



OPINION 6
BIBLICAL RHETORIC
STIRS CONTROVERSY

WORLD 8
ISRAEL ARMY TO PAUSE DAYTIME
FIGHTING IN GAZA

MONEY 10
INDIAN AIR-CONDITIONER MARKET
TO REACH ₹50,000 CRORE BY FY29

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Jeevan dayini Ganga in distress amid intense heatwave

BISWAJEET BANERJEE/
RAMESH K SINGH ■ VARANASI

On the auspicious day of Ganga Dussehra, the Ganga River in Varanasi reached an unprecedented low, measuring 189.66 feet against the expected 193 feet. The river's width, typically spanning 70 to 80 metres in June, has now been reduced to 30 to 35 metres, exposing the ghats and revealing environmental distress. "In summers, the water level generally goes down, but this year's drop is unprecedented

due to the intense heatwave sweeping across Northern India," said Vijay Kumar, General Manager of the Jalkal Department. Three days ago, 1,800 cusecs of water were released from the Kanpur Barrage to sustain the Ganga's level in Varanasi, resulting in only a 2-centimeter rise. "If the water level of the Ganga decreases further, there will be a problem," Kumar warned, noting that he had requested additional water releases from the Kanpur Irrigation Department to stabilise the



river's level. The city's water supply, which relies on 120-125 million liters per day (MLD) drawn from the Ganga, currently

uses 110 MLD. The present water level of 189.66 feet is significantly below the required 193 feet for an adequate supply.

"Although the Ganga is considered life-giving (Jeevan dayini), the recent heatwave has exposed the river's vulnerability. "The declining water levels have caused the Ganga to recede from the ghats, revealing broken boats, scattered garbage, and shattered boulders," said Ashutosh Shukla, a Varanasi resident. Pandit Dinesh Chandra Mishra, a priest at Assi Ghat, reminisced about Ganga Dussehra's traditional significance, when rising water levels used to mark the

onset of floods 50 years ago. "This trend has diminished in the past five years," he said. Mishra emphasised the need for additional water releases, pointing out the challenges faced by boatmen and the looming threat to the city's water supply. "The river has already receded from the ghats, creating major challenges for boatmen. The biggest crisis will be in our water supply," he warned. The past month and a half have seen relentless scorching heat, causing significant drying of the Ganga.

Army to turn heat on J&K terrorists

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday here reviewed the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir in the wake of several terror incidents in the region recently and also took stock of the preparations for the annual Amarnath Yatra scheduled to commence from June 29 and will continue till August 19. The Home Minister was given a comprehensive briefing on the prevailing situation in Jammu and Kashmir where security forces are expected to intensify counter-terror operations in the coming days, it was learnt. The operations against the

terrorists will be carried out in line with the Prime Minister's directive, sources said. Shah presided over the high-level meeting here at North Block, three days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a similar meeting where he directed officials to deploy the "full spectrum of counter-terror capabilities" after a spate of terror incidents, including an attack on a bus carrying pilgrims. Earlier at a meeting on Friday last, Shah was briefed about the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir, the deployment of forces along the International Border and Line of Control (LOC), infiltration attempts, the status of ongoing anti-terror operations.

Tension flares up in Capital over water woes

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The ongoing water crisis in Delhi has sparked protests, vandalism, and heated political exchanges across the Capital. On Sunday, unidentified individuals vandalised the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) office in Chhatrapur amid the severe water shortage while tensions also flared in the Dwarka, where a dispute over access to water from a common tap resulted in three people being injured and hospitalised at Indira Gandhi Hospital. The Aam Aadmi Party on Sunday accused the BJP workers of vandalising a Delhi Jal Board office during their protests over the water crisis in the national Capital. Sharing a video of the purported incident on X, AAP Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj wrote, "See the BJP leaders wearing sashes and workers



Protest erupts as water crisis worsens in Delhi on Sunday

shouting slogans in support of BJP leaders, destroying government property at the Delhi Jal Board office." Reacting to the Chhattarpur incident, former MP and BJP leader Ramesh Bidhuri expressed empathy with the anger of the people but condemned the destruction of public property. "It is natural. The people can do

anything when they are angry. I am grateful to the workers who controlled those people...It is the government's and people's property. There is no benefit in damaging this property." The incident occurred as Delhi is grappling with one of the worst water crises amid the boiling hot weather. The footage shared by on social media showed shattered window pane and broken earthen pots at the DJB office. There have been significant allegations against the AAP Government, where the protesters and the political parties are claiming that the senior officials, including some from the Delhi Government are running a "tanker mafia". Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj and Water Minister Atishi accused BJP leaders and workers of vandalising an office of the Delhi Jal Board. Terming it a "conspiracy" against

the Government, Bharadwaj shared a video showing some people breaking the windows of an office by hurling stones and earthen pots at it. "See BJP leaders wearing party sashes and its workers raising slogans of BJP zindabad vandalising Government property at the Delhi Jal Board office. Who is getting pipelines broken at various places? Whose conspiracy is it?" he said in a post on X in Hindi. Atishi said at a Press conference that the BJP is leaving no stone unturned to trouble Delhi's people. "The first part of the conspiracy was reducing Delhi's water through its government in Haryana. Today (Sunday), the Wazirabad barrage is lying empty while the Munak canal is receiving less water," the senior AAP leader alleged.

Delhi continues to sizzle

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The maximum temperature in Delhi on Sunday was recorded six notches above normal at 44.9 degrees Celsius, the India Meteorological Department said. The minimum temperature was recorded at 33.2 degrees Celsius, 5.7 notches above the season's average. For Monday, the Met office has predicted mainly clear skies and heatwave to severe heatwave to with warm night conditions and strong surface winds. At 5.30 pm, the humidity was recorded at 19 per cent. The national Capital's Air Quality Index (AQI) was recorded in the 'moderate' category with a reading of 195 at 6 pm, according to Central Pollution Control Board data. An AQI between zero and 50 is considered 'good'; 51 and 100 'satisfactory'; 101 and 200 'moderate'; 201 and 300 'poor'; 301 and 400 'very poor'; and 401 and 500 'severe'. Meanwhile, Uttar Pradesh continued to be in the grip of heatwave conditions with the maximum temperature remaining above 45 degrees Celsius at most places in the State.

