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LS SESSION TO SEE FIREWORKS CBI gets cracking in NEET case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The first Session of the 18th Lok Sabha starting Monday is all set to begin on a stormy note given the reduced strength of the ruling BJP in the Lower House and an emboldened Congress with double the number of MPs it had in the previous two Houses. Above all, the Parliament Session comes in the backdrop of a series of exams paper leaks providing enough ammo to an equally strengthened combined Opposition determined to corner Narendra Modi 3.0 Government.

The Opposition is also set to take up the issue of railway safety with a major accident in West Bengal with casualties a week ago. The Congress and other Opposition members have been demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and Rail Minister Ashwani Vaishnav.

As scheduled, the Lok Sabha will see oath-taking by the newly-elected members followed by election of the Lok Sabha Speaker on June 26 and President Droupadi Murmu's address to joint sitting of both the Houses on June 27.

The row over appointment of BJP leader and seven-term member Bhartruhari Mahtab as the Pro-tem Speaker is likely to cast shadow over the session. The move has drawn flak from the opposition, which alleged that the claim of Congress member K Suresh to the post was overlooked by the Government.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju asserted that Mahtab has had seven uninterrupted terms as Lok Sabha member, making him eligible for the post, while Suresh lost



elections in 1998 and 2004 which makes his current term as the fourth straight one in the lower house. Earlier, he was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1989, 1991, 1996 and 1999. On Monday, Murmu will administer the oath to Mahtab as the Pro-tem Speaker of the Lok Sabha at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. Mahtab will then reach Parliament House and call the Lok Sabha to order at 11 am. The proceedings will begin with members observing a moment of silence on the occasion of the first sitting of the 18th Lok Sabha. This will be followed by Lok Sabha Secretary General Utpal Kumar Singh placing on the table of the House the list of the members elected to the Lower House. Mahtab will then call upon Prime

Minister Narendra Modi, the leader of the Lok Sabha, to take oath as member of the House.

The Pro-tem Speaker will then administer oath to the panel of chairpersons appointed by the President to assist him in carrying out the proceedings of the House till the election of the Speaker on June 26. The President has appointed Kodikunnil Suresh (Congress), T R Baalu (DMK), Radha Mohan Singh and Faggan Singh Kulaste (both BJP) and Sudip Bandyopadhyay (TMC) to assist Mahtab in administering the oath/affirmation to the newly elected members of the Lok Sabha.

After the panel of chairpersons, the Pro-tem Speaker will administer the oath/affirmation as Lok Sabha members to the Council of Ministers.

The members from States, in alphabetical order, will take oath or make affirmation over the next two days.

The election to the post of Lok Sabha Speaker will take place on Wednesday and the Prime Minister will introduce his Council of Ministers to the House soon after.

The President is scheduled to address the joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament on June 27. The debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address will begin on June 28. The Prime Minister is expected to respond to the debate on July 2 or 3.

Both the Houses are expected to go into a brief recess and re-assemble on July 22 for the presentation of the Union Budget.

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has registered an FIR in connection with alleged irregularities in the conduct of the medical entrance exam — National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test-UG — held on May 5, following a complaint from the Education Ministry. It is taking steps to take over probes/FIRs of other States in the matter. Giving top priority to the case, the CBI has formed special teams that are en route to Godhra and Patna, where cases of question paper leaks have been registered by police. The CBI had already registered three cases to probe alleged irregularities in NEET exams conducted in 2018, 2021 and 2022 by NTA and this is the fourth FIR, registered on June 23, to probe allegations of irregularities in 2024 NEET exam against unidentified persons on a reference from the Union Education Ministry. Police in Bihar's Nawada arrested four persons in connection with alleged attack on CBI team probing UGC-NET leak case, said officials.

Facing flak over alleged discrepancies in competitive exams, the Centre on Saturday shunted out National Testing Agency (NTA) Director General Subodh Singh and handed over the probe into irregularities in medical entrance exam NEET-UG to the CBI to conduct a comprehensive investigation



Economic Offences Unit (EOU) personnel leave with the accused arrested in connection with the alleged irregularities in NEET-UG exams 2024 case, after the latter's medical examination at LNJP hospital, in Patna, on Sunday PTI

into the entire gamut of alleged irregularities, including conspiracy, cheating, impersonation, breach of trust, and destruction of evidence by candidates, institutes, and middlemen, including attempted irregularities. There were allegations of irregularities, including cheating, impersonation and other malpractices after the results of the NEET-UG 2024 was declared on June 4 — days before schedule. Student protests have been raging across the country since, amplified by the Opposition, and the matter has snowballed into a huge political row. The students have been demanding the exam be

rescheduled for everyone and not the 1,500-odd students who received grace marks. This, however, has not been accepted by the Government and the re-test for 1,563 candidates, who had initially received grace marks, held on Sunday. As many as 813 of the 1,563 candidates who were earlier awarded grace marks in NEET-UG appeared for a retest on Sunday, officials said. The allegations in the FIR state that the NEET(UG) 2024 examination was conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) on 5th May 2024 at 4,750 centres in 571 cities, including 14 cities abroad, with over 23 lakh candidates appearing for the examination.

Monsoon covers entire State

Heavy rains till June 26 predicted

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The southwest monsoon has covered the entire Odisha, said the Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here on Sunday.

According to the IMD, thunderstorm activity with gusty wind would continue in the State till June 26. There is also a warning of heavy rainfall on June 26 and 27. "There is a possibility of one or two spells of rain or thundershower in Bhubaneswar during the next 24 hours," the weather office said.

On Monday, thunderstorm with lightning accompanied by gusty surface wind speed reaching 30 to 40 kmph may occur in Baleswar, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Kendrapada, Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Puri, Khordha, Nayagarh, Ganjam, Gajapati, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Angul, Dhenkanal, Boudh, Kandhamal and Rayagada districts, the IMD said.

On Tuesday, thunderstorm with lightning accompanied by gusty surface wind speed reaching 30 to 40 kmph is likely in Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Angul, Dhenkanal, Kandhamal and Rayagada districts.

Shah mulls steps to save people from flood fury

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

As floods and heavy rains Aravage Northeast India, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday called for a series of comprehensive strategies with a 'Zero Casualty Approach' to address the escalating crisis, particularly the recurring flood threats posed by the Brahmaputra River.

Key measures include the creation of at least 50 large ponds to store excess water, leveraging satellite imagery for enhanced flood management, and upgrading flood forecasting systems. These initiatives are part of a broader effort to mitigate the devastating impacts of floods and improve the region's resilience.

During the review meeting on flood management with officials from the IMD, CWC, NDMA and the National Disaster Response Force, the Minister emphasised the integration of natural drainage systems into infrastructure designs, better handling of Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF), and the enhancement of community awareness and preparedness programmes. Emphasising the role of advanced technology, Shah advocated for the optimum use of satellite imagery from the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). This would aid in effective flood and water management



Union Home Minister Amit Shah chairs a high-level meeting to review preparedness to deal with floods that affect various parts of the country during the monsoon, in New Delhi, on Sunday. Union Minister of Jal Shakti C R Paatil and Union MoS for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai are also seen PTI

by providing accurate and timely data on water levels and flood risks, he told the officials, as per the statement issued here. Recurring flooding of the Brahmaputra is a major issue particularly for Assam and the Northeastern region in general as it claims scores of lives and inundates thousands of hectares every year. This year too many people have been killed, hundreds rendered homeless and communication lines and road networks snapped in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh which witnessed cloudburst on Sunday. Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Jammu and Kashmir have also witnessed flooding in recent years. During the meeting, the

Minister said under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's Disaster Management is moving forward with a 'Zero Casualty Approach'. The Minister also highlighted the importance of upgrading the forecast system for river water levels. This included modernising the equipment used in flood forecasting to improve the accuracy and reliability of flood predictions, thereby facilitating better preparedness and response. Shah also reviewed preparations to deal with Glacial Lake Outburst Floods, which have caused significant damage in regions like Sikkim and Uttarakhand in the past few years and are now becoming a recurring feature.



Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha reviews the Passing out Parade of Jammu and Kashmir Police's 16th BRTC Batch at the Subsidiary Police Training Centre in Reasi district on Sunday PTI

People aiding ultras to be tried under Enemy Agents Act in JK

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Boosting the morale of the security forces deployed on the counter-terrorism grid, Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Sunday directed them to hunt down the terrorists and those harbouring them. Echoing similar sentiments, Director General of Jammu and Kashmir police RR Swain claimed terrorism in Jammu will be wiped out in the next three months. He said people who are harbouring foreign terrorists will be tried under the Enemy Agents Act which is a much harsher law than the UAPA.

Responding to the question from a media person, DGP said to dismantle the terrorist ecosystem in the Union Territory we are considering invoking the Enemies Agents Act. According to him, the stringent law permits life imprisonment or the death penalty for those found aiding or abetting Pakistani terrorists. The DGP hoped

the decisive action would serve as a deterrent discouraging locals not to support foreign terrorists. According to the latest assessment reports around 35-40 foreign terrorists are active in the region south of Pir Panjal in the frontier districts of Rajouri and Poonch. These terrorists are mostly camping inside safe hideouts in small groups of two to three terrorists and executing terror plots at the behest of their handlers sitting across Pakistan. Official sources revealed during the high-level security review meetings these measures were discussed in the backdrop of increase in terror strikes across the Jammu region. Following these directions, the security forces have further intensified anti-terrorist operations to neutralise these foreign terrorists. Additional troops have been mobilised on ground zero to beef up security ahead of the Amarnath yatra starting from June 29.

Two CoBRA personnel martyred in IED blast triggered by Naxals

PTI ■ SUKMA

Two personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force's jungle warfare unit CoBRA were killed after Naxalites blew up a truck with an improvised explosive device (IED) in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district on Sunday, police said. The Naxal blast took place around 3 pm near Timmapuram village between Silger and Tekalgudem camps of security forces, over 400 km from the State Capital Raipur, a senior police official said.

An advance party of the 201st unit of Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) had launched patrolling from Silger camp under Jagargunda police station limits as a part of its Road Opening Party duty towards Tekalgudem, he said.

The security personnel were on motorcycles while their luggage and rations were being ferried in the ill-fated truck, he said. "Naxalites triggered an IED blast targeting the truck that claimed the lives of constable Shailendra (29), a resident of Uttar Pradesh, and driver Vishnu R (35) hailing from Kerala. The truck did not have any other occupant," he said. After being alerted about the blast, more forces were rushed to the spot and the bodies were evacuated from the forest, while a search operation continues there, he said. Expressing grief over the incident, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai said in a message on X that the martyrdom of jawans will not go in vain. "Received the sad news of the demise of 2 CoBRA soldiers in an IED blast triggered by Naxalites in Sukma district. I pray to God to rest the departed soul in peace and to give strength to their families," he said.



Mayawati reinstates nephew political heir

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Amid mounting pressure for reinstating Akash Anand and giving him some assignment, Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati on Sunday once again announced her nephew her political successor and also appointed him as the national coordinator of the party.

The appointment of Akash Anand is seen as a major development after the worst ever defeat of the BSP in the recent Lok Sabha elections in



BSP supreme Mayawati with nephew Akash Anand PTI

which the party once again failed to open its account, the same performance it witnessed in 2014 (RPT 2014) but with much higher percentage of votes.

Man-animal conflict turns tragic in Wayanad

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

It turned out to be a Sunday with a difference in Kerala's Wayanad district as a crowd of more than thousand people staged a "road roko" carrying the carcasses of four cows which were allegedly killed by a tiger during the last four days. Police and Forest Department officials rushed to the spot and disbursed the crowd through peaceful discussion. Owners of the cows were promised by the district authorities an initial solatium of ₹30,000 to the

owners of the cows which were killed by the big tiger. Wayanad, a high range district situated on the periphery of the Western Ghats forests, is no stranger to wild animals. Elephants, tigers, cheetahs, leopards and deers make frequent visits to the human settlements in search of food and water as the reserve forests are short of drinking water and food. The big cats target domestic animals like cows, sheep and bulls while the elephants prefer to have banana plants, jackfruits and mangoes in addition to their favourite



A representational image

delicacy, bamboo plants. The last few months saw a rogue tusker attacking the

owner of a house which turned out to be fatal. Three persons have been killed in

attacks by the wild animals. "We want this tiger to be shot dead so that our children can go to schools. There is no guarantee that the children and bread-earners of the family would return home because of this tiger," said Annie, a housewife who lost one of her cows in the tiger attack. The Wild Life Department in the district is seriously considering to tranquilise the tiger and shift to another zone. But the last six months saw the death of elephants and big cats which were tranquilised by the

veterinary doctors which have been reported by *The Pioneer*. All human settlements near the forests in Kerala are a gift from the Governments that ruled the State from time to time and this has led to massive deforestation. VK Bahuguna, author and former director general of Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, told *The Pioneer* that this was an unfortunate development. "I cannot blame the tiger or the elephants for this situation," said Bahuguna.

CM announces Rs 50 cr more for Tarini Temple

Says BJD looters of Keonjhar minerals won't be spared

RAJENDRA K SAHU ■
KEONJHAR

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi held a road show from the Ghatagaon High School ground to the Maa Tarini Temple as he on Sunday embarked on a two-day visit to his home district Keonjhar the first since assuming charge as CM.

Majhi received a rousing welcome after he landed at

Ghatagaon by a special helicopter in the morning. People gathered on either side of the road to catch a glimpse of the CM as he waved to the crowd expressing his gratitude. He also received grievance letters from the people and promised to address the issues.

The CM was joined by his wife Priyanka Marndi, who was waiting for him at the temple.

After offering prayers at the shrine, Majhi announced a package of Rs 50 crore for its development. "My government will promote the Maa Tarini Peetha at the national



level and develop Keonjhar district as a tourist destination. While a Rs 50-crore renovation project (for development of the Tarini Temple) is already underway, the amount,

I realised, was not enough after visiting the shrine. Therefore, an additional Rs 50 crore will be provided for the temple's development and beautification work," he told

reporters.

He said the previous BJD government has "looted" the minerals wealth of Keonjhar district and those responsible for it would not be spared of

strong action.

Later in the day, Majhi visited Keonjhar town, offered puja at the Sri Baladev Jew Temple and participated in a road show. He also attended a felicitation ceremony and addressed a public meeting.

On Monday, Majhi is scheduled to visit his native village Raikala and address a felicitation ceremony-cum-public meeting after a road show from Raikala to Jhumpura. He will have lunch at his residence at Raikala and interact with local people before flying back to Bhubaneswar in the afternoon.

Subhadra scheme to be launched in 100 days

Eligibility criteria spelled out

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Deputy Chief Minister Pravati Parida on Sunday said the State Government would launch the Subhadra scheme within 100 days.

"The scheme is in the drafting stage after getting the Cabinet nod. It will be rolled out within 100 days and women beneficiaries will get a Rs 50,000-assistance," she told reporters.

Parida said the Woman and Child Development Department is ready to implement the scheme. "Deputy Chief Minister KV Singh Deo is attending the GST council meeting and must have apprised the Centre about the scheme. But the Odisha Government will implement the scheme without waiting for anyone," she added.

On Saturday, Singh Deo sought partial funding from the Centre to implement the Subhadra scheme, one of the main pledges made by the BJP in its Sankalp Patra (election manifesto) for Odisha, during the pre-Budget meeting and GST Council meeting chaired by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in New Delhi.



"The State Government is in the process of rolling out Subhadra Yojana, under which every woman will receive a voucher of Rs 50,000 to be encashed over a period of two years. This is an innovative initiative aimed at empowering women and enhancing entrepreneurship among women," he said.

The primary goal of the scheme is to improve the standing of women in the community and provide them financial independence.

The expected eligibility criteria are:

Applicant must belong to Odisha State.

Only married women would be eligible.

Only one female member per family can apply for the scheme.

The applicant must be in the age group of 23-59 years.

The applicant must not be a government employee.

Benefits under the system will be extended to Anganwadi Workers.

Traffic violation: 121 vehicles seized in Twin City



Fines of Rs 66,000 collected

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In a bid to curb traffic violations and enhance road safety, the Commissionerate police on Saturday night carried out an intensified drive under the "Safe City Drive" initiative.

The operation resulted in the seizure of 121 vehicles and the realisation of fines of Rs 66,000 for various traffic violations, including drunken driving, mobile phone use while driving and reverse riding.

The drive was carried out under the direct supervision of Commissioner of Police Sanjeeb Panda across numerous police station areas in the capital city and Cuttack.

During the operation, out of a total of 121 vehicles seized, BBSR- Traffic police station-I seized 32 vehicles, including eight four-wheelers. The Traffic police station-II seized 16 four-wheelers and six two-wheelers.

The seized vehicles included

high-end models such as Mercedes, Mahindra Thar, Skoda Octavia, Jeep Compass, Nissan Sunny, Baleno, Tata Nexon, Hyundai Creta, Tata Safari, Mahindra XUV 300 and Honda City.

The Cuttack Traffic PS seized 17 vehicles and NH Traffic PS seized five vehicles during the drive. At all police checkpoints, several violators attempted to evade capture by making U-turns and driving in reverse under the influence of alcohol.

Prepared for such eventualities, the police teams deployed spikes to halt and seize these vehicles, resulting in the seizure of 24 four-wheelers and eight two-wheelers for reverse riding.

Total 23 cases were filed in court against the violators by Bhubaneswar UPD Police who will now face fines to release their seized vehicles. Additionally, 44 cases were registered against traffic violators with the police recommending suspension of driving licences to the Regional Transport Office (RTO).

Money laundering: SC to hear OAS officer's bail plea

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Supreme Court would hear an anticipatory bail plea of OAS officer Bijaya Ketan Sahoo in connection with a money laundering case.

A Vacation Bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Rajesh Bindal would hear the matter on Monday, according to the apex court website case list.

On May 10, the Orissa High Court refused to grant Sahoo anticipatory bail, stating that a prima facie case exists against him since he was involved in

the acquisition of properties in dealing with the "proceeds with crime".

Justice Chittaranjan Das of the High Court, however, added that if Sahoo appears before the Special Court and moves for grant of regular bail, the same shall be considered on its own merits.

The federal agency initiated a probe under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) on the basis of a Vigilance police FIR of August 2018 registered in Cuttack against Odisha Financial Of-

ficial Nalini Prusty, her husband Sahoo and other family members for allegedly possessing disproportionate assets to the tune of Rs 5.05 crore.

Assets worth Rs 3.94 crore of the bureaucrat couple were also attached under the anti-money laundering law in 2022.

The investigations had revealed that the duo invested their unaccounted money in acquiring various properties and bank investments in their name and in the name of Debaki Prusty, the mother of

Prusty. The properties included two flats in Bhubaneswar worth Rs 1.8 crore, furniture and interior articles valued at Rs 1.34 crore, a flat in Puri town estimated at Rs 21.4 lakh, a triple-storied building in Bhubaneswar worth Rs 49.6 lakh, six plots in Bhubaneswar and Jatni worth Rs 58 lakh, fixed deposits in four banks worth Rs 1.24 crore, deposit of Rs 22 lakh in saving bank accounts, household articles of Rs 46 lakh and gold, diamond jewellery estimated at Rs 40 lakh.

Will BJD head for disintegration soon?

Speculations arise as Naveen calls for unity in party

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

There are speculations about the Biju Janata Dal's (BJD) future following party leader Naveen Patnaik's call for unity and stability in the organisation amid signs of internal dissent among workers after the party's poor performance in the 2024 elections.

The controversy surrounds VK Pandian's continued influence despite his announced retirement from politics.

Naveen Patnaik made the call for unity among party workers while interacting with leaders from Banki, Telkoi and other areas recently.

"You all know that in the BJP government in Odisha, they have a majority; and in



Delhi, they are running a minority government. Hence, you should work hard, stay united and strengthen the party," Patnaik told the BJD workers.

Several theories are now doing rounds over such statements from the BJD president. Has Naveen Patnaik got some

inkling about leaders deserting the party? Is he worried whether the party will disintegrate? Are workers angry over his clean chit to VK Pandian?

Recently, angry workers had attributed the BJD's loss to Pandian and even raised slogans against him. Taking accountability, Pandian subse-

quently announced his retirement from active politics. However, it is said that Pandian's dominance still prevails in the party which has aggravated the intraparty resentment.

Banki MLA Debiranjan Tripathy hinted at signs of disintegration in the party and said, "Discussion is being made to strengthen the party and serve the people of the State."

Regarding not winning a single Lok Sabha seat, BJD leader Ranendra Pratap Swain said it was an internal matter and he has shared his views with Naveen Patnaik.

Naveen Patnaik's statement clearly shows that all is not well within the BJD. The party seems to be heading towards instability. Though it was said that the party would review the poll debacle, nothing has been done so far.

5 office-bearers expelled for ink attack on OPCC chief

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha Congress has expelled its five office-bearers for six years in connection with the ink attack on OPCC president Sarat Pattanayak at the Congress Bhawan here.

Those expelled are OPCC general secretary Prakash Mishra, general secretary of the party's women wing Shriyasmitha Panda, NSUI secretary Sandip Routray, State Youth Congress secretary Amresh Parida and NSUI State secretary Aryan Sasmal.

The ink attack had taken place on June 21 in the chamber of the OPCC president.

Terming it as an act of indiscipline intended at damaging the party's image, OPCC disciplinary action committee chairman Santosh Singh Saluja said the action was taken against these office-bearers on



the basis of CCTV footage.

Sources claimed that the ink attack was the outcome of growing resentment against the State leadership over alleged massive irregularities in ticket distribution during Lok Sabha and Vidha Sabha elections in the State. However, the OPCC chief, who suffered minor injury to his left eye, said it was the handiwork of those who are jealous of the growth of Congress in the State.

The Congress improved in Assembly seats tally to 14 in the recent elections from nine in 2019.

