by people how the audience was not even bothered with the game but instead focused on every single possible thing in the world: my clothes, hair, accent and every other irrelevant thing," she wrote in an Instagram post on Sunday.

Deshmukh finished 12th in the Challengers section with a score of 4.5 at the Tata Steel Masters.

The teenager said while male players were getting their share of spotlight purely for their game, the women were judged for aspects which had nothing to do with their ability on the chess board.



"I was quite upset to hear this and I think is the sad truth that people when women play chess they often overlook how good they actually are, the games they play and their strength," she said.

"I was quite disappointed to see how everything was discussed about in my interviews (by the audience) except my games, very few people paid attention to it and it is quite a sad thing. "I felt it was unfair in a way

because if I go to any guy's interview there would be way less judgement on a personal level, actual compliments about the game and the player," she asserted. Despite the progress made in women's sports in terms of pay scale, female athletes are still subjected to sexist behaviour and are often asked about their outfits.

Deshmukh said women players are under-appreciated in general and often endure hatred.

"...Every irrelevant thing is focused on and hated on while guys would probably get away with the same things. I think women face this on a daily basis and I'm barely 18.

"I have faced so much judgement including hatred over the years for things that don't even matter. I think women should start getting equal respect," she added.

Bhutia demands resignation of AIFF president Chaubey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former captain Bhaichung Bhutia on Tuesday demanded the resignation of All India Football Federation (AIFF) president Kalyan Chaubey, holding him responsible for the "current mess" in the administrative side of the game in the country, following the dismissal of Shaji Prabhakaran as secretary general.

Bhutia attended Tuesday's executive committee meeting of the AIFF called here to discuss the dismissal of Prabhakaran on November 7. Prabhakaran was not initially invited for the meeting but joined it virtually.

"I told the executive committee members that Kalyan Chaubey and treasurer Kipa Ajay should also resign. Shaji Prabhakaran should not be made the only scapegoat. All

three of them are equally responsible for taking decisions without the approval of executive committee," Bhutia told PTI. "All three of them were taking the decisions and if Shaji has to be removed, the president and treasurer should also be removed," said the legendary striker.

"Indian football is in mess, there is politics in the sport, cutting out each other after little over one year of taking charge, it is not good. The national team has been left in the lurch during the Hangzhou Asian Games as well as in the Asian Cup where there was inadequate training time for the team."

Prabhakaran was removed as secretary general on November 7 for "breach of trust" but a single bench of the Delhi High Court had on December 8 ordered an inter-



im stay on his sacking.

In its latest order of January 19, the High Court pointed out that Prabhakaran was dismissed by the emergency committee of the AIFF whereas the federation's constitution provides that only the executive committee has the power to do that. Another source confirmed Bhutia's version and added that

Prabhakaran asked the executive committee members to explain what constituted the "breach of trust."

"He (Prabhakaran) asked the executive committee to explain what constituted breach of trust on the basis of which he was dismissed. He said he had not committed any financial irregularities or fraud. He

also said that there was no emergency committee constituted for the AIFF and how can there be a reference to the emergency committee for my dismissal," the source said.

"Prabhakaran also said that he would have, in any case, resigned because his relationship with the president was nearing breaking point."

AIFF vice president NA Haris then intervened and said that the matter is sub-judice.

Bhutia, who lost in the AIFF presidential poll in 2022, also said that he did not know what constituted the "breach of trust" which led to Prabhakaran's dismissal.

"I am an executive committee member but I don't know what was the breach of trust Shaji had committed. I am not told nor briefed about it."

Bhutia said that he proposed live streaming of the

AIFF annual general or executive committee meetings for the sake of transparency.

"Nowadays, even the Supreme Court and High Court case hearings are streamed live, so what is the problem in doing the same for AIFF AGM or executive committee meetings. So, I proposed live streaming of AIFF meetings."

Talking about the Indian team's group stage exit in the AFC Asian Cup in Doha, Bhutia said, "Asian Games and Asian Cup are the two most important tournaments for India and both were disasters, not due to players or coach but because of the AIFF top brass."