ICONIC MOMENT



Statues of freedom fighters and national icons during the inauguration of the Prerna Sthal at the Parliament House complex, in New Delhi, on Sunday. Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar inaugurated the Prerna Sthal PTI

Musk's EVM remark sparks row in India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

More than a week after the Lok Sabha election results, the debate over Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) once again started after Tesla CEO Elon Musk sparked a fresh controversy by vouching for the elimination of EVMs over the risk of "hacking". Former Minister of State of IT and BJP leader Rajeev Chandrasekhar, however, countered his statement saying India's EVMs are robustly secure, in fact very different from those used in other countries. Chandrasekhar countered Musk's statement with a detailed explanation of India's approach to EVM technology. Chandrasekhar asserted that EVMs in India are custom-designed, secure, and isolated from any network or media. The Tesla CEO's remarks on EVM came in response to US politician Robert F Kennedy Jr's post in which he had raised the issue of EVM irregularities in Puerto Rico's primary elections. Kennedy is contesting the US Presidential elections 2024 as an Independent candidate. Later, former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav and INDIA Bloc also joined



in, backing Musk's apprehension of EVMs. Notably, the Opposition did not raise the issue of EVM hacking or malpractices after the Lok Sabha results announced. "EVMs in India are a 'black box,' and nobody is allowed to scrutinise them. Serious concerns are being raised about transparency in our electoral process. Democracy ends up becoming a sham and prone to fraud when institutions lack accountability," said Rahul while his coalition partner Akhilesh also shared Musk's post. "Technology is to remove problems, if they become a cause of problems, their use must be stopped. When risks of EVM tampering are being flagged in several elections across the world and well-known technology experts are

flagging risks, the BJP must clear the air on why they are bent on using EVMs". Prior to Lok Sabha results, they had alleged that there was a possibility of the ruling BJP tampering with electronic voting machines to turn poll outcomes in their favour. Musk, in his own social media platform post on X, raised concerns about EVMs, suggesting they should be eliminated due to the potential risk of being hacked by humans or AI, even if the risk is minimal. "This is a huge sweeping generalisation statement that implies no one can build secure digital hardware. Wrong," Chandrasekhar said, adding "Elon Musk's view may apply to US and other places — where they use regular compute platforms to build Internet connected Voting machines."

Unease in NDA over NEET



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PATNA/NEW DELHI

In what could be the first sign of "political" uneasiness in the just formed Narendra Modi-led NDA Government, its partner JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar-led Bihar Government has come down cracking by registering an FIR in the infamous NEET entrance paper leak though the Centre has been defending from day one and termed all the controversy an allegation a conspiracy by the Opposition to malign the Centre. A regular massive protests from the across the country, including Bihar which sees a large number of aspirants, is being reported on a daily basis ever since the expose giving the Opposition-led by the Congress an opportunity to attacking the Dharmendra Pradhan-led Education Ministry. After the things were getting murkier, Pradhan addressed the NEET controversy once again on Sunday reiterating the Government's commitment to accountability and fairness. He emphasised that strict actions will be taken against any officials found guilty of malpractice. "On the recommendations of the Supreme Court, a re-test has been ordered for 1,563 candidates. Irregularities have been found in two places. The Government is taking this issue seriously. If any high-ranking officials of the NTA are found guilty, they will face strict consequences. Significant improvements are needed in the NTA. We are committed to ensuring that no wrongdoer escapes punishment," Pradhan said.

The Centre and the NTA have told the Supreme Court they had cancelled the grace marks given to 1,563 candidates who took the examination for admission to MBBS and other such courses. They will have the option to either take a re-test or forgo the compensatory marks awarded to them for loss of time, the Centre has said. The Economic Offences Unit (EOU) of Bihar, which is probing allegations that the paper of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) was leaked ahead of the exams held on May 5, has said they found evidence that suggests that some students knew the questions before they appeared for the examination. EOU said 13 people, including four students, have been arrested for their suspected involvement in the alleged leak and some have also been accused of receiving the question papers ahead of the test. According to Additional Director General of Police, EOU, NH Khan, during the probe they had asked a set of questions to the National Testing Agency (NTA), which organises the NEET exam, and while they might have some follow-ups to their questions, their investigation is "very much suggestive of a paper leak." EOU Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Manavjeet Singh Dhillon said they recovered a list of the 13 people from a "safe house" located on the outskirts of Patna. Sources said around 30 medical aspirants had reportedly been summoned by people they described as the "exam mafia" to receive questions and answers ahead of the exam. Dhillon claimed that four arrested candidates had "confessed" during interrogation that the questions were identical to those they had received at the "safe house" on May 4. The NEET exam was held on May 5 in 4,750 centres across India and around 2,400,000 candidates took it. The results were expected to be declared on June 14 but were announced 10 days earlier since the evaluation of the answer sheets was completed earlier. The results sparked outrage and protests amid alleged irregularities after as many as 67 students scored a perfect 720.



Tourist guides to turn saviours

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In the wake of rising incidents of heart attacks, the IATO (Indian Association of Tour Operators) has proposed a crucial initiative aimed at ensuring first aid for tourists in emergencies: Training guides and drivers in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) skills. The move, though, has come quite late from the IATO given that countries world over train their guides and drivers in such skills to effectively respond to emergencies, ensuring prompt and potentially life-saving interventions for visitors in distress. An IATO official said they are advocating for comprehensive training programme to equip tour guides and drivers with CPR skills. "We have written to

the Tourists Guides Federation of India (TGFI) and Indian Tourist Transporters Association (ITTA) to organise the skill development training programme enabling the drivers and guides to provide quality services to the international standard to the foreign tourists. "Training of first aid and CPR is needed as sometimes medical facilities are not available in remote areas and guides can save the lives of tourists." There have been a few reported cases of heart attack among tourists also. The IATO official stressed that such training programmes should be organised annually as this will create confidence especially amongst foreign tourists, amid growing interest of inbound tourists for India.