CONTEMPORARIES

Deepfakes and misinformation: Need for regulation of AI

The recent general elections in India have been marred by controversies surrounding deepfakes and misinformation. Videos allegedly featuring statements from former Chief Minister of Odisha and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) supreme Naveen Patnaik have stirred a political turmoil with the Opposition alleging these videos to be AI-generated, an allegation which he denied issuing subsequent video statements. In Telangana, Home Minister Amit Shah accused Congress leader Revanth Reddy of using AI to alter a video, misrepresenting his views on affirmative action quotas. This incident led to arrests from the Aam Aadmi Party and the Congress. Similarly, AI-generated videos featuring deceased political leaders like M Karunanidhi and J Jayalalithaa have surfaced, raising concerns about the misuse of technology in the electoral process.

These incidents highlight an urgent need to address the issue of deepfakes and the legal void in India regarding their regulation. Deepfakes, defined by the European



S JYOTIRANJANA

Union Artificial Intelligence Act as AI-generated or manipulated content that falsely appears authentic, pose a significant threat to the integrity of elections and public discourse. It is, therefore, important to explore the problem of deepfakes with regard to the current legal regime in this context.

Deepfakes are engineered to be indistinguishable from genuine content, making them a potent tool for spreading misinformation. The use of deepfakes in the electoral process can undermine the neutrality and fairness of elections, a mandate enshrined in the Constitution of India. Despite the grow-

ing threat, India lacks specific legislation to regulate AI-generated content.

The closest legislation is the Information Technology Act, 2000 (the "IT Act"), which addresses issues like cheating by personation (Section 66D) and breach of privacy (Section 66E). However, these provisions are inadequate for dealing with the complexities of deepfakes. They do not provide a prohibitory mechanism to prevent the release of such content.

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has issued advisories to social media intermediaries under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021. These advisories urge platforms to label AI-generated content and ensure the integrity of the electoral process. However, these advisories lack the force of penal action. Section 3(1) of the IT Rules stipulates due diligence responsibilities for intermediaries, but enforcement remains a challenge.

The Indian Penal Code, 1860, and the Representation of the People

Act, 1951, have also been invoked to tackle deepfakes. Sections 465 (forgery) and 469 (forgery harming reputation) of the IPC and Section 123 of the RPA (promoting enmity) are used to penalise creators of deepfakes. However, these provisions are scattered and do not provide a comprehensive solution.

International Regulations The global community is increasingly aware of the risks posed by deepfakes. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 identified AI-generated misinformation as a significant global risk. At the AI Safety Summit in November 2023, 28 countries, including India, participated in the Bletchley Park Declaration, focusing on preventing AI misuse.

The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act is a pioneering piece of legislation aimed at regulating AI. It classifies AI systems based on risk and imposes transparency obligations on deployers of AI systems generating deepfakes. Article 50 mandates disclosure of AI-generated or manipulated content, setting a standard for responsible AI use.

In the United States, the Deep Fakes Accountability Act requires creators of deepfakes to disclose their use and prohibits the circulation of deepfakes intended to deceive or harm reputations. Violators face fines or imprisonment. The Act also establishes a taskforce to assess the impact of deepfakes on national security.

India must adopt a comprehensive approach to tackle the menace of deepfakes. A study by McAfee revealed that nearly one in four Indians encountered political deepfakes that they initially believed to be true. This highlights the need for robust legislation.

In January, Union Minister of State for Information Technology Rajeev Chandrashekar hinted at possible amendments to the IT Rules to include deepfake regulation. However, piecemeal amendments may not be sufficient. A holistic approach is necessary, considering the rapid advancements in the AI technology.

The Supreme Court's landmark ruling in KS Puttaswamy & Anr Vs Union of India & Ors affirmed

the right to privacy as a fundamental right. Deepfakes, which often violate privacy, must be addressed within this legal framework. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, though covering privacy, may not be adequate for the specific challenges posed by deepfakes. The Delhi High Court's ruling in Anil Kapoor Vs Simplify Life India & Ors highlighted the need for legal protection against unauthorised use of a person's persona, including AI-generated content. Following the EU's model, India should enact a comprehensive legislation addressing the multifaceted issues related to deepfakes.

A sector-specific approach will limit the effectiveness of any legislation. The law must be dynamic, evolving with technological advancements. A continuous monitoring of AI developments is crucial to ensure that humanity benefits from AI while mitigating its risks.

International cooperation is essential. An AI agency, akin to the International Atomic Energy Agency, could oversee global AI

regulations. Such an agency could help technologically less advanced countries assess and respond to the challenges posed by deepfakes, ensuring political stability and fairness in elections.

Deepfakes and AI-generated misinformation pose a significant threat to the integrity of elections and public discourse in India. It's a fact that the current legislation and advisories provide some safeguards, but they are insufficient. India must adopt comprehensive, dynamic legislation to regulate AI and deepfakes, ensuring the protection of privacy and the integrity of the electoral process and international collaboration and continuous monitoring of AI advancements are vital to achieving these goals.

(The writer is an advocate, Orissa High Court, Addl. Central Government Standing Counsel, CAT, Cuttack Bench, Consulting Editor-Legal Affairs and Public Policy, The Pioneer and a Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Law and Media Studies, School of Mass Communication, KIIT University. Views are personal)

14-day yoga prog before IDY by INS Chilka



PNS ■ CHILIKA

The INS Chilka celebrated the International Day of Yoga (IDY) on June 21, embracing the theme 'Yoga for Self and Society'. The event witnessed active involvement from trainees, ship's company, and their families, reinforcing the holistic benefits of yoga as a therapeutic practice for individual well-being and societal harmony.

A 14-day extensive yoga programme prior the conduct of the International Day of Yoga was held by the INS Chilika. These sessions were designed to accommodate dif-

ferent skill levels, ensuring that everyone could partake and benefit from the practice of yoga. Qualified instructors guided participants through various asanas (postures), pranayama (breathing exercises), and meditation techniques, emphasising the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of yoga. On the occasion of the Yoga Day, CMDE NP Pradeep VSM, the Station Commander, addressed the ship's company, highlighting the profound impact of yoga on personal health and societal well-being. He urged everyone to adopt yoga as a daily practice.

Yoga Day held across JSpur dist



PNS ■ JAGATSINGHPUR

The 10th International Yoga Divas was observed at Paradip on June 21. State Industries, Skill Development and Technical Education Minister and Paradip MLA Sampad Chandra Swain participated in the event along with ADM Lalit Mohan Behera, municipality Chairman Basanta Biswal, Executive Officer Abhisek Panda. Participants from schools and colleges, representatives from

several industrial houses and local people were present. At Jagatsinghpur, the event was organised at the Biju Patnaik indoor stadium where Collector Anupam Saha, MP Bibhu Prasad Tarai, MLA Amarendra Das, Jagatsinghpur ADM Sambit Rout, Sub-Collector, Sports Officer, DIPRO, besides school and college students participated. The Day was also observed at the block level and in various colleges and schools across the district.

'Let yoga become a way of our life'



Paradip Municipality holds Int'l Yoga Day

PNS ■ PARADIP

On the occasion of the International Yoga Day, the Paradip Municipality organised a grand celebration at the Biju Maidan on Paradip beach. The event saw participation from a wide range of attendees, including Paradip MLA and Minister of State for Industry and Skill Development and Technical Education, Sampad Chandra Swain.

Paradip Municipality Chairman Basant Kumar Biswal, Paradip Additional District Magistrate Lalit Mohan Behera, staff members from IFFCO and IOCL, and many students also took part in the yoga practice session. During the event, Minister Swain emphasized the importance of yoga, stating that it should not merely be a part of human life but should be embraced as a way of life. The yoga programme aimed to promote physical and mental well-being among the participants and highlight the significance of incorporating yoga into daily routines.

10L trees to be planted in Pallahara in 5 yrs



New BJP MLA assures zero tolerance to corruption

PNS ■ PALLAHARA

10 lakh trees will be planted within 5 years to make a green Pallahara. Besides, there would be zero tolerance for corruption in all developmental projects, said new BJP MLA Ashok Mohanty in a Press meet here. Mohanty conveyed special

gratitude to Pallahara people for his victory. He assured the people that all scams and corruption committed under the BJD Government would be investigated. He also shared his vision for a developed Pallahara. Among others, Lingaraj Das (State BJP leader), Panchanan Sahu (Block BJP president), Chandan Swaraj (Assembly coordinator), Tanmaya Sahu (BJP Angul district vice president), Manoj Sahu and Sashibhusan Acharya were present.

Yoga Day

Asanas, Pranayams held in Pallahara

PNS ■ PALLAHARA

The International Yoga Day was celebrated at the Mahatab High School of Pallahara under the chairmanship of BDO Pallahara on Friday.

Yoga trainer Balaram Pradhan showed different types of Asanas and Pranayams on the occasion. Apart from students, teachers and staff of Mahatab High School, SHG members and officials of the local administration were present and participated in the event.

While Sub Collector Sushanta Pati was the chief guest, Tehsildar Akankhya



Mohapatra and Block chairperson Reena Rani Naik were present as guests of honour. The necessity of yoga in day-

to-day life was discussed by the speakers. Former HM Tankadhara Pradhan and BDO Dillip Bara organised the

event. The Day was also celebrated in several other schools and colleges under Pallahara block.

New Ganjam representatives felicitated



PNS ■ BRAHMAMPUR

Newly-elected public representatives of the BJP in Ganjam district were felicitated by the general public here on Friday. First, a procession from Vibek Bihar moved throughout the city and finally reached the Biju Patnaik Sanskruti Bhavan.

The public representatives were felicitated on behalf of various social, cultural, religious and professional organisations. Minister of Commerce, Transport, Steel and Mines Bibhuti Bhusan Jena, Minister of Fisheries and Animal Husbandry, Micro, Small and Medium Industries Gokulananda Mallik,

Brahmapur MP Dr Pradeep Kumar Panigrahi, Aska MP Anita Subhadarsini, Brahmapur MLA K Anil Kumar, Chhatarpur MLA Krushna Chandra Nayak, Khallikote MLA Purna Chandra Sethi, Chikiti MLA Manoranjan Dyansamantra, Digapahandi MLA Dr Sidhanta Mohapatra, Bhanjanagar MLA

Pradyumna Nayak and Sorada MLA Nilamani Bisoyi were given warm felicitation. Among others, Ganjam district BJP president Dr Subash Sahu, Ghumusar district president Bijaya Swain and senior leaders of the party Saroj Sabat, Sunil Sahu, Pravat Sadangi, Ashok Sukla and Rajesh were present.

INBRIEF

CM DIRECTS AID FOR OWNERS OF ELECTROCUTED CATTLE

Bhubaneswar: Six cattle were electrocuted in Tulsidia village under Pattamundai Tehsil in Kendrapada district on Sunday when they came in contact with a snapped electric wire. Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi directed the district Collector to pay compensation to the cattle owners. The Collector, according to the Chief Minister, directed the TPCODL to provide assistance to cattle owners. According to the OERC rules, the cattle farmers should get compensation. So, a cow owner would get Rs 30,000, a bullock owner Rs 25,000 and a calf owner Rs 16,000. The six cattle owners would get a total compensation of Rs 1,47,000.

YOGA DAY HELD IN BRAHMAMPUR

Brahmapur: The International Yoga Day was celebrated at the Mahatma Gandhi Stadium in Brahmapur on June 21. State Commerce, Transport, Steel and Mines Minister Bibhuti



Bhusan Jena, MLA K Anil Kumar, Sub Collector Dheenah Dastageer, BeMC Commissioner Bhabani Prasad Mishra, Mayer Sanghamitra Dalai, Deputy Mayer E Vivek Reddy, students from many schools and colleges along with the general public attended and practiced yoga.

GAJAPATI CONG LEGAL ADVISOR PASSES AWAY

Paralakhemundi: Gajapati district Congress legal advisor Laxmikant Abhikari passed away on Sunday at his residence here. Abhikari was a close relative of former MLA Trinath Sahu. Later, in a condolence meeting, Paralakhemundi Congress MLA candidate Vijay Kumar Patnaik, Mohana MLA Dasarathi Gamang, district Congress, Student Congress, Youth Congress and Mahila Congress expressed grief over the demise of Abhikari said he was pillar of strength for the Congress in the district.



RS 75L GANJA SEIZED IN GAJAPATI

Paralakhemundi: Police seized ganja worth Rs 75 lakh from a mini truck at Rising Street under the Mohana police station in Gajapati district during routine patrolling. Police had chased



the truck which was on its way from Adaba, but the driver fled abandoning the vehicle. During search, 7.50 quintals of the contraband was found in the truck. Police were conducting further investigations to unearth more information about the racket. Police said a hunt was on and the accused would be arrested soon.

Short film on Ganjam folk art by Krishna DK

PNS ■ BRAHMAMPUR

The Nrityam Kala Gabeshana Kendra has prepared a short film "Adamyia" about some of the folk arts of Ganjam.

The shooting of the movie has been done in and around Makarjhola in Hinjilicut block under Ganjam district. The film is designed and directed by noted film director of international fame Krishna DK and co-directed by Suman Das. Similarly, State award winner Ranjeet Rath has taken the charge of cinematography.

The narrator of the film is Samanchal Maharana.

A band of veteran Odia actors, namely, Chaudhury Jayaprakash Das, Sanskruti Ratna Narayan Maharana, actresses Sanchita Patra, Kajal Behera, Sweetie Swain, Vivek Kumar Dakua, Shivam Sahu, Pritiranjana, Gitanjali, Madhusudan, Sapan, Khirasindhu, Sudshanshu, Guru Jayant Acharya and Mahendra performed in a spectacular manner. Besides, a number of artists from rural areas got the opportunity to perform in the film.

'Expedite land allocation to Hirakud displaced'

Revenue Min Pujari reviews departmental activities in J'suguda

PNS ■ JHARSUGUDA

Revenue and Disaster Management Minister Suresh Pujari conducted a comprehensive review of various departmental activities here on Friday.

The meeting was attended by key officials including IGP (Northern Range) Himanshu Lal, district Collector Aboli Sunil Naravane, SP Smit P Parmar, IAS probationer Saravanan C, CEO of Zilla Parishad Prabeer Kumar Nayak, Additional District Collector Kishore Chandra Swain, and other district-level



officers.

Pujari emphasized the importance of addressing public grievances promptly and effectively. He directed officials to expedite the allocation of land to Hirakud displaced individuals under various

schemes, ensure timely issuance of necessary certificates from tehsil offices, and enhance the quality and reliability of drinking water supply. Additionally, he instructed for the installation of information boards to inform the

public about project timelines, completion statuses, and costs.

The Minister underscored the necessity of maintaining high-quality standards in all project executions to ensure optimal public benefit.

Natural Calamities Committee meet held in JSpur

Focus on repair of weak river embankments, rain water discharge

PNS ■ JAGATSINGHPUR

A district-level Natural Calamities Committee meeting was held here on Friday, which was chaired by district Collector Anupam Saha. The meeting discussed the overall preparations of the civil administration in tackling possible natural calamities and their aftermath, including rehabilitation and restoration arrangements.

Jagatsinghpur MP Bibhu Prasad Tarai suggested restoration and reconstruction of dead drainage system lying defunct since years, while Minister Industries, Skill Development and Technical Education cum



Paradip MLA Sampad Swain emphasized free discharge of rainwater from villages on the outskirts of Paradip town before the onslaught of monsoon. Jagatsinghpur MLA Amarendra Das said that after a large-scale soil excavation was undertaken in river Beluakhai basement areas, the river embankment has been rendered

unsafe at Birbarpatna, Rambhadeipur and Arada villages. He suggested immediate repair of weak embankment points before flood water reaches the river.

Balikuda-Erasama MLA Sarada Jena and Tirtol MLA Dr Ramakanta Bhoi discussed rainwater discharge systems in areas under their Assembly con-

stituencies, calling for urgent reparation of the vulnerable points. They also proposed to the administration that unsafe cyclone shelters existing in several locations should be razed for public safety.

Collector Saha informed that a 24x7 hour control room has been set up at the district level to take prompt measures.

BJP attacks INDIA Bloc on TN hooch tragedy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Sunday attacked the INDIA Bloc on the hooch tragedy in DMK-ruled Tamil Nadu, saying it hopes the alliance leaders who have not spoken on the issue will at least show repentance by gathering near the Mahatma Gandhi statue in the Parliament complex and observing a moment of silence for the lives lost. Addressing a press conference at the BJP headquarters here, the party's national spokesperson Sambit Patra also slammed Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin and asked him to clarify if he was "complicit" in the incident which took place in the state's Kallakurichi district. "More than 56 people have



died... Many are still critical. More than 40 of those who died consuming spurious liquor are Dalits. This is state-sponsored murder and I am surprised that the Congress' Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul

Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and Sonia Gandhi, leaders of the DMK and those of other constituents of the 'INDI Alliance' are silent on it," Patra said. It seems they are silent on this

issue as it does not serve their politics, the BJP leader charged. "When the Parliament session starts tomorrow, I hope INDI Alliance leaders will go to Mahatma Gandhi's statue to observe silence, wearing black bands on their arms, and repent for the death of people in the hooch tragedy," Patra said. "Mahatma Gandhi was against illicit liquor. Gandhiji's statue is waiting for you, his principles are waiting for you," he added. Hitting out at Chief Minister Stalin, Patra accused his government and leaders of the DMK of being complicit in the hooch tragedy. "In his first statement, the district collector had initially denied that people died after consuming spurious liquor.

He was asked to do so because the Assembly session was scheduled to start the very next day," the BJP leader alleged, and cited some media reports. Due to the district collector's denial, those who had stock of the spurious liquor continued consuming it and more than a dozen people died the next day, he added. "Of course, the (Tamil Nadu) government is complicit in this. Look at the behaviour of the chief minister. I am astonished that a tragedy of such a magnitude has struck the state yet the chief minister is absent. Till the time I came to hold this press conference, he had not visited the bereaved family members of those who died," Patra said. "Shouldn't the Chief Minister come out with a statement," the BJP leader asked.

Jaishankar, UAE counterpart to deliberate on Gaza situation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on an official visit to the United Arab Emirates will hold wide-ranging talks with his counterpart Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Besides bilateral issues, Jaishankar and Al Nahyan are expected to deliberate on the overall situation in Gaza. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said Jaishankar's visit will provide an opportunity to review the entire spectrum of comprehensive strategic partnership between India and the UAE as well as regional and global developments. "External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will pay an official



visit to the UAE today," the MEA statement said. "During the visit, the External Affairs Minister will have meeting with his UAE counterpart on wide-ranging issues of the partnership," it added. The ties between India and the UAE have been on the upswing in the last few years. Following the landmark visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE in August 2015, bilateral relations between the two

countries were elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Both countries signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in February 2022 to boost economic engagement. The trade pact provides for numerous benefits, including the elimination and reduction of tariffs, fostering an open trade environment, and enhanced market access for service providers across various sectors. The UAE is also among the top four investors in India in terms of foreign direct investments in 2022-23. About 3.5 million - strong and vibrant Indian community forms the largest expatriate group in the UAE.

Army hospital infrastructure expansion plan set in motion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The state-of-the-art Army Hospital (Research & Referral) here has set the wheels in motion for a significant expansion in its infrastructure with three new medical centres for oncology, ophthalmology and orthopaedic and joint replacement set to come up in its sprawling campus here in the next one to two years. Lt Gen Ajith Nilakantan, Commandant, Army Hospital (R&R), said this during an interaction with a group of mediapersons on the AHRR premises on Saturday. The 1200-bed hospital is a "quaternary" facility and provides treatment largely to the patients referred to it from tertiary or similar-level hospitals, he said. With its campus in Delhi spread over 256 acres, it

is the apex medical institute of the Armed Forces Medical Services (AFMS). "No hospital can be updated and remain relevant if it doesn't expand and keep in touch with the latest advances in technology and facilities. That is why we have recently started the construction of a full-fledged oncology (cancer) centre with all the latest facilities, an ophthalmology (eye) centre is being constructed and also an orthopaedic and joint replacement centre also being constructed," the AHRR commandant said. "We hope that in the coming one to two years these will be ready," he added. The three new centres once completed will give a boost to the medical infrastructure and services offered by the hospital, which has been located at its current campus here since the late 1990s.

The AHRR had recently announced the opening of a skin bank facility, a first-of-its-kind facility to be established within the AFMS. While the skin bank housed in its Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery was formally inaugurated on June 18 by DGMS (Army) Lt Gen Arindam Chatterjee, it had received its first skin donation on May 29, a senior official said. This donor, a woman, was the mother of army personnel and had died at the AHRR, another official said. This skin bank is the first in the AFMS. In fact there are very few centres in the country which have a skin bank. Basically, it is for severe burns. Skin has to be replaced, otherwise infection can prove fatal, said Lt Gen Nilakantan. "It is very important to cover the exposed area and some-



times adequate skin may not be available with the same patient. So, we may have to take skin from somebody else and use it for an initial period until the base skin comes back.

As part of our organ donation system, we have an Armed Forces Organ Retrieval System, it's called AORTA (Army Organ Retrieval and Transplant Authority), and various organ donations are

organised, and this is the latest where skin donation is also part of our.... And, it's a licenced skin bank," he said. The AHRR Commandant said it is hoped that treatment of serious burn injuries will be augmented with this skin bank. This bank will serve as a centralised hub for the collection, processing, storage and distribution of skin grafts, providing a "critical resource" for military medical centres across the country. By establishing this facility, the armed forces are ensuring that the personnel and their families have access to the most advanced skin replacement therapies. The visiting mediapersons were later also taken around some of its key departments, which have cutting-edge medical equipment such as high-tech simulator for eye surgery.