"In the Asian Games, the team played its first match just a few hours after landing in Hangzhou. In the Asian Cup, the team was not given adequate training time."



Mumbai Open Tennis Championship to be held from February 5-11

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Players from 31 countries will take part in the Mumbai Open Tennis Championship to be held here from February 5 to 11 following a gap of six years.

The tournament will be played at the newly-laid tennis courts at the Cricket Club of India (Brabourne Stadium), which is organising the event along with the Maharashtra State Lawn Tennis Association (MSLTA). The third edition of the Mumbai Open will feature three top 100 players in the singles and six top 100 players in the doubles event, which is a part of the WTA USD 125K series.

The qualifying matches will be played on February 3 and 4 whereas the main draw will start from February 5.

Kayla Day of the US, who won the 2016 US Open girls singles and currently world No 82, will lead the 32-player field, along with Japan's Nao Hibino, who is the winner of

three WTA Tour singles titles.

The former French Open semi-finalist Tamara Zidansek, ranked 97th, is the third player from top 100 in the singles.

Ankita Raina is the only Indian confirmed in the singles main draw.

India's top-ranked doubles player Prarthana Thombare and her Dutch partner Arianne Hartono have a direct entry into the doubles event.

The wild cards for the tournament are expected to be announced soon.

"The WTA Mumbai Open has attracted some big names and rising stars in the past, including two-time Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka, who won her first WTA USD125K title right here in Mumbai in 2017," said members of the organising committee Sanjay Khandare and Pravin Darade in a statement.

Sabalenka had won the first edition of Mumbai Open in 2017 while Thailand's Luksika Kumkhum won the next in 2018.

Rohit is past his prime: Boycott

India missed Kohli in Hyderabad Test

PTI ■ LONDON

Former England opener Geoffrey Boycott feels India skipper Rohit Sharma is "past his prime" and the hosts badly missed the peerless Virat Kohli in the series opener against England in Hyderabad. Despite enjoying a strong position after the first innings, India lost by 28 runs against England in the first Test to trail 0-1 in the five-match series. In the absence of Kohli, the onus was on Rohit to shoulder the responsibility in the batting department but he could only manage 24 and 39 in two innings as the Indian batting crumbled big time while chasing 231 on a fourth day pitch.

And Boycott believes it is a golden chance for England to beat India in their own backyard after 12 years. "This India team are ripe

for the taking and England have a golden chance to be the first side to topple them on their own patch for 12 years," Boycott wrote in his column for "The Daily Telegraph."

"India badly miss Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja has a hamstring injury and will not play the second Test. Their captain Rohit Sharma is nearly 37 and past his best. He makes pretty cameos but has scored only two Test hundreds at home in four years. They are also weak in the field. They dropped Ollie Pope on 110 and that cost them 86 runs. It lost them the match."

The Indian spin trio of Ravichandran Ashwin, Jadeja and Axar Patel looked a pale shadow of themselves on a spin-friendly but not exactly dust-bowl of a Hyderabad wicket.

The English batters came out with a perfect tactical ploy, using sweeps and reverse



sweeps to great effect to counter the threat.

"England bamboozled India with their sweeps and reverse sweeps and to lose after taking a 190-run lead will be mind-blowing for India. It has never happened to them before on their own pitches where they thought they were invincible," Boycott wrote. India were dealt a big blow after the Hyderabad defeat as Jadeja and KL Rahul have been ruled out of the second Test starting in Visakhapatnam on February 2, due to injuries.

While Jadeja sustained a hamstring injury during play on Day 4 of the first Test, Rahul complained of pain in his right quadriceps.

Because of the balance that he brings into the playing, Jadeja's absence will be massive feels the legendary opener.

"Jadeja is a huge blow. He is a great all-rounder, top bowler,

brilliant fielder and was their best batsman in the first Test. Kohli is their talisman. He is a magnificent batsman who averages 60 on Indian pitches but he also gives them great energy in the field. He is a big loss and England must make the most of it before he comes back for the third Test," Boycott wrote. He believes that England have India on the mat and could well be hosts' first series defeat in a dozen of years.