World's highest steel arch rail bridge nears completion in J&K

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The world's highest steel arch rail bridge which is 1,315 metres long and 35 metres taller than the Eiffel Tower in Paris, over river Chenab in the Reasi district of Jammu division, is all set to bring Kashmir Valley one more step closer to the rest of the country with the commissioning of the 46-km long Sangaldan-Reasi section by the end of this month. Sources said in his first visit to the valley after taking over as Prime Minister for third consecutive time, Narendar Modi will also travel first when this is thrown open for



the nation later this month. The Commissioner of Railways Safety (CRS) DC Deshwal is scheduled to visit the rail section for an on-

the-spot inspection of the 46-km long railway track between Sangaldan-Reasi before giving its nod to extend the footprints of the

rail network up to Reasi. Chief Public Relations Officer, Northern Railway, Deepak Kumar said the commissioning of this section depends on the CRS's inspection of this vital section of the ambitious Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail link (USBRL) on June 27 and 28. "The works of Sangaldan to Reasi will be completed before the scheduled inspection of CRS," he said. The USBRL project, including the 48.1 km long Banihal-Sangaldan section, was inaugurated by Modi on February 20, 2024. With the commissioning of

the 46 km Sangaldan-Reasi section, the work on a 17-km stretch between Reasi and Katra only remains pending which is likely to be completed by the year's end to connect Kashmir with the rest of the country by train. Out of the total 272 km USBRL project, 209 km was commissioned in phases with the first phase of the 118 km Qazigund-Baramulla section commissioned in October 2009 followed by 18 km Banihal-Qazigund in June 2013, 25-km Udhampur-Katra in July 2014 and 48.1-km long Banihal-Sangaldan stretch in February, this year.

GUEST COLUMN

Jageshwar Dham needs conservation, not exploitation



LOKESH OHRI
HILLBILLY

The Himalayan State of Uttarakhand is widely known as Dev Bhumi. It is a sacred landscape where nature and culture come together to lend divinity to the mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers and alpine grasslands. Communities in this land have established familial bonds with the divine, even as their deities have protected them against the vagaries of nature.

Of the several sacred and historic sites of Uttarakhand, Jageshwar Dham is perhaps the most significant. A recent proposal to do away with many trees in the sacred forest around the site for a road project has raised alarm bells amongst the conservation fraternity, about the intentions of powers that be to exploit, and in the process destroy sites of such high spiritual and historic value as Jageshwar.

Jageshwar is an extremely significant pilgrimage centre located in the Almora district, with temples such a Mahamrityunjaya dating back to 850-950 century. It is a site of outstanding universal value, not just to the communities that live around it, but to entire humanity. Renowned for its ancient stone temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, namely the Jageshwar temple complex and the Dandeshwar temple complex, both sites are nationally protected by the Archaeological Survey of India. They were notified in the year 1915. Such is their significance that they are considered one of the twelve original Jyotirlingams, and it was customary for pilgrims on the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage route to stop and worship Lord Shiva here. Jageshwar is an amalga-

mation of two words, Jag and Ishwar, where the former means to awaken, and the latter means god or the supreme power. Therefore, this is a spot where Shiva is said to have awakened.

The site is also renowned as a centre of Lakulisha Shaivism, a revivalist sect worshipping Lord Shiva. Lakulisha, the name literally meaning club-bearing lord, was a wandering ascetic who is said to have united different sects and revived the worship of Lord Pashupati. The faith later flourished under the Bharashiva and Vakataka Dynasties of Southern and Central India. His devotees consider Lakulisha as the last of the twenty-eight incarnations of Lord Shiva, mentioned in the Puranas.

The Jataganga river and the Deodar forest around the site are themselves considered a geographical manifestation of Shiva and are therefore very significant to the sanctity of the site. The recent proposal to destroy these trees, points to a lack of awareness and official apathy towards conserving such sites that attract tourists, history buffs and pilgrims alike.

When one encounters such schemes, one is forced to think that our ancestors had a far better understanding of natural and cultural resources than contemporary ones. This can be seen in the religious practices at the temple site where ecological values were deeply ingrained or cultivated through various rituals, myths, legends or practices. For instance, the forest located behind the Jageshwar temple complex, forming its spectacular backdrop, a reserve forest as well, is locally known as Shiva Van, meaning the forests of Lord Shiva or a community resource dedicated to the lord himself. Dedicating a forest to Lord Shiva not only signifies its importance but was also an ingenious way of forest preservation such that the populace not only worshipped the natural landscape but was also afraid of cutting trees or causing any harm to it, as it was

believed that the community habitation around would be doomed if any harm were to come to these lofty trees.

Brahma Kund is a natural freshwater spring at the site, lying at the lowest point of the settlement, and is the most sacred natural water source of the Jageshwar Valley. All rites of passage are conducted here, just as in Har Ki Paidi, Haridwar. It, therefore, attracts a large number of pilgrims from surrounding areas. Associating the most important water source to Brahma, ensures its cleanliness and purity. Earlier, such places where all rites of passage are conducted



were avoided for residing and trading and were visited only after sunrise. Now, of course, one can see several dhabas and guest houses around.

The entire settlement is established along the banks of the rivulet Jata Ganga. This rivulet is the lifeline of the villagers. It is believed that a rock and trees over it resemble the jata or dreadlocks of Lord Shiva. Locals believe that the branches of these trees would yield milk, and this was offered to Lord Shiva for his abhisheka. However, once, a sage went on

to use that milk for a large community lunch and made kheer out of it. This mass use of milk turned the sacred sap into water, thereby teaching the sage a lesson in responsible resource use.

Kedar Dhara was a waterfall originating from the hill ranges located adjacent to the Jageshwar temple complex and falling into the Jata Ganga rivulet. As per the locals, this water was used for abhisheka of Lord Shiva. Unfortunately, the waterfall has now dried up.

The mountains have always been considered sacred and people revere them as centers of the uni-

tions of ascetics and people, living in and around the Jageshwar Valley, have shaped the land by restricting personal exploitation of resources. These include refraining from building terrace fields, restricting human habitation to four hamlets, namely Mokshdham, Dandeshwar, Jageshwar, and Koteswar, and clustering lithic monuments around two hamlets. Today, however, large resorts and cafes are mushrooming everywhere. In fact, many of the sacred Deodar trees around Jageshwar have not one single trunk but five trunks emerging from a single root. Many devotees, therefore, associate them with the Pandavas and pray to them.