Some of the mediapersons also interacted with the patients, who have recently undergone liver or heart transplant procedures at this hospital. Nilakantan said the AHRR has "all the broad specialties, and all the super specialties, and altogether we have 35 departments, including specialties and super specialties departments". "We have about 300 doctors, and 300 nursing officers. Also, we have a large number of outsourced paramedical staff, almost 1,000... Besides, 300 defence civilian," he said in response to a query. Asked what has been some of the lessons for the hospital from the COVID-19 pandemic, he said, firstly, "we had the advantage that we went for vaccination of frontline workers and our people were immunised (against Covid) at

the outset". And, with that confidence, at most of the hospitals in the AFMS, "we endeavoured to make sure that while we treated Covid, we also did not stop treatment of other diseases", the Commandant said. "This has been our endeavour. I can say it with pride that we did succeed to a large extent, including this hospital. Work here could be carried on to the fullest possible extent, with treatment of patients having other diseases as well," he asserted. "Today, we can look back and say that probably that is the way to get the whole infrastructure, medical establishment to work, in case we face similar situation in future. We were quite fully functional except for a brief period. Now, we are wiser, and next time it happens, we will be better," the Commandant said

Shuffling NEET officials no solution: Kharge

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday hit out at the Modi Government over the bureaucratic reshuffle in the National Testing Agency (NTA) after alleged irregularities in NEET-UG, saying the buck stops at the doorstep of the top echelons of the regime. Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge alleged that the National Testing Agency (NTA) was projected to be an autonomous body, but in reality was made to serve the "devious interests" of the BJP/RSS. "In the NEET scam, the buck stops at the doorstep of the top echelons of the Modi Government. Shuffling the bureaucrats is no solution to the endemic problem in the Education system rotted by the BJP," he said in a post on X. For students to get justice, Modi government must be held accountable, he said. The Centre on Saturday had shunted out NTA's Director General Subodh Singh and handed over the probe into the irregularities in medical entrance exam NEET-UG to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The Education Ministry has also set up a seven-member panel headed by former ISRO chief K Radhakrishnan to review the agency's functioning and recommend exam reforms. It also postponed the NEET-PG entrance, the fourth entrance examination to be impacted in recent days. Kharge said the NEET-PG



Exam has been postponed and in all four examinations have been either cancelled or postponed in the past 10 days. "Paper Leaks, Corruption, Irregularities and Education Mafia has infiltrated our Education system," he alleged. "This belated whitewashing exercise is of no consequence as countless youth continue to suffer," Kharge said. Slamming the postponement of the NEET PG exam, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi charged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is "helpless" before the paper leak racket and "education mafia". "Now NEET PG has been postponed. This is another unfortunate example of the ruined education system under Narendra Modi's rule. In BJP rule, students are not forced to study to save their careers, but are forced to fight with the government to save their future. Now it is clear, after silently watching the spectacle every time, Modi is helpless before the paper leak racket and Education Mafia," he said in a

post in Hindi on X. "Narendra Modi's incompetent government is the biggest threat to the future of students and we must save the future of the country from it," he added. Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also attacked the Modi government over the alleged irregularities in national competitive exams, including the NEET-UG, alleging that it has handed over the entire education system to the "mafia" and the "corrupt". In a post on X, she the NEET-UG question paper was "leaked" while the NEET-PG, UGC-NET and CSIR-NET exams were "cancelled". Earlier, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said, "No day is complete without news of cancellation of an exam because of the total incompetence of the non-biological PM and the people around him". The Communist Party of India (Marxist) demanded Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation amid a raging controversy around the National

Testing Agency (NTA) in the wake of paper-leak allegations and cancellations of exams. In a statement issued here on Sunday, the CPI (M) politburo said it is "deeply anguished over the sinister developments which have engulfed the centralised all-India examination processes". Mentioning examinations like the NEET-PG and UGC-NET, which have been cancelled, the Left party said, "The combined impact of this is irregularities and complete collapse of the processes which affects vital sectors of higher education in the country." The statement said it is not just a result of corruption, but also of centralisation, commercialisation and communalisation of education. "This is not merely the result of corruption, which is prima facie established. This has emerged from centralisation, commercialisation and communalisation in the education sphere and which is an essential ingredient of the National Education Policy," it said. The CPI(M) said asking the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to probe the allegations is an approach to "whitewash" and demanded the minister's resignation as well as the scrapping of the NEET. "The new government summoning the services of the CBI to investigate these scams confirms its approach to whitewash, like it did with the Vyapam scam. These reflect the complete collapse of the policy prescriptions in higher education for which the entire government is accountable,

particularly the HRD minister. He must resign," the statement said. "The politburo demands that in a country as big and as diverse as India, the centralisation of governance of higher education should be reversed and the first step should be to scrap the centralised NEET exams," the Left party said. Every state should be allowed their own separate procedures for conducting admission tests to regulate entry into professional educational institutions, it added. On Saturday, the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET)-PG, conducted for admission to postgraduate medical courses and scheduled to be held on June 23, was postponed as a "precautionary measure" in the wake of recent allegations on the integrity of some competitive exams, including the NEET-Undergraduate (UG). On Friday, the June edition of the Joint Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test (CSIR-NET) was postponed citing unavoidable circumstances and logistical issues. It came two days after the agency cancelled the University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) within 24 hours of its conduct, saying the integrity of the exam had been compromised and a massive row has erupted regarding the NEET-UG over alleged irregularities, with the issue now before the Supreme Court.

Academicians urge Centre to preserve integrity of exams

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As the row over irregularities in competitive examinations continues to rage, several academicians on Sunday urged the Centre to preserve the integrity of examinations and stressed that overnight solutions are not possible in such complex cases. Facing flak over alleged discrepancies in competitive examinations, the Centre on Saturday shunted out National Testing Agency (NTA) Director General Subodh Singh and handed over the probe into irregularities in medical entrance exam NEET-UG to the CBI. The Education Ministry also set up a seven-member panel headed by former ISRO chief K Radhakrishnan to review the agency's functioning and recommend examination reforms. It postponed the NEET-PG entrance, the fourth entrance examination to be impacted in recent days. The academicians said removal of National Testing Agency chief and ordering CBI probe into the NEET irregularities will build trust among students. "Since this is an issue which impacts lakhs of students, a thorough investigation into the irregularities is required for an informed decision. "Overnight solutions are not possible in such complex cases. The government has already formed high level committee.



Lets wait for all the inputs to come. We need to have patience," Govind Rangarajan, Director, Indian Institute of Science (IISc)-Bangalore, said. Anil Sahasrabudhe, Chairman of National Education Technology Forum, said the decision to hand over all NTA cases to CBI has reposed confidence in the students. "The announcement of high-powered committee with Dr Radhakrishnan as chairman and six other eminent academic is timely corrective action to build the trust amongst students. "The Radhakrishnan committee shall pave the way for robust transparent zero error process of end to end examination system fixing accountability of every functional and desired checks and balances creating confidence among students," he said. Mohandas Pai, Chairman of Manipal Global Education Services, said there should not be retest for the 24 lakh candidates who appeared for NEET. "It will be unfair to put every-

body through the process. Retest should be at the only those centers where things have gone wrong. Government is taking steps to ensure integrity of examination," he said. University Grants Commission Chairman M Jagadeesh Kumar welcomed the setting up a panel on examination reforms. "The Committee's emphasis on recommending reforms in the examination process, enhancing data security protocols, and improving the NTAs structure and functioning will strengthen our national entrance examination system. Protecting student's interests and their future is our top priority," he said. The Centre is under fire over alleged irregularities in competitive exams NEET and NET. While the medical entrance examination question paper was allegedly leaked according to an investigation by the Bihar Police, UGC-NET was cancelled a day after it was conducted following inputs that the integrity of the examination was compromised.

Children with chronic skin diseases face emotional trauma

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Naveen Rawal, a 15-year-old struggling with acne, says in a choked voice, "Having acne made me feel like everyone is staring at my face. I try to cover it up with makeup, but kids at school still make fun of me. It made me not want to go out or be seen by anyone." Similarly, 12-year-old Jagat, who battles eczema, shares, "My skin always looks red from itching. People think I have something contagious and avoid sitting next to me in the class. Sometimes, I feel really lonely because no one wants to be my friend." Nine-year-old Rema, coping with alopecia, questions why she looks different from her peers, saying, "I don't have any

hair on my head. Kids at school call me names like 'baldy' and laugh at me. It makes me not want to take off my hat or go to school." These testimonies reflect the emotional and social challenges besides bullying and stigmatisation children with chronic skin diseases such as acne, alopecia, eczema, psoriasis, and vitiligo often face affecting their self-esteem and social interactions. This has been pointed out by a study published in JAMA Dermatology. In general, girls reported more stigma than boys. The study said over 73 per cent of participants reported experiencing stigma related to their condition. This stigma was strongly linked to lower quality of life, increased

anxiety, and depression among affected children. The study covered 1671 children, 58 per cent of them girls, with mean age being about 14 years. About 56 per cent of the children self-reported high disease visibility, while 50.5% reported moderate disease severity. "The general burden of skin disease is sometimes difficult for people to appreciate, and even as dermatologists, we don't always know how to ask questions about quality of life or how our perception correlates with the lived experience of patients and their caregivers," said study author Michele Ramien, MD, Clinical Associate Professor of Pediatric Dermatology at the University of Calgary, Pediatric



Dermatologist at Alberta Children's Hospital in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and President of the Canadian Dermatology Association. "This study clearly shows, with validated instruments and tools, that there is a big burden and stigma associated with skin disease, and the experience of stigma is real," she said. "It's something we need to work on asking about more and addressing with patients." The study was conducted at 32 pediatric dermatology centers in Canada and the United States between 2018 and 2021, using the Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Instrumentation System Stigma-Skin to examine the links between disease visibility and severity and mental

health and quality of life. Nearly three quarters of children with skin disorders reported some amount of stigma. Stigma scores correlated strongly with reduced quality of life, depression, anxiety, and poor peer relationships. In addition, about 29% of parents said they were aware of their child being bullied, primarily at school, which was strongly associated with stigma. In general, girls reported more stigma than boys, and children with hyperhidrosis and hidradenitis suppurativa were more likely to have higher depression and anxiety scores. "Some conditions didn't have as much perceived stigma as we had thought, such as atopic dermatitis, while others had

more than we thought, such as excessive sweating," Ramien said. "That speaks to the disconnect in physician perceptions and serves as a reminder to ask children and families about their experience - and to find the best way to do that without making it burdensome or stigmatizing." When physicians ask about mental health challenges and quality of life, they may be better able to refer children and families to the care they need. For instance, specialized dermatology treatment may help decrease the severity and visibility of the skin condition, and mental health resources may help reduce stigma, false beliefs, and internalized perceptions.

Keen contest on cards in hypolls to 10 Assembly seats in UP

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

With the INDIA Bloc making significant gains against the BJP in Uttar Pradesh in Lok Sabha polls, the by-elections in 10 assembly seats that have fallen vacant are likely to witness a keen contest, with the ruling party under pressure to regain its hold.

The date for the by-elections has not been announced yet by the Election Commission. However, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Congress have announced that they will contest together under the INDIA bloc. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has also begun its preparations, according to their leaders. The seats fell vacant after nine assembly members including Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav were elected to Lok Sabha, while SP MLA from Sisamau MLA Irfan Solanki of Kanpur was disqualified after he was sentenced to jail in a criminal case. UP Assembly Special Secretary Brajbhushan Dubey told PTI that information about the vacancy on 10 seats has been sent to the Election Commission.

“As per the procedure, by-elections can be held on these seats within six months,” he said.

Five of these seats were won by the Samajwadi Party in 2022 while one seat was bagged by the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), which was then in alliance with the SP. Three seats were won by the BJP and one seat went into the account of BJP’s ally Nishad Party. While the by-election results will be numerically inconsequential for the BJP in the state assembly, where it



has a comfortable majority, they will impact the morale of both sides as any further losses to the BJP will help the opposition SP and Congress to further cement their gains. While the SP and the Congress have expressed confidence that they will continue their winning streak, the BJP is also preparing to do “something special” in the by-elections to increase its “credibility”, according to leaders. BJP’s state media in-charge Manish Dixit told PTI that the “NDA will contest the assembly by-elections with full strength. There is no pressure anywhere, rather the NDA will fight the assembly by-elections with full strength. BJP workers are always ready for public service and elections.” “The party will fight the elections will all its might and the result will be a special achievement,” he said. On the question of giving seats to alliance partners, he said, “The party leadership will decide this but at the level of organisation and government, we have started preparing for the elections with full enthusiasm.”

When Samajwadi Party (SP) chief spokesperson and national secretary Rajendra Chaudhary was asked about it, he said, ‘Preparations for by-elections have been started on all the vacant seats and in alliance with the Congress party, we will fight the elections with full strength and win.’ “The committee formed for management in the Lok Sabha elections is preparing for these 10 seats and national president Akhilesh Yadav will form a new committee for this after the Parliament session,” he said. Meanwhile, UP Congress Committee President Ajay Rai said that the “INDIA alliance will fight unitedly in the upcoming by-elections and soon the leaders of the alliance will meet and discuss the seats and election strategy.” A leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party said that its chief Mayawati has called a meeting of prominent leaders of all states in Lucknow on Sunday, in which the strategy for the by-elections can also be discussed. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the INDIA bloc

won 43 seats out of 80 in the state, with 37 seats going to the SP and six seats to Congress. On the other hand, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party won 33 seats while its ally Rashtriya Lok Dal won two and Apna Dal (S) got one seat. The BSP did not open its account in this election. The BJP and its allies won 73 Lok Sabha seats in 2014 and 64 seats in 2019. In the 2022 assembly elections, the BJP won a total of 273 seats with its allies.

According to the website of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, in the 403-member House, the BJP has 249, its ally Apna Dal (S) has 13, Rashtriya Lok Dal has eight, Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party has six and Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal (NISHAD) has five members. The main opposition SP has 103 members and Congress has two members. Apart from this, there are two members of the Jansatta Dal (Loktantrik) and one member of the Bahujan Samaj Party.

In the by-elections to four assembly constituencies held along with the Lok Sabha elections, two seats each were won by the SP and the BJP, but these MLAs have not taken oath yet. The MLAs from the NDA who were elected to Lok Sabha are -- Rashtriya Lok Dal’s Chandan Chauhan, BJP’s Atul Garg, Anoop Alkmlsh and Praveen Patel, Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal’s (NISHAD) Vinod Kumar Bin. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav along with party MLAs Ziaur Rahman, Lalji Verma and Awadhesh Prasad have been elected to Lok Sabha.

BJP to uproot corrupt JMM led alliance, claims Chouhan

PTI ■ RANCHI

Union minister and BJP’s election in-charge for Jharkhand Shivraj Singh Chouhan said on Sunday that the saffron party will form the next government in the state by uprooting the “corrupt” JMM-led coalition from power. Chouhan and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who is BJP’s election co-incharge for Jharkhand, held a meeting with party leaders, MLAs, MPs, and workers in Ranchi to prepare strategies for the assembly elections in the state due later this year. He said the BJP had an outstanding performance in the recently concluded Lok Sabha polls in Jharkhand where it won eight seats and its ally AJSU Party bagged one. “We had a lead in 52 of



the 81 assembly seats in the parliamentary polls. The state played an important role in securing the third term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. I congratulate the party leadership, booth workers and people of Jharkhand for the achievement,” he said. The party will work under the leadership of Babulal Marandi and form the next government in Jharkhand in the upcoming assembly polls, he said. Chouhan alleged that the current JMM-led dispensation in the state is

“India’s most corrupt government”. “There is loot everywhere in the state, be it sand, coal, mines and minerals. The chief minister is in jail and many leaders are being arrested on charges of corruption,” he said. Chouhan said that it has become “necessary to free Jharkhand from bad governance and reinstate the BJP’s good governance to make the state ‘Viksit’ (developed) [Jharkhand]”. Earlier, Chouhan and Sarma planted trees at ICAR, Namkum campus and Lichi Bagan in Ranchi’s Hatia area as part of the party’s ‘Ek ped maa ke naam’ initiative. “Prime Minister Narendra Modi is concerned about the environment. To make the earth safe for the coming generations, this initiative has been started,” Chouhan told reporters.

Under construction bridge collapses in Bihar’s Motihari



PTI ■ MOTIHARI

An under-construction small bridge collapsed in East Champaran district on Sunday in third such incident in Bihar in less than a week, officials said. No casualty was reported in the incident that happened in Ghorasahan block in Motihari, they said. The 16-metre-long bridge was being built over a canal by the state’s Rural Works Department (RWD) to connect Amwa village to other areas of the block. It was being built at a cost of Rs 1.5 crore, they added. “The exact cause of the incident is not yet known. It is a serious matter and a departmental inquiry has been ordered. Strict action will be taken against those found guilty,” Additional Chief Secretary of RWD Dipak Kumar Singh told PTI. “Senior officers of the district administration have reached the spot. A detailed report is awaited,” he said. District Magistrate Saurabh Jorwal said the exact cause of the incident was being ascertained. “There are reports that a section of locals initially objected to the construction of certain pillars of the bridge. Police are also looking into this matter,” he told PTI. On Saturday, a small bridge collapsed in Siwan district. It was built over a canal, connecting the villages of Daraunda and Maharajanj blocks. Prior to that, on Tuesday, a newly constructed bridge, about 180 metres long, had collapsed in the Araria district.

Hanumangarhi temple chief priest loses security cover

PTI ■ AYODHYA

Police personnel deployed for the security of Hanumangarhi temple’s chief priest Raju Das were recently removed after an argument between him and district officials during a meeting here called by two Uttar Pradesh ministers.

Ayodhya District Magistrate Nitish Kumar, however, said the mahant’s security cover was removed on Friday following complaints that he was misusing it to threaten people, particularly traders. The meeting was called by Uttar Pradesh ministers Jai Veer Singh and Surya Pratap Shahi on Thursday evening to review the BJP’s performance in the Faizabad Lok Sabha seat, which it lost in the polls, and Das and Ayodhya Mayor Girish Pati Tripathi were also present there. District officials, including the magistrate and Senior Superintendent of Police Raj Karan Nayyar, were called later to the meeting.

Syama Prasad’s life was dedicated to India’s unity, says Yogi

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday paid tributes to Bharatiya Jana Sangh founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee on his death anniversary and said that his life was dedicated to the unity and integrity of India.

Addressing people gathered for a ceremony on Mookerjee, Adityanath said freedom fighter Syama Prasad Mookerjee sacrificed his life in 1953 for “one country, one head of state, one constitution and one flag.” The country became independent in 1947 and in 1950 India implemented its constitution. But the implementation of the constitution, the then Congress-led government made a malicious attempt to seriously harm the national integrity by adding Article 370 to the constitution of the country. “Keeping in mind the intention of the then government, Dr Mookerjee



who was a minister in the central government at the time, left his post and started a massive movement to remove Article 370 from Kashmir for the prestige and integrity of the country,” he said. The chief minister said he had to sacrifice his life for Kashmir Satyagraha, which he had started Bharatiya Jana Sangh workers. Crediting Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the abrogation of Article 370, Adityanath said, “By abolishing Article 370 in Kashmir, the BJP government has kept its promise of ‘one country, one head of state, one constitution and one flag.’” He said, “This is a tribute

to all those martyrs who sacrificed their lives for Kashmir, the integrity of the country and for the protection of its borders.” Earlier, in a post on X, Adityanath said, “Humble tribute to the great patriot, founder president of Bharatiya Jana Sangh, excellent educationist, guide of nationalists, revered Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee on his martyrdom day! His entire life and sacrifice, dedicated to the unity and integrity of India, is a great inspiration for the people of the country.” UP cabinet ministers and other prominent leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also paid floral tributes to Mookerjee’s statue here. BJP leaders, including Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak, Water Power Minister Swatantra Dev Singh, former Deputy Chief Minister and Rajya Sabha member Dinesh Sharma and former minister Mahendra Singh paid their tribute to Mookerjee.

ISRO completes its Reusable Launch Vehicle technology demonstrations through LEX trio

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Space agency ISRO on Sunday said it has achieved a third consecutive success in the Reusable Launch Vehicle Landing Experiment by demonstrating the autonomous landing capability of the launch vehicle under more challenging conditions. This mission simulated the approach and landing interface and high-speed landing conditions for a vehicle returning from space, reaffirming the Indian Space Research Organisation’s (ISRO) expertise in acquiring the most critical technologies required for the development of a Reusable Launch Vehicle (RLV), the space agency said. The third and final test in the series of Landing Experiment (LEX-03) was conducted at 07:10 IST at the Aeronautical Test Range (ATR) in Chitradurga, Karnataka. Following the success of the RLV LEX-01 and LEX-02 missions, ISRO in a release said, RLV LEX-03 re-



demonstrated the autonomous landing capability of the RLV under more challenging release conditions (cross range of 500 m against 150 m for LEX-02) and more severe wind conditions. The winged vehicle, named ‘Pushpak’, was released from an Indian Air Force Chinook Helicopter at an altitude of 4.5 km “from a release point 4.5 km away from the runway. Pushpak autonomously executed cross-range correction manoeuvres, approached the runway and performed a precise horizontal landing at the runway centreline,” it said. Due to this vehicle’s low lift-

to-drag ratio aerodynamic configuration, the landing velocity exceeded 320 kmph, compared to 260 kmph for a commercial aircraft and 280 kmph for a typical fighter aircraft, it added. ISRO said, after touchdown, the vehicle velocity was reduced to nearly 100 kmph using its brake parachute, after which the landing gear brakes were employed for deceleration and stop on the runway. During this ground roll phase, Pushpak utilises its rudder and nose wheel steering system to autonomously maintain a stable and precise ground roll along the runway, it said.

According to the space agency, this mission simulated the approach and landing interface and high-speed landing conditions for a vehicle returning from space, reaffirming ISRO’s expertise in acquiring the most critical technologies required for the development of a Reusable Launch Vehicle (RLV). Through this mission, the advanced guidance algorithm catering to longitudinal and lateral plane error corrections, which is essential for the future Orbital Re-entry Mission has been validated, the space agency noted. The RLV-LEX uses multi-sensor fusion including sensors like Inertial sensor, Radar altimeter, Flush air data system, Pseudolite system and NavIC, it said, adding “Notably, the RLV-LEX-03 mission reused the winged body and flight systems as such without any modification, from the LEX-02 mission, demonstrating the robustness of ISRO’s capability of design to reuse flight systems for multiple missions.”