"Once in a while a team are in the right place at the right time to clinch a big series win and England could be in that position right now in India. India are due a (series) defeat at home, the signs are good as they have lost Kohli, Jadeja, Mohammed Shami and Rishabh Pant and are playing opponents full of confidence after a remarkable win. England must take this rare opportunity," he further wrote.



Deepti rises to joint second among bowlers in T20I rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

India's Deepti Sharma rose one place to joint second while team-mate Renuka Singh also moved up a spot to 10th in the latest ICC women's T20I bowling rankings issued on Tuesday.

Deepti's rise was largely due to South Africa spinner Nonkululeko Mlaba dropping three places from earlier second to fifth after one wicket from two games against Australia.

Similarly, Pakistan's Sadia Iqbal took the joint second spot with Deepti after moving up one place. England's Sarah Glenn was at fourth after rising a rung. England spinner Sophie Ecclestone maintained a healthy lead at the top of the T20I rankings for bowlers.

There was no change within the top 10 of the latest T20I rankings for all-rounders with Deepti retaining the fourth spot. Among batters, India vice-captain Smriti Mandhana remained at fourth to be the highest ranked Indian while Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma and Harmanpreet Kaur were unchanged at 13th, 16th and 17th respectively.

Australia's Beth Mooney overtook compatriot Tahlia McGrath at the top of the T20I rankings for batters after a splendid innings against South Africa. Mooney has already scored two half centuries in the shortest format of the game in 2024, with her most impressive recent knock coming when she scored a brilliant 72 not out from just 57 deliveries in a Player of the Match performance against South Africa in Canberra.

Selected spinners give us best opportunity to beat India: Stokes

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Long before debutant spinner Tom Hartley bowled England to a famous win in the first Test against India, skipper Ben Stokes had asserted that the tweakers picked for the series "give us the best opportunity" to humble the Asian giants in their own backyard.

Playing in his first Test, left-arm spinner Hartley picked up seven wickets in the Indian second innings to script a 28-run victory for the tourists, who gambled with a lone specialist pacer in Mark Wood in Hyderabad. "I think sometimes inexperience can be looked at into a bit too much. There's no doubt that experience makes players feel more comfortable and settled, especially in this environment," Stokes said in an interview with 'JioCinema' when asked about his approach behind selecting spinners just before the start of the series opener.

He added: "But the spinners we've selected on this tour are ones we think will give us the best opportunity to beat India. For me, it's not just about the spinners but understanding the talent they have and allowing them to go out there and express that talent and giving them the platform and the best



possible opportunity to not worry about the outcome too much and focus on what cricket actually is."

In the run-up to the five-match series, there was a bit of chatter around the visitors' inexperienced spin unit, but Stokes is not one to read much into all these analysis.

"As a bowler, your job is to think about taking wickets. As a batsman, it's about going out there and scoring runs. Anything more than that is overcomplicating it. I'm just taking away that fear and anxiety around the outcome."

No team has beaten India in India since 2012, when England under

Alastair Cook emerged triumphant after losing the first Test, and that is not lost on Stokes. On the challenge of beating India in India, Stokes said, "India is a hard place to come and win a game, never mind a five-match series. It's been a mission for any team who've come here to turn over India. We understand that and respect that."

"But again, it comes down to opportunity. We've got an amazing opportunity ahead of us. The squad we've picked from spinners to our seam bowlers to our batters, I think it's going to give us the best opportunity to win a series in India."

Having led the country to some

finest wins since taking over Test captaincy from Joe Root, Stokes says he never aspired to be a leader.

"It's something I never had any aspirations to do or really thought about too much, to be honest. I never really had too much responsibility around captaining or anything, either in age-group cricket or any other level."

"I had a little taste of it with the Durham Academy. This opportunity presented itself to me and it was something I couldn't turn down. It's a role I have grown into, it's a role that I've really enjoyed."