It is incomprehensible how one can even think of destroying the centuries' old well-conserved forests of Shiva at Jageshwar. Such a foolhardy act will severely impact the sanctity and the ecology of the site. Upon spending time in the Himalayan forests here, one discerns that its oaks, rhododendrons, and pines have thinned out. In those few areas where these species still abound, they either serve as visual markers of Jageshwar's boundaries or as agents that ensure that the Jata-ganga has ample, flowing water year-round. The drying up of some of the water sources, however, is a dangerous sign, pointing to the impacts of construction of too many eateries and hotels around the site.

A site of such universal significance must be documented in detail and a conservation plan prepared and implemented for its preservation. If done in the right manner, the site can attract people from across the world not just for its religious value, but also to comprehend the deep, shared connections between nature and culture in Uttarakhand. An independent authority and strong Heritage Act are needed to protect sites of such universal human value to humanity.

(The author is a writer, traveler and anthropologist who lives in the Himalayas; views expressed are personal)

IFS association requests CM to reconsider action against senior officials in forest fire case

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Indian Forest Service Association has submitted a memorandum to chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhama requesting him to reconsider and withdraw the action taken against senior members of the association following the deaths of three forest workers and one Prantiya Rakshak Dal personnel while fighting a forest fire in Almora on June 13. Following the four deaths caused by forest fire in the Binsar wildlife sanctuary, Dhama had ordered the suspension of senior IFS officials.

According to the Uttarakhand IFS Association, four personnel had died and four were injured in the wildfire in Almora. Between November last year and June this year, there has been less

than expected rain in the State which has resulted in dry conditions in the forests. This in turn has led to an unprecedented rise in incidents of forest fires. The Forest department with the help of the State government, has been using all available resources to control the forest fires. The association further stated that the Supreme Court had also appreciated the efforts undertaken by the department consistently to control forest fires for the past four months. It stated that Uttarakhand is performing better compared to its neighbouring States when it comes to controlling forest fires.

It will be recalled that a day after the incident, the CM had ordered that chief

conservator of forests (Kumaon) PK Patro will be attached with immediate effect to the office of the head of forest force (HoFF) in Dehradun. Northern Kumaon (Almora) conservator of forests Koko Rose and Almora Civil Soyam divisional forest officer in-charge Dhruv Singh Martoliya were suspended with immediate effect.

Expressing deep grief at the deaths, the CM had said that he had clarified to officials in the past that they should discharge their responsibilities properly and that any carelessness will not be tolerated. The officials concerned have been directed repeatedly to become active in the field, Dhama had said.

Lakhs throng Haridwar on Ganga Dussehra

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The heat wave conditions did not stand in the way of devotion and religious fervour as lakhs of people took ritual dips in the Ganga in Haridwar on the occasion of Ganga Dussehra on Sunday. However, it being the weekend, the large number of tourists arriving along with the devotees resulted in major traffic congestion in the city and roads leading in and out of it. The

police had prepared a special plan for the occasion but had to struggle to manage the traffic.

People had started arriving on the Ganga Ghats during the wee hours and by late afternoon more than nine lakh people had bathed in the holy river with the number expected to rise substantially by evening. The police had divided the entire Mela

area into three super zones, 10 zones and 26 sectors. Heavy police force was also deployed to control the crowds and manage the traffic. A special traffic plan had also been put into place. However, the lakhs of pilgrims and tourists arriving in Haridwar or passing through it for other destinations resulted in major traffic congestion which lasted for hours in Haridwar.

Kathavachak Dharendra Shastri arrives in Badrinath

PNS ■ JOSHIMATH

Noted Kathavachak Dharendra Shastri arrived at Badrinath on Sunday. He is slated to deliver a three-day Hanuman Katha at the Parmarth Lok Ashram in Badrinath. Shastri was welcomed by ascetics and devotees in the temple township. The Kathavachak reached the Khak Chowk Ashram where he was welcomed by its founder Balak Yogeshwar Das and other ascetics. He also met devotees who had come here to meet him.

The Badrinath-Kedarnath Temple Committee media in-charge Harish Gaur said that the popular

Kathavachak may visit the Badrinath temple in the

evening to pay his obeisance to the lord.



NIEPVD starts student enrollment for senior secondary classes under science stream

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Following the approval for science stream affiliation by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NIEPVD) has commenced enrollment of the students for the science stream in classes XI and XII on June 15. The application registration period will remain open for one month to allow students to enroll in the science stream at NIEPVD. Stating this, NIEPVD principal Amit Sharma informed that in the past only humanities subjects were taught to students with disabilities in classes XI and XII at NIEPVD, with no option for science stream. He said that in order to provide equal opportunities to Per-

sons with Disabilities (PwDs) in all fields, they had formally requested affiliation for the science stream for classes XI and XII at NIEPVD. Considering this, the CBSE has recently granted approval for the affiliation and granted us permission to enroll students



with disabilities in class XI and XII under the science stream.

He further emphasised that the online registration process for filling the registration application form started on June 15. Interested individuals can complete the online registration for enrolling in the science stream for the specified classes by visiting the NIEPVD website or by personally visiting the office to fill out the form offline. He stressed that this being the inaugural year for enrolling students in the science stream under senior secondary classes, only 10 seats are available for enrollment in NIEPVD.

He informed that for the

science stream, braille books have been printed and teachers for the physics subject have been hired. Additionally, teachers for chemistry and mathematics subjects will be appointed soon. Meanwhile, the science teachers of classes X and IX will teach the students in the secondary classes. He highlighted the primary objective behind enrolling students in the science stream is that individuals with disabilities who wish to pursue a career in the field of science should consider enrolling in the science stream at NIEPVD rather than attending a private school. By doing so, they can acquire knowledge tailored to their understanding and excel in the field, he added.



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Deadly Sunday- five including minors die in two separate accidents in Pauri

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Five people died in two separate accidents in the Pauri district on Sunday, a day after more than a dozen tourists were killed in an accident in the Rudraprayag district.