Fake currency notes printed by Naxalites seized in Chhattisgarh

PTI ■ SUKMA

Security forces have for the first time recovered a huge cache of fake currency notes belonging to Naxalites and equipment used to print them in Chhattisgarh’s Sukma district, a senior police official said on Sunday. According to the police, Naxalites were allegedly using the fake currency notes in weekly markets of interior areas of Bastar region for a long time and duping innocent tribals. Naxalites were also trying to destabilise the Indian economy with this move, Sukma Superintendent of Police Kiran G Chavan claimed. The recovery was made on Saturday evening on a forested hill near Korajguda village of the district when a joint team of security personnel from various forces was out on a search operation,



he said, without specifying the exact face value of the fake currency. “For the first time, fake currency notes belonging to Naxalites have been recovered in the state which has been struggling with the menace for more than three decades,” Chavan said terming the seizure as a crucial success in the anti-Naxal operation. Personnel belonging to the Central Reserve Police Force’s 50th battalion, District Reserve Guard (DRG), Bastar

Fighters and district force were involved in the operation which was launched based on inputs that Konta area committee of Naxalites was engaged in printing fake notes in Mailasur, Korajguda and Danteshpuram areas of Sukma, he said. On sensing the presence of security personnel near Korajguda, Naxalites escaped into a dense forest leaving behind their belongings, the official said. During a search of the site, the security personnel recovered a cache of fake notes in the denominations of Rs 50, Rs 100, Rs 200 and Rs 500, a coloured printing machine, a black and white printer, an inverter machine, 200 bottles of ink, four cartridges of printer machine, nine printer rollers, six wireless sets, its charger and batteries, he said.

Ad firm paid ₹46 lakh to company of IPS officer’s wife, claims Somaiya

PTI ■ MUMBAI

BJP leader Kirit Somaiya on Sunday alleged that ad firm director Bhavesh Bhide had paid Rs 46 lakh as bribe to a company of the wife of then GRP commissioner, who gave permission to install a hoarding which collapsed here last month. Somaiya in a series of post on X also claimed that Rs 5 crore was paid by the Ego Media Pvt Ltd (where Bhide was the director) to various railway police and Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) officials for “two dozen illegal hoardings” in Ghatkopar and Dadar areas of Mumbai. The former BJP MP said he has written a letter to Maharashtra Deputy Chief



Minister Devendra Fadnavis, requesting him to suspend then Government Railway Police Commissioner Quaiser Khalid for “Ghatkopar Hoardings Scam BRIBE”. A giant hoarding collapsed in Mumbai’s Ghatkopar area on May 13 during gusty winds and unseasonal rains, killing 17 persons and injured more than 70 others, according to police.

Revanna alleges conspiracy behind sexual abuse charges against MLC son Suraj

PTI ■ BENGALURU

JD(S) MLA and former Karnataka Minister H D Revanna on Sunday termed the allegations against his son and MLC Suraj Revanna of sexually abusing a male party worker as a “conspiracy” and said he has faith in God and the judiciary. Not wanting to react to anything, he said when time comes he will tell everything. Suraj Revanna -- the brother of former MP Prajwal Revanna who is facing allegations of sexually abusing several women -- was arrested in Hassan earlier in the day on charges of “unnatural offences” against him, police sources said. He was booked on Saturday for allegedly sexually abusing a party worker a few days ago and under different sections of the IPC, including



“unnatural offences.” “I won’t react to anything. Let the (CID) do it (investigation). Who said don’t (investigate)? I won’t say anything on this. I have respect for the judiciary. I know what’s happening in the state,” Revanna said. While speaking to reporters here, he said, “I won’t react to anything. I have faith in God and the judiciary. I won’t fear such conspiracies. I know what it is, time will decide.”

Asked as to who was conspiring, Revanna said, “I don’t know, you (media) will have to tell -- who, what. I will leave it to you...Will face it, judiciary is there. Suraj has gone (to police), everyone knows what all has happened in the last couple of days.” Regarding Suraj’s complaint, he said, “I don’t know what it is. Time will come, when time comes I will tell everything.” Suraj Revanna (37), the grandson of former prime minister H D Deve Gowda has categorically refuted the charge. Suraj had also alleged the man had filed a false complaint against him in a bid to extort Rs 5 crore from him. On Friday, police registered a case of extortion against the JD(S) worker on a complaint by Suraj Revanna’s close aide Shivakumar.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Friend in need

Both India and Bangladesh stand to beneficially feed off each other with the new tranche of agreements

New Delhi and Dhaka have signed a comprehensive bunch of collaborations that includes pledging to begin negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), deciding to launch a medical e-visa facility for Bangladeshis and agreeing to send a technical team to discuss the Teesta river water-sharing, besides announcing the opening of an Assistant High Commission in Rangpur. Additional goodies in the bouquet include new train and bus services, export of 40 MW power to Bangladesh via the Indian grid, an inland container depot at Sirajganj and 350 training slots for Bangladeshi police officers. For India, four major imperatives have significantly driven the nation's increased strategic engagement with Bangladesh: Improving the country's economic standing, attending to the healthcare requirements of Bangladeshis, increasing India's presence in the region and attempting to counter China's increasing influence in Bangladesh. In office since 2008 and earlier heartily praised for



leading her country's economic and social development, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is now facing difficulties in post-pandemic recovery. Her plan to use the bilateral relationship to address these issues includes the outreach to New Delhi in a major way. It makes sense that New Delhi is responding to her advances with a bit more warmth than usual this time, in part because of Beijing's looming shadow in the background. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina deepened their partnership with a "futuristic vision" for transformative cooperation during the latter's two-day visit to India from June 21.

India holds a special place in Bangladesh's history, particularly owing to the 1971 Liberation War wherein India played a key role. However, relations between the nations became tense during military rule in the mid-1970s, marred by anti-India sentiment. But the shared history has helped forge a strong bond, with Modi's tenure since 2014 giving a new fillip to bilateral ties. Earlier, a significant shift occurred in 1996, when Hasina took over as the Prime Minister for the first time; since then, bilateral relations have steadily improved. Since 2019, the two leaders have met on 10 occasions, ushering in an era of remarkable transformation and strengthening bonds. Prime Minister Hasina, who began her fourth consecutive term in January 2024, joined six other world leaders at Modi's swearing-in ceremony on June 9, 2024. However, challenges persist, such as border management, illegal migration, the National Register of Citizens, Rohingya and river water sharing, necessitating ongoing dialogue. Bangladesh has established an island for the persecuted Rohingyas and seeks India's help in persuading Myanmar to repatriate the displaced minorities. The Modi-Hasina partnership has the potential to further cement India-Bangladesh relations, navigating these challenges and leveraging their shared vision for mutual prosperity.

PICTALK



A herd of wild elephants bathes in water to get respite from the heat, in Kamrup

PTI

Venture Capital and Private Equity drive growth globally

These financial engines reshape industries and foster entrepreneurship, marking a pragmatic shift in the global financial landscape

In recent years, venture capital (VC) and private equity (PE) have emerged as powerful catalysts for innovation and economic growth globally. This surge represents a pivotal shift in the financial landscape, reshaping industries and fostering entrepreneurship in unprecedented ways. Venture capital, known for financing early-stage startups with high growth potential, has experienced remarkable expansion due to technological advancements and evolving consumer demands. Startups leveraging technologies such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, fintech and sustainable energy have become prime targets. These funds not only provide crucial capital for research, development and market expansion but also enable entrepreneurs to scale their innovations rapidly and disrupt traditional industries. Simultaneously, private equity has broadened its scope beyond traditional domains to include sectors like healthcare, education, consumer goods and infrastructure. PE firms typically invest in established companies seeking growth opportunities or



undergoing strategic transformations. By injecting capital, implementing operational efficiencies and providing strategic guidance, PE firms play a pivotal role in enhancing competitiveness, expanding market reach and driving sustainable value creation. Several key factors have contributed to the robust growth of VC and PE investments: **Technical Advancements** Breakthroughs in technologies such as cloud computing, big data analytics and blockchain have revolutionised business models and accelerated innovation cycles. These advancements have lowered barriers to entry for startups and empowered established companies to adapt and thrive in a digital-first economy, making them attractive targets for PE investments seeking to optimise operations and enhance

profitability. **Globalisation and Market Access:** Increasing interconnectedness has facilitated cross-border investments, allowing VC and PE firms to diversify their portfolios and tap into emerging markets with untapped potential. This global expansion not only increases investment opportunities but also exposes companies to new markets, customers and strategic partnerships, driving growth and scalability. **Shift in Consumer Behavior:** Evolving consumer preferences towards sustainability, digital solutions and personalised experiences have driven demand for innovative products and services. VC-backed startups are at the forefront of meeting these evolving needs, disrupting traditional industries and creating new market opportunities. **Supportive Regulatory Environment:** Favorable regulatory frameworks and Government policies aimed at fostering innovation, entrepreneurship and capital formation have played a crucial role in facilitating VC and PE investments. These policies provide incentives for

investors, reduce regulatory barriers and create a conducive environment for startups and growth-stage companies to thrive. **Institutional Investor Participation:** Growing interest from institutional investors such as pension funds, sovereign wealth funds and endowments has significantly bolstered VC and PE markets. These investors seek diversification, higher returns and exposure to innovative sectors, driving substantial capital inflows into VC-backed startups and PE-funded enterprises. Despite the promising opportunities presented by the VC and PE boom, challenges persist. Market volatility, valuation pressures, regulatory complexities and geopolitical uncertainties pose risks that demand careful risk management strategies. Furthermore, maintaining ethical standards, sustainable practices and alignment with stakeholders are critical for long-term success and value creation in the VC and PE ecosystem.

(The writer is CEO of Cosmos Financial Group; views are personal)



MAYANK SINGHAVIE

Naidu's comeback will redefine Andhra's future

After being sidelined for over two decades, Naidu's resurgence signals a major shift in the State's politics and sets the stage for a renewed focus on development

The recent swearing-in of Nara Chandrababu Naidu as Andhra Pradesh's Chief Minister was a significant event for Naidu personally, his Party and Indian politics. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other top BJP leaders witnessed the 74-year-old politician taking the oath for the fourth time, marking a significant political comeback. Despite being marginalised in State and national politics for over two decades, Naidu is grateful for his new role. He has once again proven that one should never underestimate a politician until they are out of the game. The triumphant return of Naidu as the Chief Minister, along with the emergence of his Party, Telugu Desam, as the second largest group in the current NDA Government, signifies a shift in power dynamics.

A year ago, Babu's predecessor, Jagan Mohan Reddy, was comfortably placed to win another term. Then, because the opposition was divided, Pawan Kalyan was not with the TDP and the BJP was still deciding whether to let the TDP join the NDA coalition again. Babu was accused of corruption and TDP workers felt disheartened. Several factors contributed to Naidu's comeback. Apart from the anti-incumbency sentiment, the caste coalition of Pawan Kalyan's Janasena, the BJP and the TDP played a crucial role. Jagan's neglect of infrastructure and agriculture also negatively affected the people, further contributing to Naidu's resurgence. Naidu has been a survivor. He started his political career as a junior minister in 1978 and has since held various positions in the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). He has served as the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh multiple times, overseeing significant development projects and facing political controversies. Throughout it all, Naidu kept up his unwavering spirit. Naidu has announced that the 2024 election will be his last, a move intended to emotionally appeal to voters while grooming his son Lokesh as his successor. This strategic deci-



sion could significantly impact the Naidu dynasty's future in Andhra Pradesh politics. At first, Babu stayed in the shadows of his father-in-law and Telugu Desam chief N.T. Rama Rao, but eventually became Indispensable. He gained valuable experience and insights into national politics during the National Front and United Front Governments. His Party was part of the VP Singh, Deve Gowda, I.K. Gujral and later Vajpayee Governments, signifying that no party was untouchable. Naidu and his Party have had a fluctuating relationship with various central Governments. However, their current participation in the Modi Government is particularly notable. With TDP's support for the Modi Government, Naidu is in a position to negotiate and advocate for the interests of Andhra Pradesh. As for the State, Babu has become the State's CEO again. As chief Minister, Naidu rubbed shoulders with Tech Giants like Bill Gates in his earlier terms. He brought investment opportunities to Hyderabad and transformed it into Cyberabad. He secured funding for infrastructure from agencies like the World Bank and developed Hyderabad overall. However, the mistake was that he should have focused on developing

“DURING HIS FOUR DECADES OF POLITICAL CAREER, NAIDU, AGED 74, HAS PROVED HIMSELF A SURVIVOR. HE WAS MUCH AHEAD OF HIS TIME IN HIS FIRST AND SECOND TERMS

other parts of the State. In his fourth term, Naidu should avail the opportunity to bring back the importance of Andhra Pradesh, once the country's rice bowl. Naidu's top priority is securing additional funds for Andhra Pradesh, which is a crucial step towards the State's development. Naidu's vision for Andhra Pradesh's development includes reviving long pending irrigation projects like the Polavaram project to boost the State's agricultural sector. With his Party's support, Naidu is determined to maximise the State's resources and drive development. "We are not negotiating on the composition of the Narendra Modi cabinet when it comes to State interests," was his response to a question about the TDP securing only one cabinet minister and one Minister of State in the Modi cabinet. However, they still hope to secure more positions during the next expansion. The second important task is to build the Andhra Pradesh State capital, Amaravati. His predecessor, Jagan Mohan Reddy, suspended this ambitious project during his two terms. Now that Babu is back in charge, he aims to complete Amaravati. He will put pressure on the Centre to secure funds for building capital, various new projects and his six welfare schemes. Being a show-

man, he would like to project Amaravathi as a model capital. The State is facing a severe financial crisis. There is a significant shortage of funds, with a total debt of around Rs 14 lakh crores, including Rs 12 lakh crore borrowed from various sources and pending bills of Rs 1.5 lakh crore. During his four decades of political career, Naidu, aged 74, has proved himself a survivor. He was much ahead of his time in his first and second terms. He projected himself as a forward-thinking, pro-technology and tech-savvy Chief Minister. The atmosphere is excellent, as Naidu has the comfort of a kingmaker. Being part of the Modi Government gives him a chance to share power. He has no opposition in the Assembly, with YSRCP reduced to just 11 seats. The TDP needs to address the issue of reservations for Muslims. This topic could lead to conflicts with the BJP. Naidu's positive relationship with Modi is expected to last a year, after which they could pressure the Modi Government on this issue. Additionally, the TDP must resolve the corruption case as Naidu is currently out on bail. His conduct in his fourth term is crucial for his future and that of his son Lokesh.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IN BENGAL

Madam — This is my response to the news item "Bengal Guv. alleges snooping by State Police," published on June 21. I am too dumbstruck to react to such news. If the governor of a State feels insecure in the Raj Bhawan, how safe and secure are ordinary citizens of the State of Bengal? Earlier, there were allegations that Governor C.V. Ananda Bose had molested a Raj Bhawan lady staffer. This implies that Bose is himself a threat to the security of lady staffers. His run-ins with the CM of Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, are well known. Bengal has become the theatre of the absurd, where everything imaginable as well as unimaginable is possible. If people holding high constitutional offices become the "torchbearers" of misconduct, it will be hard to find a place of refuge. Even this quote offers cold comfort to the people of Bengal. Life is tragic and absurd and none of it has any purpose at all. says T. C. Boyle, an American novelist. Or does absurdity have no upper limits at all?

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

HEAT TAKING TOLL OF HEALTH

Madam — Shocking observations have been revealed in a survey conducted by the network organisation World Weather Attribution (WWA). The temperature has increased by 35 times; the current year is the highest. In the Northern Hemisphere region of the Earth, it has been observed that there is a severe heat wave before the monsoon season. The current year or season is the one with the highest heat stress. There has been a huge increase in greenhouse gases all over the world. Similarly, the increasing use of fossil fuels generates huge amounts of heat. However, the risk of heat stroke caused by such heat is predicted to increase. In this case, the body's cooling system completely collapses and if not treated in time, there is a possibility of human death. These shocking observations have been

Paper leak rows



Propos the news story "After NEET comes NET row," published on June 21, this is my response. As if the NEET fiasco was not enough, we now have the NET exam being cancelled. With the alarming frequency of paper leaks happening in our country, it would not be an exaggeration to say that

it has become a norm rather than an exception. Merely rolling a few heads in the NTA will not serve the purpose until structural issues are addressed. NTA, which conducts entrance tests like CUET, JEE, NEET and UGC-NET, has failed to live up to expectations and rather failed miserably. It cannot guarantee the cybersecurity at thousands of examination centres and the conduct of invigilators. With such a huge number of students competing for such a small number of seats, crooked operators have all the opportunities to exploit the parents. NTA can learn a thing or two from the GRE and TOEFL as to how to conduct online exams smoothly. The end objective should be that not a single student should face injustice and suffer.

Aarohi Sharma | Jammu

recorded in the survey conducted in South America, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Belize and El Salvador. All in all, people's lives on this next earth will be difficult and unbearable due to heat.

Dattaprasad Shiroadkar | Mumbai

AIR POLLUTION MENACE

Madam — The Health Effects Institute recently released a report on air pollution. In the world, there has been a great deal of pollution due to air pollution and it has been reported that as many as 81 lakh deaths have occurred in the year 2021. India and China have the highest number of deaths and they account for 54 per cent of the total deaths. The year 2021 is set to have more deaths due to air pollution than any previous year. In 2021, around 169,000 children under the age of five died in India due to air pollution alone. India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Ethiopia are the countries. Air pollution is the fourth leading cause of death in many countries after high blood pressure, a poor diet and tobacco. Just read this news. Small particles in the air cause

death. How can this air pollution be eliminated or reduced? For this, vehicle smoke should be reduced. Along with that, trees should be planted and nurtured in large quantities. Clean water is also an important factor. It is advisable to reduce the use of gasoline and diesel vehicles and use battery-powered vehicles instead of that. Thinking should also be started on how to reduce plastic waste, or not at all. In this regard, it is necessary to make a lot of efforts at the Government level. Only then will there be a reduction in air pollution. Citizens should know the importance of polluted air. Today, there is a lot of air pollution in the cities of Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai. Many school-children have developed respiratory disorders and have to drive vehicles on the road for a day. When there was Corona and at that time all the traffic was closed, the air pollution was very low and the clear sky was its indicator.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

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SHAINY SHARMA

Reading habits offer countless benefits, from intellectual stimulation to overall wellbeing

Reading is essential for those who seek to rise above the ordinary. Cultivating a habit of reading can have numerous positive effects on our life starting from intellectual stimulation to emotional well-being. Finding time to read regularly is a valuable investment in oneself, whether one prefers to use physical books or e-books. There is no warmer feeling than reading your favourite book on a rainy day, covered in a cozy blanket with a cup of coffee in hand. The smell of fresh books, hiding pieces of an old love such as dry flowers, old photographs and hazy letters as bookmarks for books as they say have and will always be eternal gifts. In a world hustling and bursting with technological advancements every now and then, the way everyone engages with literature has undergone a significant transformation. The traditional means of reading a book have found themselves in tug-of-war with their digital and audio counterparts. Today, carrying a book library in the pocket makes it easier for people to access a wide range as per their convenience thereby removing the biggest barrier of travelling to a bookstore or a library and then selecting for the favourite one. Moreover, e-books provide an environmentally friendly access when compared to physical books, as they reduce the demand for paper, which significantly reduces the demand for wood pulp from trees and transportation from printing facilities to distribution centres and then to bookstores or directly to consumers. Moreover, the production of physical books involves various materials and processes, including ink, chemicals and packaging materials, which can generate waste and pollution. E-books do not involve these manufacturing processes, thereby reducing the environmental footprint associated with production and waste disposal. While reading e-books requires electronic devices that consume energy, the environmental impact can be mitigated by using energy-efficient devices, renewable energy sources for charging and by considering the longer lifespan and potential reuse of electronic devices compared to physical books.