"I love everything that comes with it, the responsibility of looking after people from different types of angles. Whether it be out in the field or away from the field. Understanding different individuals and personalities, because in a team sport, you have got a lot of people and not everyone is the same. That's helped me mature as a person."

When the discussion turned to 'bazball', he said the team tries to stay away from the term.

"It's a phrase that was created by the media. Something that we try and stay away from. It just came from what we have managed to do over the last two years and how we've played."

Injuries to Rahul, Jadeja cause major selection headache

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Untimely injuries to Ravindra Jadeja and K L Rahul have given a major selection headache to India as they seek to bounce back in the second Test against England, following a rare defeat at home. Both Jadeja and Rahul were among India's main performers in the first innings of the Hyderabad Test before England turned the tables on the formidable hosts.

Jadeja sustained a hamstring injury while going for a quick single during the Hyderabad Test while Rahul has complained of pain in his right quadriceps.

The duo's unavailability adds to the woes of the home side, which was clearly stunned by England's 'Bazball' strategy. Jadeja, with his exceptional all-round abilities, makes himself almost irreplaceable and Rahul too has been among India's standout batters across the ODI and Test format since returning from a surgery in September.

Virat Kohli remains unavailable due to personal reasons and after a shock reverse in the series opener, the management will be missing him even more in Visakhapatnam where the second Test begins on Friday. Rohit Sharma and Rahul Dravid have enough options to choose from with selectors adding three players to the squad -- Sarfaraz Khan, Sourabh Kumar and Washington Sundar.

A straightforward selection will be Rajat Patidar, who was also a part of the 15 in Hyderabad. He could take Rahul's place in the



middle-order with Kuldeep Yadav replacing Jadeja as the third spinner alongside R Ashwin and Axar Patel. Another option for India is to do what England did in the opener, play only one pacer for four spin choices.

In that case, Mohammed Siraj could make way for Kuldeep and the team can accommodate either Sarfaraz Khan or Washington to solidify the middle-order.

Sourabh, who also bowls left-arm spin like Jadeja and is a decent batter with a couple of first-class hundreds to his name, can be a dark horse in that race. The ACA-VDCA Stadium in Visakhapatnam has staged two Tests till date and the pitch is usually a batting friendly one at least in the first innings.

Batting first at the venue back in 2019, India had racked up 502 in the first innings against South Africa with Mayank Agarwal getting a double hundred and Rohit scoring a brisk 176 in his first innings as a Test opener.

Spin legend Anil Kumble feels wrist spinner Kuldeep's presence in the eleven will be helpful.

Will not be afraid to play all spin attack in Vizag: England coach

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Tom Hartley has not only won the opening Test for England but more importantly dented the psyche of the Indian batters, who might have to face an all-spin attack in the second Test starting here on Friday.

England beat India by 28 runs in the opening Test with debutant Tom Hartley bagging seven in the second innings having gone for plenty in the first. McCullum is eagerly waiting to have a look at the track and judge how it would behave.

Although traditionally a high-scoring ground, it has seen domination by the

spinners lately, deeming that the conditions are likely to suit the latter.

On the same note, McCullum warned that if the pitch indeed favours the spinners, the Three Lions would not be afraid to field an all-spin attack, hinting that uncapped spinner Shoaib Bashir, who missed out on Hyderabad due to visa delay, could be handed his debut. However senior most spinner Jack Leach's knee injury will be a concern.

However in Hartley, Joe Root, Rehan Ahmed and Shoaib Bashir, he would still have four spinners and he can replace Mark Wood with an extra batter.



"If the wickets continue to spin as much as what we saw in the first Test as the series goes on, look, we won't be afraid to play all spinners or a balance of what we've got," the former New Zealand skipper was quoted as saying to SEN Radio.