During Sunday afternoon, four persons died and three sustained injuries after the driver of the vehicle they were in lost control near Khirsu Chaubatta in Pauri district. The vehicle fell into a 200-metre deep gorge. The officials informed that the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) team called at the spot retrieved the bodies of four persons including three minors. They were identified as Saumya (5), Arushi (9), Shrishti (15) and the driver Manwar Singh alias Sonu. The team also rescued three injured people and sent them to the hospital. The injured were also minor and were identified as Kanha (11), Sakshi (14) and Samiksha Rawat (15). The SDRF also conducted a thorough search around the crashed car and the essential items recovered



were handed over to the district police. The officials also informed that considering the health condition of Sakshi Negi and Samiksha, they were airlifted to All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rishikesh in the evening. The chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhama also directed the officials to take all possible measures to provide the best treatment to the injured persons.

In another accident, a car carrying six people to Satpuli for attending a wedding ceremony fell about 150 metres down the mountainside near Dudharkhal earlier in the morning. The officials said that the locals informed the police about the accident. The police reached the accident site and called the SDRF to conduct a rescue operation. The SDRF rescue team under the supervision of additional sub inspector

Harish Bangari reached the spot and started the rescue operation. The team rescued five injured from the gorge with the help of locals. The injured were sent to the hospital for treatment. The team found one person dead on the spot and handed over the body to the police. The officials said that all the people in the vehicle were local residents who were going towards Satpuli to join a wedding procession.

Driver's sleep deprivation and fatigue probable cause of Rudraprayag accident

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Sleep deprivation and fatigue due to continuous driving throughout the night was the probable cause of the Rudraprayag accident in which 14 people lost their lives and 12 were injured on Saturday. The driver also did not have sufficient experience or skill to drive on mountainous routes. The initial report of the inspection team of the Transport department shows that the accident did not occur due to any fault in the road or the vehicle but possibly due to driver's error, the joint transport commissioner Sanat Kumar Singh said. A team of the department's lead agency was sent to Rudraprayag to inspect the accident site on the directions of chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhama. The team checked the road and the wreck of the Tempo Traveller vehicle to analyse the cause of the fatal accident. Singh said that as per the report, the vehicle left Delhi at around 11 PM on Friday. Based on the GPS installed in the vehicle, the vehicle stopped for about 45 minutes near Muzaffarnagar. After this, the vehicle stopped the next day directly at Devprayag for about one and a half hours where the passengers took a bath and carried out other activities and

then left for Rudraprayag. The team found out that the road was flat from the place called Narkota to the accident site. The board displays a maximum speed limit of 30 kilometres per hour there. However, the driver was probably driving at a much higher speed. Singh said that as per the primary report, there are parapet blocks constructed on a stretch of the road and crash barriers installed on the remaining part of the road. At the place where the vehicle fell into Alaknanda river, there are five parapet blocks instead of crash barriers. The vehicle first broke two blocks and then went over the third block and fell, destroying the fourth block. It was observed that the road width at the accident site is 12 metres of which 10 metres is painted. The road width between the white road markers is nine metres. According to the team, the vehicle was registered in January this year and there was no technical fault in it. Therefore, the probable cause of the accident is not the fault in the road or the vehicle but



FILE PIC

the driver's error possibly caused by fatigue resulting from driving throughout the night without rest. The driver's license was issued from Aligarh in 2019 but it is not valid to operate on mountain routes. It is possible that the driver did not have sufficient experience or skill to drive on mountain routes. Singh further said that according to the report received from the Green Card portal, the online fee for the endorsement of mountainous routes on the driver's license was deposited at 3:34 PM after the accident on Saturday and the endorsement was received online. It is clear from this that the online test and the said fee submission were done by someone else instead of the driver. The

department will investigate this too, he said. Singh also added that the agency will submit the final report on Monday. It is pertinent here that before the Covid-19 pandemic, the endorsement for mountain routes on the license was issued only when the driver was present in any transport office of Uttarakhand, but after the pandemic, the government made this process completely online. In the online process, the driver does not have to give any practical exam due to which his driving skills are not tested for driving on mountainous roads. This might also be the cause of inefficient drivers driving on mountainous routes and causing fatal accidents.

Yogi checks condition of ailing mother, accident victims in AIIMS

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath visited the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Rishikesh on Sunday to check on the condition of his ailing mother Savitri Devi and enquire about the state of the persons injured in the road accident which occurred in Rudraprayag on Saturday. The UP CM's mother has been undergoing treatment at AIIMS Rishikesh for some time and for this she has to visit the hospital periodically for routine checkups. She has been admitted in the hospital for some days now as part of this process.

Adityanath was received by the AIIMS executive director Dr Meenu Singh and faculty members upon his arrival in



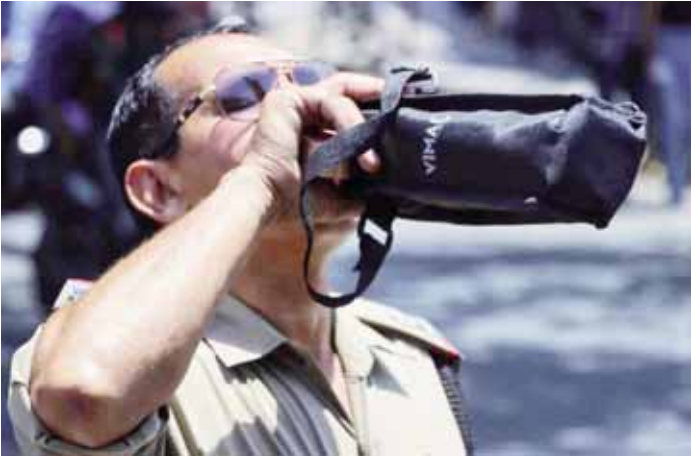
the afternoon. He sought information about the condition and treatment of his mother. The UP CM also visited the institute's trauma centre to check on the condition of those injured in the Rudraprayag accident. He talked to the relatives of the

injured and asked the institute administration to provide the best possible treatment. The State's Health minister Dhan Singh Rawat, Haridwar MP Trivendra Singh Rawat and others were also present during Adityanath's visit.