But what depresses the most is when these e-books are available on devices such as a tablet or a phone resulting in the biggest sources of distraction and thereby reducing the focused reading time. Moreover such devices also offer multimedia enhancements (like videos or interactive elements), which can either enhance or distract from the reading experience, depending on individual preferences. Some people prefer the tactile experience of physical books. Several research and studies reflect a complex interplay of factors influencing the preference for e-books versus physical books. Physical books tend to offer better comprehension, retention and a more comfortable reading experience, while e-books provide convenience, portability and cost efficiency. The choice between the two often depends on the specific needs and preferences of the reader. Instead of immersing oneself in a book, social media browsing encourages quick, fragmented reading of short posts or articles, which can ultimately diminish the habit of sustained, deep reading. The immediate gratification and constant novelty of social media can make reading books seem less appealing or rewarding by comparison. Even when attempting to read, the temptation to check social media notifications or browse feeds can interrupt concentration and disrupt the reading experience. It's important to note that the environmental impact of e-books versus physical books can vary depending on factors such as the energy efficiency of devices used, the source of electricity and how frequently devices are replaced but what matters is that the user also recognise the unique benefits of physical books, leading to a balanced approach where both formats coexist in their reading habits. There's no better way to learn, evolve and relax than reading books. *(The writer is an educator, views are personal)*

Centralised testing faces credibility crisis



SHIVAJI SARKAR

High costs, allegations of corruption and systemic inefficiencies underscore the need for a comprehensive overhaul of the ‘One Nation, One Test’ policy



The country needs to go back to drawing board on centralising entrance tests as the big ones - JEE, NEET, CUET and UGC-NET - are having far too many glitches and questions raised on the National Testing Agency (NTA). The NEET scam and NET cancellation have shocked the youth and raises questions on credibility of the testing agency. Let the country note that within 48 hours of NEET results, four students took their own lives. Should not the country rethink on the One Nation-One Test? The tests are designed to make coaching redundant. Few have an idea of the cost of one NEET — National Eligibility-cum-Entrance (Undergraduate) Test, previously called Pre-Medical Exam. It costs over Rs 400 crore borne by the parents of 2406079 candidates registered for the 2024 exam at the rate of Rs 1700 fee per applicant. The system does not say how much is the profit for NTA. It is common knowledge that no entrance fee is fully spent. Should it not be considered as a tax on the unemployed knowledge seekers! There are approximately 108,915 MBBS seats available across 706 medical colleges for NEET 2024. Around 55,000 of these seats are in Government medical colleges; the rest are in private medical colleges. One wonders why private colleges are included which have a devious fee structure backed by severe capitation fees. The quality of faculty is also questionable. Of course, even newly set-up many State medical colleges too have such issues. Many even do not have a cardiologist or neurologist. Add the cost of coaching, travelling and other expenses, together to cost quite a few hundred crores more, big drain on the economy plus parental and societal stress. The Kota coaching system has an estimated business of Rs 600 crore. There are reports that the UGC-NET having nine lakh aspirants was cancelled as there was paper leak. Each question paper was sold for Rs 5,000 for transfer

“THE NATIONAL ELIGIBILITY-CUM-ENTRANCE (UG) TEST COSTS OVER Rs 400 CRORE BORNE BY THE 2406079 CANDIDATES REGISTERED FOR THE 2024 EXAM AT THE RATE OF Rs 1700 FEE PER APPLICANT. THE SYSTEM DOES NOT SAY HOW MUCH IS THE PROFIT FOR NTA. SHOULD IT NOT BE CONSIDERED A TAX ON THE UNEMPLOYED KNOWLEDGE SEEKERS?”

to the students' Telegram app. For NEET Rs 30-35 lakh per student was charged as alleged by a student witness, who got the paper with its answers a day before. It's possibly one of the biggest scams that spanned from Vadodara and Godhra to Patna and where not! It has sparked countrywide protests. No wonder the moves against generation of black money has not succeeded. Add to this the various recruitments stalled for scams, 13 in UP, many in West Bengal and the worst known VYAPAM in Madhya Pradesh. The irregularities are thriving with the highest jobless numbers. The NEET scam got exposed and how parents paid Rs 66 lakhs and more. Eight students from the same examination centre in Haryana who secured all-India rank (AIR) 62 to 69, had largely similar roll numbers. On 5 May 2024 at two NEET centres in Haryana, students received a wrong question-paper set, which was taken back after 25 minutes. A paper scam in Gujarat, featured a Vadodara-based coaching centre and at least 16 students who each paid Rs 10 lakh to pass the exam. Fresh accusations arose when news reports of a paper leak emerged only days after conclusion of the competitive exam. A Godhra school teacher is accused of the NEET exam cheating scandal, Rs 7 lakh were found in his car, while cheques worth 2.50 crore were found from the office of the director of the coaching centre. Reportedly, this money was given by the students. “There is a perception of mismanagement by the NTA”, says ABVP general secretary Yagywalkya Shukla. BJP MP Rakesh Sinha calls for severe criminal action

against any nexus found between paper setter and coaching institutes. It has rattled everyone. The reality is the NTA does not have competence to hold the examinations as many professional autonomous institutions have been doing for decades. None could raise a finger against any of them, including the All India Institute of Medical Science. They also selected students with proper aptitude. An issue that has cropped up now with many of the national institutions with CUET in particular. The only action against weeks after the NEET fiasco has been the cancellation of the examination for grace mark students. The NTA appears to be loosely controlled organisation. The tests are gateway to careers and future professional excellence. If it is mired with malpractices and money power, the future of the nation is at stake. Would those adapting devious methods could ever have ethical bindings! The implementation is shoddy. The NTA does not conduct the tests on its own. Implementers are largely burgeoning private sector 'service providers', IT companies and emerging outsourcing infra organisations for conducting such mammoth tests. The competence of NTA for ensuring cyber-security at thousands of centres is doubtful. Even invigilators and other staff are hired casually leaving the system vulnerable to attacks, pilferage and compromise. The suspicion over the countrywide coaching organisations calls for rethink on the composition of the tests. Are they giving instructions or have it emerged as the most corrupt money-minting machines? Should not the coun-

try do away with this organised malpractice? The examinations need to be tailored in a way that students do not need any coaching. National convener of Sanskriti Utthan Nyas Devendra Singh has demanded cancellation of the NEET test. The Shiksha Bachao Andolan founded by Dinanath Batra and Atul Kothari also wants the test cancelled. Too much centralisation could be breeding irregularities. It is a diverse country with diverse State boards, languages and systems. Apart each genre of professional institutions has varied needs for selections. The previous systems of selections by many professional institutions, organised by themselves have rarely raised an eyebrow. The NTA needs structural reforms. Conducting professional examinations are challenge. Minister for Education Dharmendra Pradhan says, “We will take the final call”. The entire university system cribs over CUET — Central University Entrance Test. It forces students to take a test even for subjects, which are not in demand. The huge numbers have put off academic calendars for the past few years. Let universities conduct their own admissions as before to rid the system of over centralisation, delays and trauma to the students and their families. The academics must put their heads together to have least of central admission examinations and more decentralised process not only to keep the process sanitised but also put India on the world map for its education, that such compromised systems sully. *(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)*

Kallakurichi liquor tragedy shows how deep the rot runs

The nexus between local politicians, law enforcement and illicit brewers makes mockery of prohibition laws in the State

Even as this column is being written on Friday at 1 pm, the death toll in Kallakurichi hooch tragedy has risen to 49 with doctors saying that more persons are expected to leave earth to meet their maker. It is only because of the unprecedented increase in the number of persons succumbing to the spurious liquor that this incident has come to national limelight. The truth is that many people lose their lives on a daily basis after the consumption of spurious liquor in Tamil Nadu. Chief Minister M K Stalin has declared a solatium of Rs 10 lakh each to the families of the deceased and this would help him to buy peace with the people. A commission of



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

inquiry has been set up with a retired judge of the Madras High Court as chairman to find out the reason behind the liquor tragedy with instructions to submit a report within three months. The relatives of the victims allege that the bootlegging is done with the patronage of the DMK MLAs and nobody can stand up to him. The MLAs representing Rishivandiyam and

Sankarapuram constituencies (both belong to the DMK) are a law unto themselves. “Not even a flower shop will function here without the knowledge of the MLA. How can we accept that he did not know about illicit hooch being brewed here,” according to K Ilavarasu (34), owner of a mobile phone repair shop in Karunapuram who has been quoted by a local newspaper. R Perumal (35), a resident of Madhavcheri who lost his brother, says, “Hooch will be brought in packets and sold at a common spot in the village. People from the Scheduled Caste community and Most Backward Class community buy them. When it comes to hooch,

there is no rich or poor or dominant or oppressed caste. Police will come for inspection, but will silently leave after taking bribe.” Last year saw 17 persons getting killed in nearby Villupuram district after consuming spurious arrack brewed in the nearby hilly region. Resident “Not even a flower shop will function here without the knowledge of the MLA. How can we accept that he did not know about illicit hooch being brewed here,” asks K Ilavarasu (34), owner of a mobile phone repair shop in Karunapuram. R Perumal (35), a resident of Madhavcheri who lost his brother, says, “Hooch will be brought in packets and sold at a common spot in the vil-

lage. People from the Scheduled Caste community and Most Backward Class community buy them. When it comes to hooch, there is no rich or poor or dominant or oppressed caste. Police will come for inspection, but will silently leave after taking a bribe.” Residents of Karunapuram allege that a lethal cartel of police-DMK politicians-illegal brewers exist in the region. “Those daring to complain against them are silenced once and for ever. Jungle raj prevails in this region,” said a relation of one of the victims. Prohibition has been found to be a total failure in Tamil Nadu. Dravidian politics thrived on the money generated by the sale of spurious

liquor and to generate more money the State Government banned the manufacture and sale of arrack (the poor man's scotch). The daily wage earners toiling in the fields from day break to dusk get some relief when they consume arrack which was available at reasonably low rates. With the Government's decision to ban the production and sale of arrack, thousands of jobs along with the tax revenue from sale of the stuff was lost to the Government. Toddy tapping too has been banned in the State, home to the founders of the Dravidian movement who were not averse to the idea of sun-downers. By early 2000, the private

retail outlets too downed the shutters and the public sector Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMC) took over the entire liquor trade in the State. The Government's was the last word on the brand to be consumed by the tipplers and this was a violation of fundamental right granted under the Constitution of India. Only the brands of liquor manufacturers who were willing to part with a fixed amount to the powers that be were allowed to be sold through the retail outlets. The result was that the market was flooded with poor quality brands which charged premium rates. The daily wage earners were left with no options other than the bootleggers. Had the Government not banned toddy tapping and brewing of country liquor, the mass murders of the kind which we saw in Kallakurichi would not have happened. Period. The objective of this writup is not to encourage people to take drinks. The illegal stuff that is brewed by bootleggers is made with toxic chemicals like ammonium sulfate and insects like centipedes. There was an instance in Kerala where arrack was made out of ethyl alcohol which was used for preserving dead bodies in medical colleges. Should we furnish more details? *(The writer is a special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)*

Netanyahu reiterates claim of US withholding arms despite denial

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his Cabinet on Sunday that there had been a “dramatic drop” in US weapons deliveries for Israel’s war effort in Gaza, doubling down on a claim that the Biden administration has denied and underscoring the growing strains between the two allies.

Netanyahu told his Cabinet that the drop had occurred four months ago, without specifying which weapons, saying only that “certain items arrived sporadically but the munitions at large remained behind.”

The spat highlights how high tensions have surged between Israel and Washington over the war in Gaza, particularly surrounding the Israeli military’s conduct in the beleaguered territory and the harm to civilian life there. President Joe Biden has delayed delivering

certain heavy bombs since May over those concerns, but his administration fought back last week against Netanyahu’s charges that other shipments had also been affected.

Netanyahu told the Cabinet that he was driven to release a video in English last week after weeks of unsuccessful pleas with American officials to speed up deliveries. He said a resolution appeared close.

“In light of what I have heard over the past day, I hope and believe that this matter will be solved soon,” he said, without elaborating.

Netanyahu’s video last week sparked an uproar among critics in Israel and was met with denial and confusion from White House officials. White House national security spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. was “perplexed” by Netanyahu’s claims. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre

said, “We generally do not know what he’s talking about.”

His remarks came hours after Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant traveled to Washington for meetings with senior officials. A statement from Gallant’s office said he would discuss “maintaining Israel’s qualitative edge in the region” but made no mention of the weapons issue.

The war in Gaza, which was sparked by Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, has tested the US-Israel relationship like never before. While the US has staunchly supported Israel’s aims of freeing hostages taken into Gaza and defeating Hamas, it has grown increasingly concerned over the rising Palestinian death toll and the humanitarian crisis created by the war.

Biden has felt pressure from progressive Democrats to take a tougher line against

Israel, and he has sharpened his warnings to Netanyahu over military tactics in the Gaza Strip. But after threatening to impose a more sweeping ban on arms transfers over an assault on Rafah, the administration has avoided any suggestion that Israel’s expanding push into the southern Gaza city has crossed a red line. During an election year, Biden is also facing critics on the right who say he has moderated his support for an essential Mideast ally. For Netanyahu, the growing daylight with the US also poses political risks and opportunities. His critics see the public spats as the result of a leader prepared to wreck important alliances and tarnish Israel’s image in the world for political gain. But the rift grants the long-serving leader a chance to show his base that he isn’t beholden to the US and that he is putting Israel’s interests first.

Thousands of Iran-backed fighters offer to join Hezbollah in its fight against Israel

Beirut (AP): Thousands of fighters from Iran-backed groups in the Middle East are ready to come to Lebanon to join with the militant Hezbollah group in its battle with Israel if the simmering conflict escalates into a full-blown war, officials with Iran-backed factions and analysts say.

Almost daily exchanges of fire have occurred along Lebanon’s frontier with northern Israel since fighters from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip staged a bloody assault on southern Israel in early October that set off a war in Gaza. The situation to the north worsened this month after an Israeli airstrike killed a senior Hezbollah military commander in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah retaliated by firing hundreds of rockets and explosive drones into northern Israel.

Israeli officials have threatened a military offensive in Lebanon if there is no negotiated end to push Hezbollah away from the border.

Over the past decade, Iran-backed fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan

and Pakistan fought together in Syria’s 13-year conflict, helping tip the balance in favour of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Officials from Iran-backed groups say they could also join together again against Israel.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said in a speech Wednesday that militant leaders from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and other countries have previously offered to send tens of thousands of fighters to help Hezbollah, but he said the group already has more than 100,000 fighters.

“We told them, thank you, but we are overwhelmed by the numbers we have,” Nasrallah said.

Nasrallah said the battle in its current form is using only a portion of Hezbollah’s manpower, an apparent reference to the specialised fighters who fire missiles and drones.

But that could change in the event of an all-out war. Nasrallah hinted at that possibility in a speech in 2017 in which he said fighters from Iran, Iraq, Yemen,

Afghanistan and Pakistan “will be partners” of such a war.

Officials from Lebanese and Iraqi groups backed by Iran say Iran-backed fighters from around the region will join in if war erupts on the the Lebanon-Israel border. Thousands of such fighters are already deployed in Syria and could easily slip through the porous and unmarked border.

Some of the groups have already staged attacks on Israel and its allies since the Israel-Hamas war started October 7. The groups from the so-called “axis of resistance” say they are using a “unity of arenas strategy” and they will only stop fighting when Israel ends its offensive in Gaza against their ally, Hamas.

“We will be (fighting) shoulder to shoulder with Hezbollah” if an all-out war breaks out, one official with an Iran-backed group in Iraq told The Associated Press in Baghdad, insisting on speaking anonymously to discuss military matters. He refused to give further details.

Sunak hit with another betting allegation

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is on Sunday dealing with yet another senior party official being involved in placing bets on the date of the general election before July 4 was confirmed, as the scandal engulfing his top aides continues to be investigated by the country’s gambling watchdog. The British Indian leader, who has said he was “incredibly angry” on learning about the allegations that emerged earlier this month, now finds the Conservative Party’s chief data officer also being investigated by the Gambling Commission for allegedly betting on the timing of the election before the date had been announced. Following the revelations first reported in ‘The Sunday Times’, Nick Mason is said to have taken a leave of absence but denies wrongdoing. It comes as a fresh blow for the Sunak-led Tories, already trailing far behind the Opposition



Labour Party in all pre-election opinion polls, after his director of campaigns, Tony Lee, and his Tory MP candidate wife, Laura Saunders, were named earlier in the election date betting investigations. It followed reports of Sunak’s close protection officer being arrested by the Metropolitan Police on suspicion of misconduct over placing an election date bet and Sunak’s parliamentary aide, Tory MP candi-

date Craig Williams, also under investigation.

While betting is legal in the UK, any bets placed with the advantage of insider information could fall within the purview of illegality. “There are multiple investigations happening. It’s right they’re allowed to proceed. They’re independent and necessarily confidential,” Sunak told reporters earlier this week. “There’s also a criminal investigation, and these are poten-

tially criminal matters. If anyone is found to have broken the rules, they should not only face the full consequences of the law, but I will make sure they are booted out of the Conservative Party,” he said. Since then, he and senior party leaders have refused to comment on ongoing investigations, with a senior Cabinet minister condemning the actions of his party colleagues. “It looks like one rule for them and one rule for us. That’s the most potentially damaging thing,” said Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove, who is not seeking re-election next month. The Gambling Commission has only admitted “investigating the possibility of offences concerning the date of the election” and declined to provide any details on the “ongoing investigation.” “We are not confirming or denying the identity of any individuals involved in this investigation,” a spokesper-

son said. Meanwhile, the Opposition parties have continued to pile pressure on the governing Conservatives over the spiralling betting scandal.

“Rishi Sunak promised integrity, professionalism and accountability, instead his weakness means he has overseen the same sleaze and scandal that have come to epitomise the last 14 years of Tory government. Rishi Sunak must take immediate action and suspend all those implicated in the Tory betting scandal,” said a Labour Party spokesperson. The Liberal Democrats have also called on Sunak to personally intervene after the allegations. “This is now an all-out scandal at the heart of Rishi Sunak’s Conservative Party. Sunak must personally intervene to order a Cabinet Office inquiry and suspend all those under investigation by the Gambling Commission,” said Lib Dem deputy leader Daisy Cooper.

Philippines stands firm after clash with Chinese Coast Guard, aims to avoid war

AP ■ MANILA

The president of the Philippines said Sunday his country would not yield to “any foreign power” after Chinese forces injured Filipino navy personnel and damaged at least two military boats with machetes, axes and hammers in a clash in the disputed South China Sea, but added the Philippines would never instigate a war. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. flew with his top generals and defence chief to the western island province of Palawan, which faces the South China Sea, to meet and award medals to navy personnel who came under assault by the Chinese coast guard Monday as they attempted to deliver food and other supplies to an outpost on the hotly contested Second Thomas Shoal. Videos and pictures of the chaotic face-off made public by the military showed Chinese coast guard personnel hitting a Philippine navy boat with a wooden bar and seizing a bag while blaring sirens and using blinding strobe lights. The Chinese government said

that its coast guard had to take action after Filipino forces defied warnings not to stray into what China calls its own offshore territory, a claim long rejected by rival claimant governments and international arbitrators.

The violent confrontation sparked condemnation and alarm from the US, the European Union, Japan, Australia and other Western and Asian nations, while China and the Philippines blamed each other for instigating it. Marcos’s key advisers said Friday that his administration has no plan to invoke the country’s mutual defence treaty with the United States. “We are not in the business to instigate wars,” Marcos told Filipino forces. “In defending the nation, we stay true to our Filipino nature that we would like to settle all these issues peacefully.”

In Monday’s face-off at the shoal, Marcos said “we made a conscious and deliberate choice to remain in the path of peace.” The Filipino navy special operations group personnel who came under attack used only their bare hands to push back the Chinese,

some of whom pointed knives at them, said Philippine military chief Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr.

“We stand firm. Our calm and peaceful disposition should not be mistaken for acquiescence,” Marcos said. “History itself can tell that we have never, never in the history of the Philippines yielded to any foreign power.”

Chinese officials in Manila and Beijing did not immediately comment on Marcos’s remarks. Marcos praised about 80 officers and personnel involved in Monday’s supply mission, including one who lost his right thumb during the high seas confrontation, saying they “exercised the greatest restraint amidst intense provocation.” He issued an appeal: “Continue to fulfil your duty of defending the nation with integrity and respect as you have done so far.” The territorial disputes, which involve China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, have long been seen as a flash-point that could pit the US against China if high seas confrontations escalate into armed conflict.

Drone likely launched by Houthi rebels hits ship in Red Sea

Dubai (AP) : An aerial drone likely launched by Yemen’s Houthi rebels struck and damaged a vessel in the Red Sea on Sunday, officials said, the latest attack by the group targeting the vital maritime corridor.

The attack comes as the US has sent the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower back home after an eight-month deployment that saw it lead the American response to the Houthi assaults. Those attacks have seen shipping drastically drop through the route crucial to Asian, Middle East and European markets in a campaign the Houthis say will continue as long as the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip rages on.

The drone attack happened around dawn off the coast of the rebel-held port city of Hodeida, the British military’s United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said. It said the vessel sustained damage but its mariners on board “were reported safe.” It did not elaborate on the extent of the damage, but said an investigation was ongoing.

The private security firm Ambrey identified the ship involved as a Liberia-flagged container ship bound for Qingdao, China.

The Houthis did not immediately claim the attack. However, it can take the rebels hours or even days to acknowledge their assaults.

The Houthis have launched more than 60 attacks targeting specific vessels and fired off other missiles and drones in their campaign that has killed a total of four sailors. They have seized one vessel and sunk two since November. A US-led airstrike campaign has targeted the Houthis since January, with a series of strikes May 30 killing at least 16 people and wounding 42 others, the rebels say. The Houthis have maintained that their attacks target ships linked to Israel, the United States or Britain. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the Israel-Hamas war — including those bound for the Houthis’ main benefactor, Iran.

One more victim dies day after Arkansas grocery store shooting

Little Rock (AP): Police said a fourth victim has died a day after a shooter opened fire at an Arkansas grocery store, wounding nine others and riddling cars with bullet holes as panicked bystanders scrambled for cover.

The person died Saturday evening, Arkansas state police said in a statement, listing a total of 14 people as hit by gunfire: “11 civilians, two law enforcement officers and the suspect.”

The dead were identified as Shirley Taylor, 62, Callie Weems, 23, Roy Sturgis, 50, and Ellen Shrum, 81 — “all civilians,” according to the statement.

The wounded range in age between 20 and 65, police said. Four were still hospitalised, including a woman who was in critical condition.

The wounded agents were identified as Fordyce Police Officer James Johnson, 31, who was released from a hospital Saturday evening, and Stuttgart Police Officer John Hudson, 24, whose injuries

were said to be minor.

Police said the suspect is Travis Eugene Posey, 44, of New Edinburg, and he will be charged with four counts of capital murder.

“He was treated for non-life-threatening injuries after exchanging gunfire with law enforcement” and was then released to police custody and taken to the Ouachita County Detention Centre, police said in the statement. Police have not released a motive. A media briefing to update about the shooting was announced for 2 pm Sunday.

As of Friday, a state police spokesperson did not know if Posey had an attorney, and there was no immediate response to a phone message left with the agency’s public information office Saturday night. The Ouachita County Sheriff’s Office confirmed Saturday that he was being held at the detention centre but had no information about a possible lawyer. No inmate record was online for him yet. The shooting took place

around 11:30 am Friday at the

Mad Butcher grocery store in Fordyce, a city of about 3,200 people located 65 miles (104 kilometres) south of Little Rock.

Roderick Rogers, a member of the city council, said he called the sheriff when employees at his restaurant nearby notified him of the shooting. When he got there, he saw people running for cover in every direction, even one running to the hospital nearby.

“People were just jumping into cars to get to safety,” Rogers said Friday.

Video posted on social media showed at least one person lying in the parking lot, while another captured multiple gunshots ringing out. Images from reporters on the scene showed a slew of bullet holes in the store’s window, and spent shell casings strewn throughout the parking lot. In video images, local and state agencies could be seen responding with at least one medical helicopter landing nearby.