"Bash (Bashir), he was

obviously with us during our camp in Abu Dhabi, and he really impressed with his skill set. He fitted in seamlessly within the group, and he's a guy who's got an immense amount of enthusiasm, albeit at a young age and pretty limited in his first-class experience." "When he arrived, boys gave him a huge cheer, and he got to witness something pretty special with the fellas bowling us to a Test win."

He comes into calculations for the next Test match," added McCullum.

McCullum was all praise for the manner in which Ben Stokes handled a relatively inexperienced spin attack with such ease. Hartley managed to

grab nine wickets in his debut Test, including mesmerising figures of seven for 62 in the second innings.

Although the 24-year-old was hammered for 131 in the first innings, especially by young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal, he overcame the obstacles in the subsequent innings, as McCullum believes that allowing him to play with freedom was a real sign of leadership from Stokes.

"He's only played a handful of first-class games and was probably a bit of a punt, selection-wise. But, we saw something in him that we thought would work over there, and he's a tough character,"

India pummel New Zealand by 214 runs

PTI ■ BLOEMFONTEIN

Musheer Khan's superlative showing in the ongoing ICC U-19 World Cup continued as his second hundred trampled New Zealand by 214 runs in a Super Six encounter here on Tuesday.

After India's top performer Musheer's 131 backed by opener Adarsh Singh's 52 powered India to a huge total of 295/8, left-arm spinner Saumy Kumar Pandey (4/19) and pacer Raj Limbani (2/17) ripped apart New Zealand's top order to bowl them out for a mere 81 in 28.1 over.

Limbani struck on the first and the fifth ball of New Zealand innings to ensure momentum

remained India's way throughout. India vice-captain Pandey finished with splendid figures of 10-2-19-4 as he knocked the stuffing out of Black Caps' chase.

Left reeling at 27/4 in the Powerplay, New Zealand could never really stage a comeback as Indian colts like every edition are looking favourites to win the tournament.

For New Zealand, it was their third heaviest defeat in terms of runs and also their third lowest total at the U-19 World Cup stage.

Earlier, Musheer played New Zealand attack with his second century of the ICC U-19 World Cup while opener Adarsh Singh struck 52 as India posted a stiff 296-run



target. On a perfect batting wicket here at the Mangaung Oval, Musheer

tore apart the Kiwis bowling line-up to become the first batter in the current competition to breach the

300-run mark, going past Pakistan's Shahzaib Khan with his stupendous effort.

En route his 131, Musheer blasted 13 fours and three sixes off just 125 balls and once showed admirable temperament to up the ante just when it was required.

Busy at the crease constantly, the 18-year-old Musheer motored on from one end unleashing strokes in all directions, while he began with an upper-cut for a four.

His innings was spruced with fine running between the wickets and ended in the death overs when he was looking to accelerate.

Musheer and Adarsh carried out a fine recovery job with a 77-run stand for the second wicket after an

early blow for India.

Adarsh took charge of attacking the bowlers as he looked good while driving on the rise and also played the pull-shot with elan.

It was only unfortunate that he failed to keep a drive in check when Zac Cumming (1/37) teased him with one outside off.

A thick edge off Adarsh's bat flew to Oliver Tewatiya at point in the 18th over, which ended the charge for the left-handed Indian opener who made 52 off 58 balls with six fours.

There also was some disappointment in store for India captain Uday Saharan who failed to convert his start and was dismissed for 35 (57 balls, 2 fours). He had two

fifties on trot at the start of the tournament.

Saharan, nevertheless, did a fine job of consolidating the innings for his side, putting on 87 with Musheer which also happened to be the best stand for India in this game.

However, Musheer's century and Adarsh's contribution at the top notwithstanding, India lost wickets in a flurry towards the end to fall short of breaching the 300-run mark, finishing at 295 for eight.

Brief scores: India U-19 295/8 in 50 overs (Adarsh Singh 52, Musheer Khan 131, Uday Saharan 35; Mason Clarke 4/64) beat New Zealand U-19 81 in 28.1 overs (Oscar Jackson 19; Raj Limbani 2/17, Saumy Pandey 4/19) by 214 runs.