Doon sizzles at 42.8°C, no relief from heat wave conditions today

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Heat wave conditions continued in Dehradun and elsewhere in the State on Sunday with no respite being forecast for the start of the week either. The maximum temperature rose nine degrees above normal to 42.8 degrees Celsius in Dehradun on Sunday with the weather expected to remain similar on Monday. The State meteorological centre has issued a yellow warning (Watch) regarding the possibility of heat wave conditions likely to occur at isolated places in Uttarkashi, Rudraprayag, Chamoli, Bageshwar, and Pithoragarh districts today. The meteorological centre also issued an alert regarding the possibility of heat wave conditions likely to occur at few places in the remaining districts of the State. Apart from this, very light to light rain/thunderstorms are likely to occur at isolated places in Uttarkashi, Rudraprayag, Chamoli, Dehradun (hills),



Tehri, Bageshwar and Pithoragarh districts. Dry weather is likely to prevail in the remaining districts of the State while surface winds are likely to be strong and gusty (30-40 kmph) in the plain areas of the State today.

Dehradun today.

The maximum and minimum temperatures recorded in various parts of the State on Sunday were 42.8 degrees Celsius and 27.9 degrees Celsius respectively in Dehradun, 41.4 degrees Celsius and 25.2 degrees Celsius in Pantnagar, 31.8 degrees Celsius and 18.2 degrees Celsius in Mukteshwar, 32.2 degrees Celsius and 21.6 degrees Celsius in New Tehri. Light rain was reported in Didihat with 14 millimetres of rain being recorded.

Miffed BJP leader plans to contest Badrinath bypoll as independent

PNS ■ JOSHIMATH

Miffed at the Bharatiya Janata Party for fielding Congress turncoat and former Badrinath MLA Rajendra Singh Bhandari in the Badrinath Assembly by election, party leader from Chamoli district and a cousin of the former Badrinath MLA, Virendra Pal Bhandari has announced that he will contest the bypoll as an independent candidate. He told the media on the weekend in Pokhri that a number of senior party leaders of the region will quit the party and support his candidature.

Virendra Pal Bhandari said that he had held various posts in the party including that as an MP representative during the term of former chief minister Bhuwan Chandra Khanduri. He said that he had worked diligently as a party worker for more than twenty years. "However, the party first inducted the former Badrinath MLA and is now fielding him in the Badrinath Assembly by election. This is not just about me as many sincere party workers are miffed at the party favouring a person who has harassed BJP workers

in this region in various ways. I am being contacted by a number of dissatisfied party leaders and workers who support the stand I have taken. I will file nomination as an independent candidate and on that day a number of senior party leaders will leave the BJP," he claimed.

Observers point out that many in the BJP in the Garhwal region were not

some issues for the party, the observers opined.



Public approves Modi's guidance and Dhama Govt's works: Gautam

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Bharatiya Janata Party State in-charge Dushyant Kumar Gautam said that despite the low voter turnout, the party had succeeded in winning all the five Lok Sabha seats in Uttarakhand by a margin almost similar to the

pared to the margin of about 14 lakh votes in the previous elections. There are many decisions taken by the State government which are historic and were later included in the party's election manifesto," he said. Appreciating the party's

enactment of anti-conversion and anti-copying law along with Uniform Civil Code and other steps. "It is a matter of pride for us that various such decisions are being adopted in the nation with public support. The equations change in



previous election. He said that this shows that the people approve the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the works done by the State government under chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhama. He said this in the meeting of the party's Lok Sabha State election management committee held here on Sunday. Speaking at the meeting, Gautam said that the party had won the election due to the hard work of the party workers under the committee's leadership. "Despite the low voter turnout we won in Uttarakhand by a margin of more than 12 lakh votes com-

election team, he exhorted them to attempt and work even better to maintain the possibility of achieving even better results in the future. Addressing the gathering of party members, Dhama said that the election results show that the party has succeeded in fulfilling the responsibilities accorded to the Central and State governments by the people. The Modi government has executed various public welfare schemes in the interests of women, youth, farmers and the backward classes. He said that the people of the State had supported the party for the historic decisions like

every election. Considering this, we have to set new challenges for ourselves and build up on the energy we have gained from this victory to maintain it in the future," the CM said. The BJP State president Mahendra Bhatt said that the party had won 47 seats in the 2022 Vidhan Sabha elections while it had won from 60 Assembly constituencies in this election. He said that the suggestions which have come forward in the four meetings held on Saturday and Sunday will be discussed in detail and implemented in the party's strategy for the future.

Nigerian man arrested for duping Dehradun woman of Rs 13.61 lakh

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Uttarakhand Special Task Force (STF) has apprehended a Nigerian man who is believed to be the mastermind behind a gang that has conned people across the country through phishing scams. The gang posed as fake customs officials and used identity theft and other methods to carry out their fraudulent activities, the STF senior superintendent of police Ayush Agrawal said.

He said that a woman from Dehradun had registered a complaint at the cyber crime police station stating that an unknown man contacted her through Facebook and WhatsApp claiming to be Dr William Riker, a gynaecologist in the USA. He allegedly lured the victim and told her that he was sending US\$ 25,000, some gift items including a bracelet, jewellery, mobile phone, watch, purse and other valuable items from abroad in a parcel for her.

The accused and his gang allegedly informed the victim about the parcel claiming to be from the Customs department in Delhi and lured her to pay a total of 13.61 lakh in different bank accounts in the name of converting US dollars into Indian currency. Based on the victim's complaint, the STF's Cyber Police registered a case against the unknown accused. The team started the investigation by analysing the mobile numbers and bank accounts of the unknown accused provided by the victim.

The STF found out that the culprits in this case were pre-

sent in Delhi. Considering this, the teams were sent to all possible places in Delhi and after a long search, they nabbed the accused who was a Nigerian man. The team also recovered



two passports, four mobiles, one laptop and a charger from the accused's possession. The SSP said that the accused told the STF that he and his gang dupe people by posing as gynaecologists or doctors and befriend them through social platforms. They work on gaining their trust and then cheat them in the name of sending them gifts from abroad including foreign currency. The STF is working to nab other accused too. Agrawal also appealed to the public not to make online transactions with unknown people for quick gains. If one becomes a victim of such scams, register a complaint in the nearest police station or contact at cyber helpline number 1930 immediately as maximum complaints against culprits by the victims can help the authorities to nab them sooner, he added.