Melania Trump stays out of public eye as Trump runs for president

AP ■ WEST PALM BEACH

After Melania Trump missed key events in her husband’s presidential bid earlier this year — from the kick-off of the 2024 election in Iowa to Donald Trump’s Super Tuesday victory party — reporters asked the former first lady whether she planned to hit the campaign trail. Her response: “Stay tuned.” But since making that comment in March, after she and Donald Trump voted in Florida’s primary, Melania Trump has largely refrained from public appearances. The few exceptions have included a couple of fundraisers in April and their son’s high school graduation. The former first lady noticeably did not accompany the presumptive Republican presidential nominee on any of the days of his more than month-



long hush money trial in New York. She was not there last month for the guilty verdict or the following day for his remarks at Trump Tower. She also did not appear June 14 at a 78th birthday party organised for Trump by his fan club, or at any of the campaign rallies he has held in recent months. Her absence during the trial

and for other important moments is unusual, said Katherine Jellison, a professor of history at Ohio University who studies first ladies. But Jellison said maybe it should not come as a surprise as Melania Trump seems reluctant to follow the traditional public role of a politician’s wife. As first lady, she also kept

a low profile and she was not a regular presence on her husband’s losing 2020 presidential campaign. “But everything the Trumps do seems to be against the standard playbook of how candidates and spouses behave,” Jellison said. Melania Trump’s behaviour deviates from how other politicians have relied on their spouses. Sometimes male politicians turn to their wives to try to reach out to female voters. Candidates also may be joined by their spouses as a way of giving voters more of a sense of what the candidate is like outside the political arena. During this year’s GOP primary, for example, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’ wife, Casey DeSantis, travelled with him, granted interviews and formed a coalition named Mamas for DeSantis before he suspended his bid for the nomination.

Iowa flood displaces residents; US heatwave persists

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Floodwaters forced people out of their homes in parts of Iowa, the result of weeks of rain, while much of the United States longed for relief Saturday from yet another round of extraordinary heat.

Sirens blared at 2 am in Rock Valley, Iowa, population 4,200, where people in hundreds of homes were told to get out as the Rock River could no longer take rain that has slammed the region. The city lacked running water because wells were unusable. Mayor Kevin Van Otterloo said a state helicopter was on its way to help but was called off when boats were able to reach stranded residents. “We’ve had so much rain here,” he said. “We had 4 inches last night in an hour and a half time. Our ground just cannot take anymore.” Gov. Kim Reynolds declared a disaster for 21 counties in northern Iowa, including Sioux County, which includes Rock

Valley. In drone video posted by the local sheriff, no streets were visible, just roofs and treetops poking above the water. In South Dakota, Gov. Kristi Noem declared an emergency after the southeastern part of the state received heavy rainfall. The town of Canton, 30 miles (48 kilometres) south-east of Sioux Falls, has received 18 inches (45.72 centimetres) of rain. Several highways were closed, including a key stretch of Interstate 29 south of Sioux Falls that later reopened. Sioux Falls, the state’s largest city, had more than 7 inches (17.7 centimetres) of rain in three days. “Even though the rain is slowing down, we need to keep vigilant,” said Noem. “The worst of the flooding along our rivers will be Monday and Tuesday.” Elsewhere in the US, the miserable grip of heat and humidity continued. The National Weather Service said roughly 15 million people were under a heat warning — the highest level of alert — while another

90 million were under a heat advisory. Millions across the country have had their lives disrupted by stretches of unusually high temperatures. Last year the US experienced the most heat waves since 1936, experts said. An AP analysis of data from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention found that excessive heat contributed to more than 2,300 deaths, the highest in 45 years of records. Temperatures around 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 degrees Celsius) were predicted for Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia, while Philadelphia; Newark, New Jersey; Columbus, Ohio; and Detroit were bracing for the heat 90s.

Heat-related hospital visits in New York state lately were 500 per cent higher than on the average June day, according to the Department of Health. “We still have this prolonged heat wave across portions of the Ohio Valley and into the

Northeast,” weather service meteorologist Marc Chenard said. “We get a little bit of relief by early in the week, at least in the eastern US, the Northeast, but in general above-normal temperatures are going to cover a large portion of the country even into next week.” In southeastern Michigan, DTE Energy said 7,400 customers remained without power as of Saturday afternoon due to storm-related outages, down from 75,000 earlier in the week.

A heat index of around 100 Fahrenheit (37.8 Celsius) didn’t stop Florida couple Judy and Bill Watson from watching the Tigers play the White Sox at Detroit’s Comerica Park. Their afternoon visit was a milestone: Bill Watson has now seen games at all 30 MLB ballparks.

“We’re from Florida. You might be interviewing the wrong people about heat,” the 71-year-old Bradenton man said with a smile.

PTI-backed SIC not entitled to reserved seats'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party-backed Sunni Ittehad Council is not eligible for reserved seats as the party does not allow non-Muslims to be a part of it, Pakistan's election commission has said in a response submitted to the Supreme Court, according to media reports. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) on Saturday filed a reply before the Supreme Court to the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) plea against the rejection of its claim on reserved seats for women and minorities in the national and provincial assemblies after the general election. The ECP said that reserved seats cannot be allocated to the SIC, which is backed by 71-year-old Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), as the party failed to submit the list of nominees for the reserved seats by the deadline of December 24, Geo News reported. The top polls body added that as per the SIC constitution, a non-Muslim person cannot be a part of the party, which is unconstitutional. "According to the constitution of the SIC, a non-Muslim cannot become a member of the party. The provision against the

inclusion of non-Muslims in the constitution of SIC is unconstitutional. The SIC is not entitled to reserved seats for women and minorities," the election watchdog said. It added that the independent candidates joined the SIC after the elections, after which the ECP gave the majority 4-1 verdict of not allocating the reserved seats to the party, and later the Peshawar High Court (PHC) upheld the ruling. "SIC is not eligible for the reserved seats. There is nothing wrong with the ECP and the PHC's decision of not giving reserved seats to SIC. The decision is in line with the laws and Constitution," the ECP said, according to the report. There are 70 reserved seats in the National Assembly and another 156 in the four provincial assemblies, and the SIC was not given any seat as it had not contested the election. The party gained strength when independently elected candidates backed by the PTI party joined it after the elections. The PTI-backed independent candidates took the lead in the February 8 elections after they won the 92 National Assembly seats followed by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) (79) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)

Imran's party reiterates demand for CEC resignation

Islamabad (PTI): Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's party on Sunday reiterated its demand for Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja's immediate resignation for failing to hold "free and fair" elections and protested against the "injustices" being committed against the party, according to media reports. Leaders of 71-year-old Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, along with other National Assembly members, led a protest rally from the Parliament to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) on the Constitution Avenue here, The Express Tribune newspaper reported. Led by Leader of Opposition and party leader Omar Ayub, the protesters demanded the resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner

(CEC) Raja and election commission members for alleged poll rigging. The controversial February 8 general elections in Pakistan were marred with massive rigging allegations. During the rally, Ayub called for the immediate resignation of CEC Raja and other members of the ECP, alleging that the only job of the election commission was to conduct clean and transparent polls, but it failed to fulfil its constitutional duty, The News International newspaper reported. The protesters were stopped from reaching the electoral body's central office, as large contingents of security personnel were deployed outside the ECP building, the report said. Slogans were also chanted for the release of party founder and cricketer-turned-politician Khan.

Khan has been incarcerated in the high-security Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi since September last year. He was shifted to this prison from the District Jail Attock, where he had been lodged after his arrest on August 5, 2023, following his conviction in the Toshakhana case. Addressing the rally, PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Khan said, "The doors of courts have been closed on opposition leaders; our women are in jail, and history will remember them." He said that it was a matter of regret that all the parliamentarians were coming out on the streets and protesting for the release of PTI founder Khan, the report said. "Today, we have come out against this injustice. Our voice is not being heard in this House (Parliament).

Whatever we said in the House, our voice was silenced. We want the women's release. This is a clear violation of human rights," he said. Addressing the protesters, the party's central leader, Asad Qaiser, said, "On May 9, we were targeted on the pretext that we are not negotiating with anyone. Our voice is not heard in parliament, which amounts to our gross abuse." After the controversial general elections, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party formed a coalition government after intense negotiations following a fractured poll verdict. Independent candidates – a majority backed by the PTI party – won 93 of the 265 National Assembly seats contested in the February 8 election.

Niger was betting on China-backed oil pipeline before troubles began

AP ■ ABUJA

A China-backed pipeline that would make Niger an oil-exporting country is being threatened by an internal security crisis and a diplomatic dispute with neighbouring Benin, both as a result of last year's coup that toppled the West African nation's democratic government. The 1,930-kilometer (1,200-mile) pipeline runs from Niger's Chinese-built Agadem oil field to the port of Cotonou in Benin. It was designed to help the oil-rich but landlocked Niger achieve an almost fivefold increase in oil production through a USD 400 million deal signed in April with China's state-run national petroleum company. But it has been stalled by several challenges, including the diplomatic disagreement with Benin that led to the pipeline's closure last week. There also has been an attack this week by the local Patriotic Liberation Front rebel group, which claimed to have disabled a part of the pipeline and is threatening more attacks if the USD 400 million deal with China isn't cancelled. The group, led by Salah Mahmoud, a former rebel leader, took up arms after Niger's junta came to power, posing further security threats to the country, which is already struggling with a deadly security crisis. Analysts say the crises could further hurt Niger, one of the world's poorest countries which funds most of its budget with now-withheld external support in the aftermath of the coup. Niger currently has a local refining capacity of only 20,000 barrels per day (bpd) for local demands while the pipeline is to export up to 90,000 barrels daily — a feat officials and analysts have said would help the country shore up its revenue and emerge from the coup sanctions that had isolated it from regional neighbours and hurt its economy and people. "It is a completely messy situation and the only way for a resolution is if both administrations directly engage and resolve issues," said Ryan

Cummings, director of Africa-focused security consulting company Signal Risk. One major concern is how the stalled pipeline operation might impact Niger's overall economic growth. The World Bank had projected that the West African nation's economy would rebound and grow the fastest in Africa this year at a rate of 6.9%, with oil exports as a key boost. The diplomatic tensions with Benin date back to July when Niger's president, Mohamed Bazoum, was deposed in a coup, resulting in West African neighbours closing their borders with Niger, and in the formation of the so-called local liberation group now threatening more attacks on the oil project. Benin, alongside other neighbours, has reopened its border with Niger, but Nigerian officials have refused to open theirs, accusing Benin of hosting French troops that pose a threat to the country after Niger severed military ties with France. That has led Benin's president, Patrice Talon, to make the oil exportation through its port conditional on the reopening of the border. Both countries are losing out economically, with Benin also being deprived of millions of dollars in transit fees. Observers say the impasse is worsening regional tensions since the coup, which came after a string of other military takeovers. It has pitched Niger against the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS, which usually mediates on such issues. With Niger tilting towards Russia in its diplomatic shift and Benin aligned with France and the West African bloc, China has tried to step in and resolve the impasse and benefit from its investment in the project. But even Beijing's efforts, which resulted in the first lifting of oil from the Agadem field in May, collapsed as the diplomatic spat escalated further. Benin this week convicted and imprisoned three of five Nigerian oil workers it recently arrested at the Beninise port after they crossed from the border and were accused of "use of falsified computer data."

Thousands participate in International Yoga Day events in South Africa

Johannesburg (PTI): Thousands of yoga enthusiasts from various communities in South Africa who joined the International Day of Yoga events in Johannesburg and Durban highlighted the unity that yoga brings about, Indian High Commissioner Prabhat Kumar has said. Kumar was speaking at the iconic Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg, where he joined almost 8,000 people on Saturday to participate in an hour of yoga led by expert Maya Bhatt. This broke the record of 7,500 which was set at the same venue last year. International Yoga Day is hosted across South Africa on the Saturday closest to June 21 for the convenience of people who join the events from across the country and even from neighbouring states. Also on Saturday, on the beachfront in Durban, about

3,500 people joined the chief guest, Premier of KwaZulu-Natal province Thami Ntuli, at the Yoga Day event organised by the founder of Sivananda World Peace Foundation, Prince Ishwar Ramlutchman Mabheka Zulu. He remains the only Indian-origin person who has been anointed a Prince of the Zulu Kingdom for his philanthropic work. "The numbers we see here are mind-boggling. The energy here is palpable," Kumar said as he recalled how he had witnessed Yoga Day events in many countries where he had been posted which did not achieve these numbers. "This is the beauty of yoga. It creates unity and it brings all of us together. In my previous postings, I have seen that yoga takes on local flavour, which are innovations that we should encourage," Kumar added.

23 held for tourist's lynching in Pak's Swat

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan police have arrested more than 20 people for alleged involvement in the lynching of a tourist in the picturesque town of Swat for allegedly desecrating the Quran, media reports said here on Sunday. Muhammad Ismail, a 40-year-old resident of Sialkot in Punjab province, was gunned down by an enraged mob which dragged him through the town and later hanged him in full public view in Madyan tehsil of Swat district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Thursday. The mob had also set the Madyan police station ablaze. Ismail was accused of having burnt the pages of Islam's holy book. Five police personnel and 11 locals were injured in the incident. Police arrested 23 people for alleged involvement in Ismail's lynching and the arson attack on the Madyan police station, Geo News reported. Those arrested were shifted to an undisclosed location while

efforts were underway to arrest others involved in the incident, police said. Members of the mob had been identified, and "efforts for their arrest are underway," the report said, quoting Swat District Police Officer (DPO) Syed Zaman Shah. He said that two first information reports (FIR) had also been registered under the charges of blasphemy and damaging state property, respectively. He added that the suspect was reportedly a drug addict and had been booked in a case of domestic violence on his mother's complaint. On Saturday, Pakistan's Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal condemned the lynching, lamenting how religion is being weaponised to justify "street justice" and "vigilantism." "We must take notice of this incident as our nation is on the brink. We have now reached a point where we are using religion to justify mob violence and street justice, flagrantly violating the Constitution, the law and the state," Iqbal said.

Pakistan govt approves deployment of Frontier Constabulary in PoK

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan's federal government on Sunday approved the deployment of the paramilitary force Frontier Constabulary in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) which was rocked by protests last month, during which several people were killed. As many as six platoons of the paramilitary force will be deployed in the region for three months, Geo News reported. The decision to deploy the Frontier Constabulary comes a day after Pakistan announced to launch a major new operation against terrorism with a renewed commitment. The protests, against inflation and high electricity prices, were led by the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action

Committee (JAAC) and had traders at the forefront in most parts of the region. "The development came after the 'prime minister' of the disputed region Chaudhry Anwarul Haq met with Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi," Geo News reported. During the meeting, the two leaders reportedly discussed the law and order situation, the prevailing political landscape, as well as the disputed region's budget for the next fiscal year. As many as six platoons of the Frontier Constabulary will be deployed in the region for three months and would provide fool-proof security for Neelum-Jhelum, Mangla and Gulpur hydro-power projects, apart from assisting the police.

Lanka minister hails UK's decision to maintain LTTE under proscribed list

Colombo (PTI) Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry has hailed the decision of the UK government to continue to maintain the LTTE under the proscribed list, saying that the move will thwart every plan of the former armed group to revive itself in the island nation. In a post on the social media platform X, Sabry said that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) international network's approach and strategy is to get foreign governments to deproscribe it so that they could revive the group once again. The decision by the UK authorities to carry on with Sri Lanka's LTTE under the proscribed list has thwarted the group's plans to revive them in Sri Lanka, Sabry said in his post on X.

Ukrainian attack leaves 4 dead in Russia, Crimea

AP ■ KYIV

Russian authorities said four people died in Ukrainian drone and missile attacks on Sunday, a day after Russia's bombing of Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv killed three people and left dozens in hospitals. Three people — including two children — were killed by falling debris when five Ukrainian missiles were shot down in Sevastopol, a port city in Russia-annexed Crimea, said Mikhail Razvozhayev, the city's Moscow-installed governor. Close to a hundred people were injured, he said. One person was killed and three injured in Russia's Belgorod region, bordering Ukraine, when three Ukrainian drones attacked the city of Grayvoron, regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said. Air defenses overnight shot

down 33 Ukrainian drones over Russia's western Bryansk, Smolensk, Lipetsk and Tula regions, the Russian Ministry of Defense said Sunday. No casualties or damage were reported. The attacks came after Russia struck Kharkiv on Saturday afternoon with four aerial bombs, hitting a five-story residential building and killing three people. Regional Gov. Oleh Synchubov said that 41 people were still being treated for injuries on Sunday. In a video address following the attack, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged Ukraine's partners to bolster its air defenses. "Modern air defense systems for Ukraine — such as Patriots, accelerated training of our pilots for F-16s, and most importantly, sufficient range for our weapons — are truly necessary," he said.

With its new pact with N Korea, Russia raises stakes with West

AP ■ SEOUL

Behind the smiles, the balloons and the red-carpet pageantry of President Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea last week, a strong signal came through: In the spiralling confrontation with the US and its allies over Ukraine, the Russian leader is willing to challenge Western interests like never before. The pact that he signed with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un envisions mutual military assistance between Moscow and Pyongyang if either is attacked. Putin also announced for the first time that Russia could provide weapons to the isolated country, a move that could destabilise the Korean Peninsula and reverberate far beyond. He described the potential arms shipments as a response to NATO allies providing

Ukraine with longer-range weapons to attack Russia. He bluntly declared that Moscow has nothing to lose and is prepared to go "to the end" to achieve its goals in Ukraine. Putin's moves added to concerns in Washington and Seoul about what they see as an alliance in which North Korea provides Moscow with badly needed munitions for its war in Ukraine in exchange for economic assistance and technology transfers that would enhance the threat posed by Kim's nuclear weapons and missile programme. The new agreement with Pyongyang marked the strongest link between Moscow and Pyongyang since the end of the Cold War. Kim said it raised bilateral relations to the level of an alliance, while Putin was more cautious, noting the pledge of mutual military assistance mirrored a

1961 treaty between the Soviet Union and North Korea. That agreement was discarded after the Soviet collapse and replaced with a weaker one in 2000 when Putin first visited Pyongyang. Stephen Sestanovich, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations noted that when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev signed the deal with Pyongyang in 1961, he also tested the world's biggest nuclear bomb, built the Berlin Wall and probably started thinking about moves that led to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. "The question for Western policymakers now is whether Putin is becoming comparably reckless," Sestanovich said in a commentary. "His language in North Korea — where he denounced the United States as a worldwide 'neocolonialist dictatorship' — might make you think

so." South Korea responded by declaring it would consider sending arms to Ukraine in a major policy change for Seoul, which so far only has sent humanitarian assistance to Kyiv under a longstanding policy of not supplying weapons to countries engaged in conflict. Putin insisted Seoul has nothing to worry about, since the new pact only envisions military assistance in case of aggression and should act as a deterrent to prevent a conflict. He strongly warned South Korea against providing lethal weapons to Ukraine, saying it would be a "very big mistake." "If that happens, then we will also make corresponding decisions that will hardly please the current leadership of South Korea," he said. Asked whether North Korean troops could fight alongside Russian forces in Ukraine under the pact,

Putin said there was no need for that. Last month, Putin warned that Russia could provide long-range weapons to others to hit Western targets in response to NATO allies allowing Ukraine to use its allies' arms to make limited attacks inside Russian territory. He followed up on that warning Thursday with an explicit threat to provide weapons to North Korea. "I wouldn't exclude that in view of our agreements with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," Putin said, adding that Moscow could mirror the arguments by NATO allies that it's up to Ukraine to decide how to use Western weapons. "We can similarly say that we supply something to somebody but have no control over what happens afterward," Putin said. "Let them think about it."

Bitter political fight in Bolivia paralysing govt; unrest boils over eco crisis

AP ■ LA PAZ

Protesters streamed into Bolivia's capital, throats hoarse from chanting and feet blistered from a week of walking along the national highway. The throngs of street vendors in the South American country's vast informal work force ended their nearly 100-kilometre march from Bolivia's mountain-rimmed plains with a call that summoned years of growing anger over the nation's dangerously depleting foreign-exchange reserves: "We want dollars!" With prices surging, dollars scarce and lines snaking away from fuel-strapped gas stations, protests in Bolivia have intensified over the economy's precipitous decline from one of the continent's fastest-growing two decades ago to one of its most crisis-stricken today. "We can change the country because we are the engine of production," Roberto Rios

Ibanez, secretary-general of Bolivia's Confederation of Merchants, said as weary protesters broke for lunch around him in the capital's traffic-snarled centre. "The government doesn't listen. That's why we're in the streets." Bolivia's financial quagmire stems, at least in part, from an unprecedented rift at the highest levels of the governing party. President Luis Arce and his one-time ally, leftist icon and former President Evo Morales, are battling for the future of Bolivia's splintering Movement for Socialism, known by its Spanish acronym MAS, ahead of elections in 2025. The political fight has paralysed the government's efforts to deal with the deepening economic despair and analysts warn that the social unrest could explode in the historically turbulent nation of 12 million people. Cracks in the governing party

opened in 2019, when Morales, then Bolivia's first Indigenous president, ran for an unconstitutional third term. He won a contested vote plagued by allegations of fraud, setting off mass protests that caused 36 deaths and prompted Morales to resign and flee the country. After an interim government took control in what MAS called a coup, Morales' chosen successor, Arce, won election on a campaign promise to restore prosperity to Bolivia, once Latin America's mainstay source of natural gas. Arce had been Morales' finance minister who oversaw years of strong growth and low inflation, but assuming the presidency in 2020, he encountered a bleak economic reckoning from the coronavirus pandemic. Diminished gas production sealed the end of Bolivia's budget-busting economic model. Still hugely popular among Bolivia's Indigenous communi-

ties, coca growers and union workers, Morales saw an opportunity. After returning from exile, the charismatic populist announced plans last year to run in the 2025 vote — setting himself on a collision course with Arce, who is expected to seek re-election. "Bolivia has an Indigenous majority and people will instinctively support someone like Morales based on what he represents," said Diego von Vacano, an expert in Bolivian politics at Texas A&M University and former informal adviser to Arce. "Now they have the push factor, the lack of success of the Arce administration." Earlier this month, Morales drew tens of thousands of loyalists to Cochabamba southeast of La Paz, galvanizing his rural stronghold. "We're going to win the elections and we're going to save Bolivia," a triumphant Morales bellowed in a stadium filled

with cheering supporters waving wiphalas, the checkerboards of bright colours to represent Bolivia's many peoples. Arce disputes the legitimacy of Morales' campaign, arguing a 2023 constitutional court ruling bars him from running. Legal experts say it's not so clear-cut. "We've seen both the politicians manipulate the courts to decide political issues that have major bearing on the constitution," said Eduardo Rodriguez Veltze, a Bolivian judge who served as president in 2005-2006. Morales, who proclaimed in his speech that "we have complied with the rules," has threatened to unleash mass unrest if he is disqualified from running. Meanwhile, with the cash crunch denying access to dollars to pay suppliers abroad, Bolivian merchants have produced extraordinary scenes on the border with Brazil and Peru by clamouring to buy the US currency at inflated prices

in the neighbouring countries. When exchange shops in La Paz ran dry last year, Bolivians waited in line all night outside the Central Bank to get hard currency. It's a striking contrast to Bolivia's boom at the turn of the 21st century. Buoyed by a windfall of export revenue, Morales' government pulled the poverty rate down to 15 per cent, expanded the middle class and built up sprawling cities and roads. Trouble began in 2014 when commodity prices plunged and the government dipped into its currency reserves to sustain spending. Then it drew on its gold reserves and even sold its dollar bonds locally. "We ate up the savings and now we are scraping the pot," said Gonzalo Chávez, economics professor at Bolivia's Catholic University. With the government forking out USD 2 billion a year to import heavily subsidized gasoline in an effort to

quell public discontent, the squeeze has tightened. The Fitch rating agency in February downgraded Bolivia's debt deeper into junk territory, assigning it a CCC rating. And the fight over MAS is exacerbating economic woes. Morales' allies in Bolivia's Congress have consistently thwarted Arce's attempts to take on debt that would relieve the pressure. Bolivia sits on a treasure trove of lithium, but lawmakers won't give Arce approval to let foreign companies extract it. Arce calls the gridlock an "economic boycott" aimed at subverting his presidency. Seeking to ease investor fears, Finance Minister Marcelo Montenegro denies there is any crisis. But the long lines of frustrated motorists outside gas stations suggest otherwise. In recent days, angry truckers have blocked roads and burned tires. "Arce has dismantled our social organisations while abandon-

ing his management of the economy," said Jorge Cucho, an Indigenous leader and activist. "Prices have increased by 70 per cent. Our salaries are no longer enough to go to the market." The tensions tearing at MAS offer Bolivia's opposition its first real shot at power since Morales won an unprecedented electoral majority in 2005. Centrist and conservative politicians have jumped into the field. But the opposition is fractured and its legitimacy is in question, with dozens of its politicians behind bars. "The opposition has far more opportunities now due to the division," said Fernando Mayorga, a sociologist at Bolivia's public university in Cochabamba. "So far, we've seen no signs that it can act on them." Bolivians who are incensed by Morales but disappointed by Arce say the country stands at a perilous crossroads.

Mcap of three of top-10 most valued firms jumps ₹1.06 lakh cr

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The combined market valuation of three of the top-10 most valued firms jumped Rs 1,06,125.98 crore in holiday-shortened last week, with HDFC Bank and ICICI Bank emerging as the biggest gainers.

Last week, the BSE benchmark Sensex climbed 217.13 points or 0.28 per cent. While HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank and Infosys were the gainers from the top-10 pack, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Bharti Airtel, State Bank of India, Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), Hindustan Unilever and ITC faced a combined erosion to the tune of Rs 1,01,769.1 crore. The market capitalisation (mcap) of HDFC Bank zoomed Rs 52,091.56 crore to Rs 12,67,056.69 crore. ICICI Bank added Rs 36,118.99 crore taking its valuation to Rs 8,13,914.89 crore. The mcap of Infosys climbed Rs 17,915.43 crore to Rs 6,35,945.80 crore. However, the market



valuation of Reliance Industries tumbled Rs 32,271.31 crore to Rs 19,66,686.57 crore. LIC lost Rs 27,260.74 crore from its mcap which stood at Rs 6,47,616.51 crore. ITC's valuation eroded by Rs 14,357.43 crore to Rs 5,23,858.91 crore and that of Hindustan Unilever dropped by Rs 8,904.95 crore to Rs 5,73,617.46 crore. The mcap of TCS tanked by Rs 8,321.6 crore to Rs 13,78,111.45 crore and that of Bharti Airtel diminished by Rs 7,261.72 crore to Rs 8,04,262.65 crore. State Bank of India's valuation declined by Rs 3,391.35 crore to Rs 7,46,454.54 crore. In the ranking of the most valued firms, Reliance Industries retained the number one place followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Bharti Airtel, State Bank of India, LIC, Infosys, Hindustan Unilever and ITC.

BII bullish on Indian EV ecosystem, expects to invest USD 300 million in 3 years: MD

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

British International Investment, UK's development finance institution, is betting big on the Indian electric vehicles ecosystem and expects to invest another USD 300 million in the next three years, according to its MD and Head of Technology & Telecoms, Abhinav Sinha. The company, which has backed Mahindra group's electric vehicles (EV) arm besides other startups like Euler Motors, Turno and Battery Smart, has already invested around USD 300 million in the Indian EV sector and sees further investment opportunities in EV manufacturing, components and financing segments in the country. "India has quite an evolved auto market... On the EV side, the penetration right now lags the rest of the world... The (overall) penetration of EVs in India is something like 6 per cent and we see it quite easily expand, double and more than double quite quickly," Sinha told PTI in an interview. He further said, "the leader today is China, but for India to be significantly ahead of where it is today... We think it's a very achievable sort of an objective... So we're quite bullish." Sinha was responding to a query on how British International Investment (BII) sees the EV ecosystem in India compared to the other markets in the world and investment opportunities in the country. By 2030, he said there will be a "massive level" of EV



penetration in public transportation in India and there will be "quite a bit of traction on the passenger (electric) cars, as more and more people adopt it." "I would imagine even if it's not as much as China, it'll be ahead of Europe and the US in the way it's going and all the push coming from the government as well as the logic of total cost of ownership," Sinha said. On BII's investments in India, he said, "We have invested (USD) 300 million so far in this whole EV space... We've backed Mahindra in India, on their EV platform and that's a very significant investment for us, almost USD 250-million." Moreover, it has also made investments in Euler Motors, a startup commercial EV manufacturer, Turno, an EV distribution and financing for small businesses and individuals and Battery Smart, a battery-swapping network for electric two- and three-wheelers. When asked about BII's further investment plans in the Indian EV ecosystem, Sinha said, "It's hard to say an

exact number but we have invested USD 300 million over the last three years and I would expect a similar sort of pace going forward." On the strategy for future investments, he said, "What we realised is that a lot of focus has to go on earlier stage investments and these tend to be smaller, even though the number of our typical sizes in these spaces are like USD 5 million to USD 10 million investments. Maybe the numbers may not stack up quite a bit initially but as these companies become bigger we then follow with another investment." For BII in India, he said climate in general has the highest attention and within that "EV is probably going to be the largest area for us to invest." "So, we will continue investing in the manufacturing side and we will extend that in the components and the financing side. It is a space which will take a lot of investment. We will invest across the entire value chain," Sinha said.

Students who shone in JEE Advanced felicitated



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

FIITJEE on Sunday felicitated their meritorious students who had performed exceptionally well in the recently declared JEE Advanced 2024 results. FIITJEEians performed exceptionally well in JEE Advanced with 4 of their students in the Top 10 AIR (All India Ranks). In a glittering event "UTKARSH", FIITJEE South Delhi centre conducted a felicitation ceremony in which the students, faculty along parents were present at Siri Fort Auditorium, New Delhi.

Taxpayers can amend sales return form before GST payment

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

GST taxpayers will now have the option to amend outward supply or sales return form GSTR-1 before payment of taxes for a month or quarter. The GST Council in its meeting on Saturday had recommended providing a new optional facility by way of Form GSTR-1A to facilitate taxpayers to amend the details in Form GSTR-1 for a tax period and/or to declare additional details. GSTR-1A will, however, have to be filed before filing of return in GSTR-3B for the said tax period. This will facilitate the taxpayer to add any particulars of supply of the current tax period missed out in reporting in form GSTR-1 of the said tax period or to amend any particulars already declared in GSTR-1 of the current tax period (including those declared in IFF, for the first and second months of a quarter, if any, for quarterly taxpayers), to ensure that



correct liability is auto-populated in GSTR-3B. Currently, GST taxpayers file outward supply return GSTR-1 by the 11th day of the subsequent month. Taxpayers with an annual turnover of up to Rs 5 crore can file GSTR-1 quarterly within the 13th day of the end of the quarter. Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co Partner Rajat Bose said this is a positive change recommended by the council from a compliance perspective and will facilitate ease of doing business. Abhishek Jain, Indirect Tax Head & Partner, KPMG, said allowing revision of filings

FPIs infuse ₹12,170 crore in equities in June on hopes of policy reform continuation

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Staging a strong comeback after general election results, foreign investors pumped Rs 12,170 crore in Indian equities so far in June, mainly driven by expectations of continued policy reforms and sustained economic growth. This came following a net withdrawal of Rs 25,586 crore from equities in May on poll jitters and more than Rs 8,700 crore in April amid concerns over a tweak in India's tax treaty with Mauritius and a sustained rise in US bond yields. With the latest investment, the total outflow now stood at Rs 11,194 crore so far in 2024 (till June 21), data with the depositories showed. Going ahead, Sunil Damania, Chief Investment Officer at MojoPMS, said foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) inflow will remain constrained due to the high valuations currently commanded by the Indian equity market. FPIs had been waiting on the sidelines for the election results. So far in 2024, barring



March (Rs 35,000 crore inflow), they have been pulling out from India. "Though the general election results were sort of a surprise and resulted in a weaker than expected mandate, markets celebrated that yet again a stable government is formed and government continuity is maintained," Kislay Upadhyay, smallcase Manager and founder of FidelFolio, said. Further, business sentiment remained buoyant, and policy continuity added confidence to markets.

Damania attributed three primary reasons for this positive inflow. "First, the continuity of the government assures ongoing reforms. Second, the Chinese economy is decelerating, as evidenced by a 12 per cent decline in copper prices over the past month. Third, certain block deals in the market have been eagerly taken up by FPIs," Damania said. However, these FPI inflows are concentrated in a select few stocks rather than being widespread across the market or sectors.

Additionally, the anticipation of a pro-growth budget has also lifted investor sentiment, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director - Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said. Early trends in FPI activity in June indicate buying in financial services, telecom and realty and selling in FMCG, IT, metals and oil and gas, VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said. Additionally, FPIs invested Rs 10,575 crore in the debt market during the period under review, data with the depositories showed. Foreign investors have consistently invested in Indian debt in 2024, except for April, with a total investment of Rs 64,244 crore. India's inclusion in the debt index positively impacts debt inflows. "Irrespective of the short-term changes in flows, we believe India remains an attractive long-term investment destination for global investors," Nimesh Chandan, CIO, Bajaj Finserv Asset Management Ltd, said.

Daikin to sell 2 million units of AC in FY25

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Air conditioner maker Daikin expects to manufacture two million units in India this fiscal and has plans to scout for more export opportunities by making India a manufacturing hub. The company has already sold 7 lakh units of residential air conditioner (RAC) in the first three months of the year, helped by a blistering summer this season and expects over 50 per cent growth, said Daikin Airconditioning India Chairman and Managing Director Kanwaljeet Jawa. Daikin, which has started its third manufacturing unit in India at Sri City in Andhra Pradesh, is investing in compressor manufacturing here and aiming to manufacture five million units by 2030. "The mandate is of 5 million units, which includes 4 million units for the domestic market and 1 million of exports by 2030 and we are very confident," Jawa told PTI.

New home supply falls 13 per cent in April-June as builders launch fewer projects due to polls: PropEquity

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Fresh supply of housing units is estimated to decline 13 per cent during this quarter across nine major cities with builders launching less number of projects because of the general election, according to real estate data analytic firm PropEquity. PropEquity data shows that new housing supply in April-June is estimated to fall to 97,331 units across nine major cities as against 1,11,657 units in the year-ago period. Pune and Hyderabad are witnessing fewer launches

during this quarter while the new supply in Delhi-NCR has almost doubled. Samir Jasuja, Chief Executive Officer & Managing Director of PropEquity, attributed the fall in new supply of housing units to the Lok Sabha election which took place in this quarter. The new supply is 7 per cent lower from the January-March quarter of this calendar year, he added. As per the city-wise data, new launches of residential properties in Delhi-NCR are likely to rise 95 per cent to 11,118 units during April-June this year from 5,708 units



a year ago. The new supply of housing in Bengaluru is likely to rise 21 per cent to 14,297 units from 11,848 units.

In Chennai, the launches are likely to rise 67 per cent to 5,754 units from 3,634 units. However, the fresh supply in Hyderabad is estimated to fall 36 per cent to 11,603 units from 18,232 units. In Kolkata, new supply is likely to fall 26 per cent to 3,411 units from 4,617 units. Housing supply in Mumbai is estimated to dip 6 per cent to 9,918 units from 10,502 units. Navi Mumbai is likely to witness a 5 per cent decline in new supply of homes to 6,937 units from 7,272 units. New launches in Pune are seen falling 47 per cent to 15,568 units from 29,261

units. In Thane too, the new supply of residential properties is estimated to fall 10 per cent to 18,726 units in April-June from 20,781 units in the year-ago period. PropEquity has estimated a marginal 2 per cent dip in housing sales during April-June 2024 to 1,19,901 units from 1,21,856 units in the corresponding period of the preceding year. PropEquity is a real estate data and analytics company. It tracks over 1,73,000 projects of about 57,500 developers across 44 cities in India on a real-time basis.

BoB aims to double tech team headcount to 3,000 by FY26-end

PTI ■ MUMBAI

State-owned Bank of Baroda is aiming to double its in-house technology team headcount to 3,000 in the next two years, a top official has said. The new additions to the current team strength of 1,500 employees will be done both through the regular hiring processes and lateral hires of specialist talent, Debadatta Chand, its managing director and chief executive officer told PTI recently. "In the next two years, we will double the number of people in our IT team," Chand said after the announcement of its March quarter earnings. Recently, the Reserve Bank of



India has taken stringent action on banks for shortfalls in technology architecture which impacted the ability to execute transactions. Apart from the 1,500 in-house workers, there are also contractual employees engaged by the bank in the IT function, Chand said. The bank is wanting to hire contemporary talent as part of the efforts to significantly up

its strength of IT professionals, he said. The lateral talent will be across any grade, depending on the requirement and a candidate's experience, he said. He also said that a generative artificial intelligence-based platform will soon be going live for customers wherein a slew of services could be availed in an interactive way.

Chand said that the bank has been spending aggressively on the technology front, including around Rs 2,000 crore investments on infrastructure alone, and will up the spends as the area comes under increased focus going ahead. In FY24, the bank had a budget of Rs 743 crore on technology and the IT spend stood at Rs 453 crore, as per management commentary. The bank is targeting to open 60 new branches during the fiscal year 2024-25. In FY25, the bank will be targeting a credit growth of 12-14 per cent, backing it up with a deposit growth of 10-12 per cent and aspires to keep the NIMs at 3.15 per cent, Chand said.

Haveus Aerotech plans robust expansion in major cities after record profit for FY24

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) services provider Haveus Aerotech India plans to open new facilities in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai in the coming months as part of its expansion plans, a top company official has said. The company also looks to hire 350 persons to increase its headcount to around 500 employees from around 150 workers, at present, in the coming years. The New Delhi-based MRO player recently announced the appointment of veteran aviation expert and former Air India Engineering Services chief HR Jagannath on its board as director. Haveus Aerotech plans a major expansion of its capabilities and facilities in different parts of India, its MD and CEO Anshul Bhargava told PTI. "Some of the new upcoming facilities to be established are in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai in a few months. "We will increase our workforce to around 500 employees in coming years with the expansion of our facilities," Bhargava said. The New Delhi-based company has recorded a nearly three-fold jump in net profit to Rs 15.69 crore in 2023-24 compared to Rs 5.68 crore in the year-ago period. Its revenue increased to Rs 45.22 crore in FY2023-24. Also, the company saw its ROI increase to 61 per cent during the same period. The MRO services provider said it is seeing a surge in the customer base while discussions with various new customers are at the final stages. Haveus Aerotech CFO Rajendra Kumar Singh said, "The company has shown remarkable growth during the last couple of years, and we are committed to following the trend in future also".



During his visit to the Cottage (Janpath) External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar praised the delightful array of artisanal products. Managing Director of The Central Cottage Industries Corporation of India Ltd Manoj Lal showcased the impressive offerings. PNS Photo

Boosting e-commerce exports with dedicated hubs

PTI ■ KOLKATA

In a bid to boost India's e-commerce exports, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) is working with the Department of Revenue to establish designated e-commerce hubs across the country to streamline the process for online export shipments. The country's e-commerce exports currently stand at USD 2 billion as compared to China's staggering USD 350

billion, according to industry sources. The government aims at bridging the gap by establishing a supportive e-commerce ecosystem, they said. "A lot of streamlining is required in this regard. We are working with the Department of Revenue to have designated e-commerce hubs so that clearance of goods happens fast," Director General of Foreign Trade Santosh Kumar Sarangi told PTI. He said these hubs will have

facilities like dedicated customs and security checks, allowing cleared parcels to proceed through a green channel at airports, eliminating the need for further inspections. This approach mirrors best practices observed in other countries, Sarangi said. He also pointed out that the e-commerce hubs will be built and maintained by private entities, while the government will oversee security and customs clearances.

YOGA THE WAY OF LIFE

GLOBAL AND INDIAN STUDIES INDICATE THAT YOGA IS A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE HOLISTIC METHOD FOR REDUCING STRESS AND ENHANCING PHYSICAL WELL-BEING IN TODAY'S DEMANDING ENVIRONMENT.

ARCHANA JYOTI UNDERSCORES THE SUBSTANTIAL POSITIVE IMPACT OF YOGA

YOGA FOR HEART HEALTH
Presented at Heart Failure 2024, a study conducted by Dr. Ajit Singh from the Indian Council of Medical Research focused on yoga's effects on heart failure patients. The research involved 85 patients with heart failure, aged 30 to 70 years, who were divided into a yoga group (40 patients) and a control group (45 patients). All participants continued their standard heart failure medications. Participants in the yoga group received supervised sessions focusing on pranayama (yogic breathwork), meditation, and relaxation techniques. They continued home practice weekly, under guidance, for 50 minutes. Echocardiography measured heart structure and function at baseline, six months, and one year. Parameters included left

ventricular ejection fraction, right ventricular function, blood pressure, heart rate, and symptom burden. The yoga group demonstrated significant improvements in all measured parameters compared to the control group. This included better heart function, reduced symptoms, and improved daily activity capability. Dr. Singh concluded that yoga can complement standard medical treatments for heart failure, providing long-term benefits in managing symptoms and improving quality of life.

YOGA NIDRA FOR SLEEP AND COGNITIVE HEALTH
Published in PLOS ONE, the study led by Karuna Datta examined the effects of yoga nidra on sleep quality and cognitive function. Participants

engaged in a two-week yoga nidra program involving daily 20-minute guided sessions. Objective measures like polysomnography were used to assess sleep stages and cognitive performance. Participants showed increased delta-wave activity during deep sleep, indicating enhanced restorative sleep. They also demonstrated improved cognitive abilities across various tests, including memory, learning, and emotional recognition. Yoga nidra was highlighted as a cost-effective and accessible method to improve sleep and cognitive function, offering potential benefits for mental and physical health enhancement. Yet another groundbreaking functional MRI (fMRI) study by researchers from IIT Delhi, AIIMS Delhi, and Mahajan

Imaging Delhi conducted on Yoga Nidra, revealed significant changes in brain connectivity during the practice. Published in Scientific Reports, the study involved 30 experienced meditators and 31 novices. It found that Yoga Nidra alters the Default Mode Network (DMN), reducing connectivity more in experienced meditators. Thus suggesting reduced mind-wandering and deeper relaxation with heightened awareness. This study sheds light on how Yoga Nidra impacts brain function and could potentially aid in mental health therapies.

YOGA'S ROLE IN MANAGING EPILEPSY STIGMA AND SEIZURE CONTROL
The study Study, published in Neurology, explored yoga's impact on reducing stigma and

improving seizure control in people with epilepsy. Participants practiced yoga or sham yoga for three months, focusing on relaxation techniques and meditation to induce a relaxation response. Yoga participants reported reduced stigma perception, decreased seizure frequency, and improved quality of life compared to the sham group. They also exhibited lower anxiety levels and enhanced mindfulness. The study underscored yoga's potential as a holistic therapy for epilepsy management, complementing conventional medications and improving overall well-being.

YOGA FOR CHRONIC LOW BACK PAIN RELIEF
Published in the Journal of Orthopaedic Research, this study

focused on the efficacy of yoga in alleviating chronic low back pain. The research involved 21 women, with 10 experiencing chronic low back pain. Participants underwent an 8-session yoga program over four weeks, combining physical postures, breathing exercises, and mindfulness practices. Women with chronic low back pain reported significant reductions in pain intensity, measured using a visual analog scale. They also showed improved neuromuscular responses during trunk flexion, crucial for managing back pain. The study suggested that yoga could be a valuable complementary therapy for chronic low back pain, providing holistic benefits beyond conventional treatments.

KUNDALINI YOGA AND

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE RISK
Conducted by UCLA researchers and published in the Journal of Alzheimer's Disease, the study examined Kundalini yoga's effects on brain connectivity in older women at risk for Alzheimer's disease. Using specialized MRI techniques, the study suggested that Kundalini yoga enhanced hippocampal connectivity related to stress management and memory processing. The findings highlighted yoga as a promising strategy for enhancing cognitive health in individuals with perceived stress and cardiovascular risk factors. Needless to say, each study underscores yoga's versatility as a therapeutic practice, benefiting diverse health conditions from heart failure and chronic pain to epilepsy and cognitive decline.



SAIMA WAZED (WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia): Yoga is more than just a form of exercise. It is an ancient physical, mental and spiritual practice originating in India. The Sanskrit word 'yoga' means 'to unite,' symbolizing the harmony between body and mind. Mindful breathing, meditation, and gentle movement calm the nervous system, reduce stress hormones, and cultivate inner peace. Consistency is key when practising yoga's versatile aspects.