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DEMAND NOTICE

Under Section 13(2) of the Securitisation And Reconstruction Of Financial Assets And Enforcement Of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with Rule 3 (1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002. The undersigned is the Authorised officer of Piramal Capital & Housing Finance Limited (PCHFL) under Securitisation And Reconstruction Of Financial Assets And Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (the said Act). In exercise of powers conferred under Section 13(12) of the said Act read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, the Authorised Officer has issued Demand Notices under Section 13(2) of the said Act, calling upon the following Borrower(s) (the "said Borrower(s)"), to repay the amounts mentioned in the respective Demand Notice(s) issued to them that are also given below. In connection with above, Notice is hereby given, once again, to the said Borrower(s) to pay to PCHFL, within 60 days from the publication of this Notice, the amounts indicated herein below, together with further interest as detailed in the said Demand Notice(s), from the date(s) mentioned below till the date of payment and/or realization, payable under the loan agreement read with other documents/writings, if any, executed by the said Borrower(s). As security for due repayment of the loan, the following assets have been mortgaged to PCHFL by the said Borrower(s) respectively.

Sr. No.	Name of the Borrower(s)/ Guarantor(s)	Demand Notice Date and Amount with NPA date	Description of secured asset (Immovable property)
1.	(LC No. M0138979 of Dehradun Branch) Kalam Singh (Borrower) Baveeta K (Co Borrower 1)	27-05-2024/ Rs. 9,68,086/- (Rs. Nine Lakh Sixty Eight Thousand Eighty Six Only) NPA (05-05-2024)	Khata Khatoni No 188 (Fasli Year 1422-1427), Khasra No 125 Min Mauza Shahpur Kalyanpur, Pargana Pachwa Doon, Tehsil Vikasnagar, Tehsil Near Shiv Mandir, Shahpur Kalyanpur, Dharmawala Poanta Road Dehradun- 248001
2.	(LC No. 09700002565 of Dehradun Branch) Kavita Shah (Borrower) Surendra Singh (Co Borrower 1)	27-05-2024/ Rs. 10,41,839/- (Rs. Ten Lakh Forty One Thousand Eight Hundred Thirty Nine Only) NPA (10-05-2024)	Kh No 1104ka Mauza Mehuwala Khalsa Pargana Pachwa Doon Vikas Nagar Dehradun Dehradun Uttaranchal :- 248001

If the said Borrowers shall fail to make payment to PCHFL as aforesaid, PCHFL shall proceed against the above secured assets under Section 13(4) of the Act and the applicable Rules, entirely at the risks of the said Borrowers as to the costs and consequences. The said Borrowers are prohibited under the Act from transferring the aforesaid assets, whether by way of sale, lease or otherwise without the prior written consent of PCHFL. Any person who contravenes or abets contravention of the provisions of the said Act or Rules made there under, shall be liable for imprisonment and/or penalty as provided under the Act.

Date: 17-06-2024
Place: Uttaranchal

Sd/- (Authorised Officer)
Piramal Capital & Housing Finance Limited

NSA Doval to hold two-day talks with US counterpart from today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and US will review the entire spectrum of their strategic ties during two-day talks here starting Monday between National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval and his counterpart Jake Sullivan. They will also hold meeting on initiative of Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), it was learnt here on Sunday. It will be the first meeting between the two NSAs after Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office for the third time. Incidentally, Modi had a bilateral meeting with President Joe Biden earlier this week on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Italy. The main meeting of iCET will be held on Monday with the focus being a review of all the projects considered at the Washington meeting on January 31, 2023 including transfer of technology of GE-414 jet engines for Tejas Mark



II fighters, sources said. A US team is already in India to negotiate the sale of 31 MQ 9B armed Predator drones to India, just as a French team is in India to negotiate the 26 Rafale-Maritime fighter deal for INS Vikrant. NSA Ajit Doval is slated to be in Paris on June 20-21 for a meeting with his counterpart Emmanuel Bonne and military counterpart to deepen military ties. During the iCET meeting, Doval and Sullivan are likely to discuss the draft of a new

bilateral Defence Industrial Cooperation Roadmap to accelerate technological cooperation between the two countries for the joint development and production of jet engines, loitering ammunition and other systems. The other issue under review is building of a resilient semi-conductor supply chain in India through joint ventures. Other issues under discussion will be space cooperation, quantum computing and next generation telecommunications.

Statues of national icons relocated for beautification: Om Birla

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Outgoing Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla said on Sunday said statues of freedom fighters and national icons spread across Parliament complex have been relocated to a new enclosure on its premises, Prerna Sthal, following discussions with different stakeholders. The relocation of the statues, he said, were done as part of a landscaping and beautification exercise. Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Thakkar inaugurating the Prerna Sthal on Sunday in the presence of large numbers of members of Parliament. Addressing reporters, Birla also asserted that discussions were held from time to time with different stakeholders on the relocation of statues as such decisions were within the purview of the Office of the Lok Sabha Speaker. "None of the statues have been removed, they have been relocated. There is no need to indulge in politics on this," the outgoing speaker said when asked about the opposition



criticism on the relocation of the statues. "From time to time, I have been discussing these issues with different stakeholders. People were of the view that having these statues at one place will help disseminate information about their lives and achievements in a better way," Birla said. The statues of Mahatma Gandhi and B R Ambedkar, earlier located at prominent places on the Parliament premises, were places where opposition leaders gathered to protest against the government. Congress chief spokesman

Jairam Ramesh had said the whole idea of this relocation and giving it a grandiose name was to ensure that the statues of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar were not in a prominent place right in front of Parliament House where MPs could hold peaceful and democratic protests as and when required. Birla said the Prerna Sthal -- located on the lawns between the old Parliament building and the Parliament library building -- will be open to visitors all through the year and host commemoration days to honour the contribution of the leaders to nation building.

The outer lawns of the Parliament complex have statues of national icons such as B R Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharana Pratap, Hemu Kalani, Mahatma Basaveshwara, Kittur Rani Channamma, Motilal Nehru, Maharaj Ranjit Singh, Durga Malla, Birsa Munda, Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, and Chaudhary Devi Lal. "An action plan has been made to make the life stories and messages of these great Indians available to visitors through new technology," the Lok Sabha speaker said.