RAJESH KOTECHEA (Union Ayush Secretary): Yoga is a comprehensive instrument for empowering women, encompassing their physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Empowered women take on roles as leaders, educators, and advocates for change, promoting inclusivity, diversity, and empowerment across society. Our aim is to propel Yoga into a widespread movement with a focus on women's well-being and promoting global health and peace.



DR ISHWAR V. BASAVARADDI (Ex-Director, Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga): Yoga fosters unity between mind and body, and promotes balance, self-control, and overall well-being. Various studies have shown that yoga works almost all our muscles and keeps the body flexible and supple. Yoga improves symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder, suggesting that the practice may be useful for people dealing with anxiety, meditation and breathing.



RAJ VARDHAN DIXIT (Noida International Institute of Medical Sciences (NIIMS) College & Hospital, NIU): Yoga, with its holistic approach to wellness, has emerged as a powerful tool for addressing both physical and mental health issues. Incorporating daily yoga sessions into one's routine not only enhances flexibility, strength, and balance but also offers therapeutic benefits for conditions like back pain and arthritis. Also, yoga can mean more energy and brighter moods



DR RP PRASHAR (CMO, Ayurveda, MCD): Yoga and Ayurveda are the most ancient disciplines of India, aiming to achieve physical, mental and spiritual balance. The various branches of yoga include Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Gyan Yoga. Hatha Yoga focuses on physical asanas and pranayama, which is extremely effective in the treatment of lifestyle diseases like diabetes. Hence, we should make yoga along with Ayurveda an integral part of our daily life.



DR VINOOD KUMAR (Yoga expert and Naturo-therapist): Yoga, an ancient tradition rooted in the Vedic era, has gained worldwide acknowledgment and reverence over the last twenty-five years because of its inclusiveness and benefits. It serves as a method that guides the mind, body, and soul to function harmoniously and artistically. It transcends individual limitations; it embodies a comprehensive philosophy that facilitates ease and well-being in every aspect of life.



Celebrating Diversity and Awareness

Vitiligo Day observed on June 25 each year raises awareness about the skin condition causing loss of skin colour in patches. It's the day to celebrate diversity, promote understanding, and support those affected by vitiligo worldwide, says **ARCHANA JYOTI**



RADIANCE BEYOND SKIN: CELEBRATING BEAUTY FROM WITHIN
Stepping onto the beauty ramp with patches of vitiligo wasn't just about showcasing outer beauty; it was a bold statement of self-acceptance and empowerment. "For years, society's narrow beauty standards made us doubt if we belonged. In a world where narrow beauty standards often exclude diversity, stepping into the spotlight that day was a moment of triumph," these were the sentiments of every vitiligo warrior who participated in a fashion show 'Vitiligo Vikings 3.0' spearheaded by **Dr. Nitika Kohil**, an ayurvedic dermatologist.

HEAT WAVES AND VITILIGO
Individuals living with vitiligo are particularly vulnerable to the effects of heightened temperatures and increased sun exposure, emphasises Medical and Cosmetic Dermatologist **Dr. Atula Gupta**. She offers practical tips to help manage and cope with these challenges effectively. As per Gupta, sun Protection is of paramount importance for individuals with vitiligo. A broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher should be applied copiously on all exposed areas including those with white patches. Reapplication every 4 hours is crucial. Clothing should cover as much skin as possible and physical protection in the form of



umbrellas, sunglasses, and hats should be encouraged. During peak sun hours, it is advisable to seek shade whenever possible. Avoid consumption of alcohol or excessive caffeine and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. It is crucial to moisturize the white patches on the skin to avoid the risk of irritation from sweat and trauma. Taking care of your mental and emotional well-being is essential for managing vitiligo. No doubt, from increased psychological stress to the risk of sunburn, peak summer weather poses specific concerns for people with vitiligo. But with proactive measures like emphasising on sun protection, protective skin care, fostering emotional well-being and addressing mental health issues people with vitiligo can enjoy the summer months without impacting their skin condition, says Dr Atula.

WHAT IT IS ALL ABOUT
Vitiligo is an autoimmune disease where the immune system attacks melanocytes, cells responsible for producing pigment in the skin, leading to lighter patches and spots. It can affect various parts of the body, including the skin, mouth, nose, and eyes, and may cause premature graying of hair or white streaks in hair. While vitiligo can appear at any age and in people of all races, it often begins in childhood and may run in families. However, in many cases it is not guaranteed to be inherited. Triggers like severe sunburns or skin injuries can also contribute to its development. Additionally, vitiligo may coincide with other autoimmune conditions or certain cancers.



NEWS BRIEFS



AI-ENABLED YOGA MAT DEVELOPED
A startup incubated at IIT Mandi has developed an artificial intelligence (AI) -enabled Yoga mat, which was presented to Union Ministers here. The mat called 'YogiFi' was handed over to Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar; Union Railways, I&B and IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw; Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and others on behalf of the Ministry of Science and Technology. The mat has the potential to revolutionise the at-home yoga experience by leveraging AI and Computer Vision (CV) technologies to enable comfortable yoga practice, according to the ministry. It is equipped with a built-in innovative sensor layer, tracks the postures of yoga performers, and offers suggestions to help correct their posture in real-time. It has been developed by Wellnesys Technologies Private Ltd, incubated at the Technology Innovation Hub (TIH) iHub at IIT Mandi, and supported under the NM-ICPS programme of DST.

NEW SAFETY MEASURES FOR TOPIRAMATE
The UK's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has implemented new safety measures for topiramate (sold under the brand name

Topamax) following a comprehensive safety review triggered by recent European studies. These studies highlighted increased risks associated with the use of topiramate during pregnancy, including a 2 to 3 times higher likelihood of intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children born to mothers who used the drug during pregnancy. Based on recommendations from the Commission on Human Medicines (CHM), the MHRA now advises that topiramate should not be prescribed for treating epilepsy during pregnancy unless there are no suitable alternative treatments available. This caution extends previous guidance that already restricted its use during pregnancy for migraine due to known risks of birth defects.

PHDCCI HEALTH TEAM MEETS FM
PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PHDCCI) delegation led by Dr. Deep Goel, Chair of the Health Committee, of the chamber recently met Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and shared their Pre-Budget Memorandum for Union Budget 2024-25. The bucket list includes efforts to strengthen our healthcare system amidst the pandemic's lessons, enhancing public health infrastructure, and investing in medical education is critical. Addressing regional healthcare disparities and bolstering the workforce, including doctors, nurses, technicians, and pharmacists, is essential for effective pandemic response. Redirecting resources to expand facilities, incentivizing healthcare professionals, and implementing robust public health emergency plans are vital. Leveraging technology, promoting preventive care, and fostering international collaboration are key for resilient health infrastructure. Establishing well-equipped primary healthcare centers and government hospitals nationwide, particularly at Tehsil/Block levels, is crucial, it said.

Near perfect India could play party poopers to under pressure Australia

PTI ■ GROS ISLET (SAINT LUCIA)

India will be out to derail Australia's T20 World Cup campaign when they take on their shocked and under-pressure opponents in their final Super 8 game here on Monday. A third straight win for India will not only make them the group toppers and send them to the semifinals, it will also substantially threaten Australia's chances of progressing through to the semi-finals following the unexpected loss to Afghanistan in Saint Vincent on Saturday night. Following the reverse against Afghanistan, Australia don't have the destiny in their own hands and will be keenly tracking Rashid Khan's team final game against Bangladesh on Monday night. India, who have had to endure heartbreaking defeats at the

hands of Australia in major ICC events, would like to see a pre-mature exit of their strong rivals. On fine-tuning their game ahead of the knockouts, India don't need to do much having ticked all boxes in their back-to-back wins against Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Both Rohit and Virat Kohli played innings of substance against Afghanistan, while Shivam Dube, who had not been able to perform his role, answered his critics with a crucial knock. Number three Rishabh Pant has been getting dismissed off reverse hit often and it is something he would like to correct. The biggest positive for India in this tournament has been the all-round effort of Hardik Pandya, who has now come to the party with the bat to complement his incisive spells. Kuldeep Yadav has taken little

time to come up with match-winning contributions and he would be relied on for wickets in the middle overs. With the team playing three Super 8 games with as many days of travel in between, the management will be tempted to rotate players but is unlikely to do so. India, who arrived in Saint Lucia on Saturday night, chose not to train ahead of the Australia game considering the hectic travel involved. It will only be the second day game at the Darren Sammy Cricket Stadium. The day nighters have produced high-scores here but in the previous game at the venue, England were not able to chase 164 in a day game against South Africa. It has been the best batting strip of the competition but sun beating down on the pitch through the day is likely to aid the slower bowlers. Australia, on the other hand,



have plenty to worry about going into the game. It was a flop batting show against Afghanistan and unusually Mitchell Marsh's team had a forgettable night in the field as well. Having logged only 88 runs in six games at a strike rate of 111, Marsh needs to lead from the front against India. With the ball, offie Glenn Maxwell needs to check his economy rate of 8.58 runs per over. In terms of match ups, it will be interesting to see how Kohli fares against leg-spinner Adam Zampa, who has had the better of the Indian superstar on multiple occasions. Australia played the extra spinner in Ashton Agar instead of Mitchell Starc against Afghanistan but that could change against India. "It was an off-night for us in the field, and we own that. We'll be back next game. It

wasn't an easy wicket but both teams played on this surface. (India next...) First and foremost it becomes clear for us. We need to win and no better team to do it against (India)," said the skipper in a very matter of fact way after the Afghanistan game. **SQUADS:** **India:** Rohit Sharma (captain), Hardik Pandya, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Rishabh Pant, Sanju Samson, Shivam Dube, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Arshdeep Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammad Siraj. **Australia:** David Warner, Travis Head, Mitchell Marsh (captain), Glenn Maxwell, Marcus Stoinis, Tim David, Matthew Wade (wk), Pat Cummins, Ashton Agar, Adam Zampa, Josh Hazlewood, Mitchell Starc, Josh Inglis, Cameron Green, Nathan Ellis.



Big hitting West Indies clash with rampaging SA in must win super 8 clash

PTI ■ NORTH SOUND

Hosts West Indies will need their all-round firepower for taming a rampaging South Africa in their must-win final Super Eight clash to seal the semi-final berth at the T20 World Cup here. After their only loss in six games to England in their opening Super 8 game, WI regrouped to smash co-hosts USA by nine wickets. For WI, a win will see them through to the last-four, while a loss will bring it down to net run-rate and that too only if USA beat England in the other group match. South Africa, who have won all their six games so far, are sitting at the top of the table but they too are not yet guaranteed a spot in the semifinal and will need a win to seal the position. A loss will again leave their fate on the other result and NRR. However, both teams will have the advantage of knowing the exact scenario before they head into the match. West Indies had failed to rotate strike against England but they quickly addressed the issue, producing a dominant show against USA led by Shai Hope's belligerent 39-ball 82. While Hope will be expected to produce the firepower in the powerplay, the Windies also possess some big power-hitters such as Nicholas Pooran, Andre Russell to provide the charge in the death as well. They also have Kyle Mayers waiting in the wings and it needs to be seen if WI is tempted to open with him, given his stint in SA20 and his mountain of runs in the pre-World Cup series against South Africa last month. "I think most of the times when we control the power play, whether batting or bowling, that's when we come out on top," Roston Chase said in the pre-match press conference. "I think that's the main focus, because we know in the end we have the power at the end. So, it's just for us to control that power play with the batting and our bowling..." South Africa, on the other hand, haven't looked dominant so far despite an all-win

record. It has always been tight wins even against minnows like the US and Nepal. The positive thing is that Aiden Markram's team has always found a way to come out trumps. "If you look at previous World Cups, the small moments we haven't really won. And it's good to see that I think all the games have come really close and we found a way, so it's building the character within the team," Keshav Maharaj said. "And I think it prepares us for obviously certain opportunities that we could get and crossing over the line in those small moments are things that we've never done before. So, it's good to see us getting into that." For SA, Quinton de Kock and Reeza Hendricks have done the heavy lifting, while Anrich Nortje and Keshav Maharaj have been their standout bowler. De Kock's big-hitting in the powerplay made the difference in their last match against England and WI has to find a way to stop him. WI has some quality spinners in Akeal Hosein, Gudakesh Motie and Chase and a lot will depend on them as how they contain the middle-order, led by David Miller. WI will also take inspiration from their 3-0 sweep of South Africa ahead of the tournament although it came against a second-string side. South Africa, on the other hand, have an overwhelming 3-1 record against the West Indies in T20 World Cups.

SQUAD:

West Indies Squad: Rovman Powell (c), Kyle Mayers, Johnson Charles, Nicholas Pooran (wk), Sherfane Rutherford, Andre Russell, Romario Shepherd, Roston Chase, Akeal Hosein, Alzarri Joseph, Gudakesh Motie, Obed McCoy, Shamar Joseph, Shimron Hetmyer and Shai Hope. **South Africa:** Aiden Markram (c), Ott Niel Baartman, Gerald Coetzee, Quinton de Kock, Bjorn Fortuin, Reeza Hendricks, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, David Miller, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi and Tristan Stubbs.

PTI ■ KINGSTOWN

Afghanistan pulled off an upset of epic proportions with a shock 21-run win over mighty Australia in T20 World Cup with Gulbadin Naib's four-wicket haul upending Pat Cummins' hat-trick to produce one of most memorable days in Afghan cricket. Using the slower balls smartly on a difficult batting wicket, Afghanistan defended their total of 148 for six for their first-ever win over Australia in international cricket. Australia were all out for 127 in 19.2 overs in the Super Eight contest and they are now staring at early elimination from the World Cup. Australia now must win their match against India on Monday and also hope that Afghanistan lose to Bangladesh in their next match. Afghanistan opens Rahmanullah Gurbaz (60) and Ibrahim Zadran (51) forged a 118-run partnership setting up base for a challenging total but Pat Cummins registered his second successive hat-trick spread across two overs to restrict Afghanistan to a manageable total. Australia were reduced to 32 for 3

in the powerplay but Glenn Maxwell slammed a 41-ball 59 to somewhat resurrect the chase. However Naib's timely strikes proved crucial in toppling the 2021 champions. Afghanistan exacted revenge for their defeat in Mumbai during the ODI World Cup. Maxwell had snatched victory from Aghans at that time and on Saturday too he threatened to deny them but Naib's brilliance ensured them the win. "It's massive win for us as a team and as a nation. Great feeling. It's something we missed in last two years. Really happy with the win and super proud of the guys," Afghanistan skipper Rashid Khan said at the post-match presentation. "The way Gulbadin bowled today - the experience he has, it came good today. The way Nabi started - the wicket of Warner - was also pleasing to see. It's so important for us back home and around the world. I'm sure they're proud and would've enjoyed the game," he added. The result has opened up the Group 1 as both Australia and Afghanistan now have one win each with one match to go, while India sit atop the table with two



wins from as many games. Defending 149 on a spin-friendly wicket, Afghanistan had the perfect start as Naveen-ul-Haq picked up two early wickets with the new ball to peg Australia back. First Naveen cleaned up Travis Head for a duck with a fuller delivery and then he deceived the skipper Mitch Marsh with a slower delivery as he holed out to Nabi. Maxwell eased the pressure with two fours off Azmatullah but Nabi removed David Warner (3), who went for a slog sweep only to find Noor Ahmad as Australia scored the lowest Powerplay score of 33 for 3 this World Cup. Naib returned to pick his most

prized cap, dismissing the dangerous Maxwell in the 15th over and then Rashid removed Matthew Wade as their chase fell apart. Naib next knocked off the stumps of Cummins, while Naveen claimed his third victim by removing Ashton Agar. Azmatullah ended the proceedings by dismissing Josh Hazlewood. Earlier, Gurbaz and Ibrahim notched up their third century stand of this T20 World Cup with a 118-run partnership. The duo capitalised on their chances as Australia had to wait till the 16th over for their first breakthrough. Gurbaz slammed four maximums and as many fours in his 49-ball stay, while Zadran hit six boundaries during his 48-ball knock. Stoinis got rid of Gurbaz with an off-cutter, while in the next over, Adam Zampa cleaned up Azmatullah Omarzai with a slider. Looking for big hits, Afghanistan lost wickets there after with Cummins dismissing Rashid Khan, Karim Janat and Gulbadin Naib to became the first player to pick up two hat-tricks in T20 World Cups.

De Bruyne crowns Belgium's 2-0 win over Romania to get Euro 2024 campaign on track

AP ■ COLOGNE (GERMANY)

In front of Belgium's royal family, King Kev sealed the win. Belgium shook off the shock of losing to Slovakia in its opening game of the European Championship by beating Romania 2-0 on Saturday. Kevin De Bruyne's second-half goal completed the win after Youri Tielemans scored in the second minute at Cologne Stadium. Watching on were Belgium's King Philippe and Queen Mathilde. "We knew what we needed to do. We needed to win otherwise we were going home," De Bruyne said. "I will do everything I can to keep the lads on track." This was just what Belgium needed after the Slovakia stunner, which raised the prospect of another early exit from a major tournament after being eliminated at the group stage of the 2022 World Cup. Tielemans gave the No. 3-ranked team in the world a flying start with a goal from the edge of the area. De Bruyne converted direct from Belgium goalkeeper Koen Casteels' long kick in the 80th.



The result means all four teams in Group E have three points and there is all to play for in the final round of games on Wednesday, when Belgium plays Ukraine and Romania takes on Slovakia. "I'm very relieved we won the game. It was very important to get the three points," Belgium coach Domenico Tedesco said. While Belgium now, there was more frustration for Romelu

Lukaku, who had a third goal ruled out by VAR at these Euros. Still, he was at the center of his team's great start when laying the ball off for Tielemans to drive in low from the edge of the box. Belgium has been criticized for failing to live up to expectations in the past, and its opening defeat would not have helped the confidence among the squad going into Saturday's game.

Tielemans' goal seemed to lift the pressure, and Belgium ruled the rest of the half with 67% of possession. Lukaku thought he scored after the break, but VAR said he strayed offside before firing past Romania keeper Florin Nita. The longer the game went on without Belgium scoring a second, the more the tension rose. Dennis Man could have evened the score when running through on goal, but was denied by Casteels. The keeper then turned provider with a long punt upfield, which De Bruyne raced on to and fired home. Tedesco thought his team took too long to seal the win. "Scoring four or five goals tonight was possible," he said. "It is important to create chances, but you have to kill the game earlier for sure." Under former Belgium coach Roberto Martinez, Portugal advanced to the knockout phase after a 3-0 win against Turkey in Group F. Georgia picked up its first ever point at a major tournament after a drawing the Czech Republic 1-1 and still has hopes of advancing.

Indian recurve mixed team wins bronze medal in Archery World Cup

PTI ■ ANTALYA (TURKEY)

Indian recurve mixed team of Dhiraj Bommadevara and Bhajan Kaur produced an excellent performance to rally past Mexico and clinch a bronze medal in the Archery World Cup Stage 3 here on Sunday. Trailing 0-2 after conceding the opening set, the Indian team produced a flawless round to bring it level and seal a stunning 5-3 (35-38, 40-39, 38-37, 38-38) win over their Mexican opponents Alejandra Valencia and Matias Grande. This was India's third medal from the meet and the archers will be in the hunt for two more medals when Dhiraj and Ankita Bhakat compete in their respective individual semifinals later in the day. Indian women's compound team of Jyothi Surekha Vennam, Aditi Swami and Parneet Kaur bagged a gold medal, while Priyansh bagged a silver on Saturday.

Italy and Croatia clash with tournament survival at stake

AP ■ LEIPZIG (GERMANY)

Defending champion Italy needs to avoid defeat against neighboring Croatia in their final group game to ensure progress at the European Championship. Croatia can progress with a win, or by avoiding defeat as long as Albania does not beat group-winner Spain in the other Group B game at the same time. **HERE'S WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT THE MATCH:** **MATCH FACTS** □ Italy has three points after beating Albania 2-1 in its opening game before losing 1-0 to Spain, which is already assured of winning the group. Croatia lost to Spain 3-0 in its opening game, then drew with Albania 2-2 in their second game, leaving both Croatia and Albania with one point.

Albania has the better goal difference. □ Though a draw will be enough for Italy's progression, Luciano Spalletti's team will be keen to impress after being thoroughly outclassed by Spain in its previous game. Italy only lost by a goal, but the Italian players spent most of the game chasing Spanish shadows and were saved embarrassment by captain and goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma. □ Zlatko Dalic's Croatia team is once again led by Real Madrid star Luka Modric, who is yet to score in his fifth tournament appearance. □ Italy lost in its previous and only game in Leipzig, a 1-0 defeat to East Germany in a friendly in April 1982. □ Many of the Croatia players have played in Italy, while Italy coach Luciano Spalletti is



familiar with Marcelo Brozovic and Ivan Perisic from their time together at Inter Milan between 2017 and 2019. The now 35-year-old Perisic scored 55 goals in 254 games across stints with Inter, winning the Serie A title in 2021 and Coppa Italia the next season. **TEAM NEWS** □ Italy left-back Federico Dimarco is expected to miss the game with a right calf injury sustained in the loss against Spain. Dimarco featured in both of Italy's games so far. □ Croatia will be without midfielder Nikola Vlacic, who is no longer with the squad because of an injury, while veteran defender Domagoj Vida missed Saturday's training session with an ankle injury. **BY THE NUMBERS** □ Italy has a poor record

against Croatia, winning only one of their previous nine meetings. Croatia won three, while there were five draws. The last three games all finished 1-1. □ Italy's only win came in the first meeting between the countries, a friendly in Genoa in 1942 that yielded four goals for the home team. **WHAT THEY'RE SAYING** "I know the Italy coach. They will be well organized. It will be a tough match, but I believe we will rise to the challenge and come out victorious." - Croatia midfielder Mario Pasalic. "Croatia are strong. They have experience. In addition to Brozovic, they have many quality players and we will have to be careful. But we will have to play our game with our own strengths, and I'm sure we will cause them problems.