Birla said during the construction work of the new Parliament building, the statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru and Chaudhary Devi Lal were moved to other places within the complex. Lawns and gardens have been laid around the statues at the Prerna Sthal to allow visitors to easily pay their tributes to them and also take inspiration from their lives by accessing information using QR codes, Birla said. Asked about the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) taking over security of the entire Parliament complex, Birla said it was done so that accountability could be fixed on one agency. Earlier, the Parliament Security Service, the Delhi Police and the Central Reserve Police Force were responsible for the security of the Parliament complex and there was certain overlap in responsibilities, he said. The Lok Sabha speaker said CISF personnel were being trained on dealing with parliamentarians as the system of Parliament security was different from guarding other premises.

Railway Board sets up panel to find out reasons for violation of speed limits by drivers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Railway Board has set up a committee to find out the reasons for the violation of speed restrictions by train drivers at various points between originating and destination stations which is detrimental to safe train operations. According to sources, the Board came into action after recent incidents in which two train drivers violated the speed restriction of 20 kmph at a river bridge, which was under maintenance and drove their trains at 120 kmph speed. In the first incident, the loco pilot and assistant loco pilot of the Gatiman Express, India's first semi-high-speed train

which runs at 160 kmph speed between Hazrat Nizamuddin in Delhi and Virangana Lakshmi Bai Junction in Uttar Pradesh, violated the advisory speed restriction between Jajau and Mania railway station near Agra Cantt. Just a couple of days after the Gatiman incident, the drivers of another train Malwa Express, which runs between Katra (Jammu) and Indore (Madhya Pradesh), too committed a similar violation at the same spot and steered the train at 120 kmph. Soon after these incidents, the Railway Board on June 3 issued a circular to all zones and informed, "Railway Board has constituted a committee to review the caution orders being issued to Loco Pilots



and Train Managers (guards)." "The committee desires to interact with Loco Pilots through video conference to

understand the issues related to caution orders at the field level," the circular added, asking all zones to nominate loco

pilots from each division to attend a meeting on June 5. "Over 180 loco pilots and loco inspectors took part in

the meeting and came out with various suggestions to ensure that speed restrictions are followed in letter and spirit," said a loco pilot, who was part of the virtual meeting. The Railways imposes speed restrictions for the safe operation of the trains for various reasons such as track condition, ongoing track repair work, old railway bridges and station yard remodelling etc. The Railway officials say that before boarding the engine, the loco pilots and their assistants obtain a complete route chart along with advisories and cautionary speed limits from the concerned operating department and they are supposed to maintain the speed accordingly. During operation, the assis-

tant driver calls out loudly these advisories and cautions and the driver repeats it to confirm. "In the meeting, various suggestions came. For instance, a section of drivers suggested that a train guard should remind a driver on a walkie-talkie 3 km before the starting point of the speed restriction. This practice is being followed by the guards of Kota division and a request was made to make it applicable across the board in Railways," said another loco pilot, who attended the meeting. "Some drivers wanted the caution order to be given on bold letters with bigger font size on A4 size white paper. They also said that drivers should be issued different

colour highlighters to mark the restrictions for their convenience," he added. The participants also said that it was also discussed in the meeting whether permanent speed restriction (PSR) should also be made a part of the caution order. "Normally only temporary caution orders are given to the drivers on a paper sheet but a suggestion was made that PSR should also be mentioned," said a loco pilot. "The committee will look into these suggestions and deliberate upon other means to decide if there is a need to amend the operation norms concerning speed restrictions in the interest of safe train operations," said a source in the Railway Board.

Minister reviews progress of social justice schemes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Dr Virendra Kumar soon after taking over the office convened a meeting to review the progress of various schemes and strategise on key departmental initiatives for the next 100 days. During the meeting, Secretary of the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), Rajesh Aggarwal, delivered a comprehensive presentation on the department's initiatives, according to an official statement. This was followed by a detailed discussion on the modernisation efforts of the Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation of India (ALIMCO). Heads of various organisations, including the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD), the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), National Institutes (NIs)



and the National Divyangjan Finance and Development Corporation (NDFDC), presented their significant achievements. The participants engaged in thorough deliberations on strategic direction and action plans aimed at enhancing the department's outreach and efficiency. The modernization of ALIMCO is expected to revolutionize the provision of aids and assistive devices for persons with disabilities. The achievements of CCPD, RCI, NIs and NDFDC high-

light the department's dedication to inclusive growth and empowerment. Dr Kumar underscored the importance of these initiatives in fostering an inclusive and equitable society. "The Government's focus is on creating a robust framework that supports the empowerment and inclusion of all sections of society. The modernisation of ALIMCO and the achievements of our various bodies are testaments to our dedication towards this goal," he said.

IAF contingent participates in Ex Red Flag 2024

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

An Indian Air Force (IAF) contingent participated in the Exercise Red Flag 2024 conducted at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska of the United States Air Force, from June 4-14. This was the second edition of Ex Red Flag 2024, which is an advanced aerial combat training exercise, held four times in a year by the US Air Force, IAF said here on Sunday. The exercise witnessed participation of the Indian Air Force along with Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF), Royal Air Force (RAF) of the United Kingdom, Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf), German Luftwaffe, and the US Air Force (USAF). The IAF contingent participated with the Rafale aircraft and personnel comprising of aircrew, technicians, engineers, controllers and subject matter experts. The transatlantic ferry of Rafale fighter aircraft was enabled by the IL-78 Air to Air Refuellers (AAR), while the transportation of personnel and equipment was undertaken



by the C-17 Globemaster aircraft. The contingent landed at Eielson, USAF base in Alaska on 29 May 24. Red Flag is an air combat exercise conducted with multiple scenarios designed to provide realistic combat settings. A demarcation of forces is done for simulating the desired environment, with the Red Force simulating Air Defence elements, and the Blue Force simulating the Offensive

Composite elements. During this Exercise (Ex), the Red Force was mainly constituted by the USAF Aggressor Sqn flying the F-16 and the F-15 aircraft. This was the first time the IAF Rafale aircraft participated in Ex Red Flag, wherein, they operated alongside the RSAF and USAF F-16 and F-15s, and the USAF A-10 aircraft. The missions included Beyond Visual Range (BVR) combat

exercises as a part of Large Force Engagements (LFE), in Offensive Counter Air and Air Defence roles. The IAF crew were actively involved in mission planning and also assumed the role of Mission Leaders for designated missions during the exercise. In spite of the challenging weather and almost sub-zero temperatures, the IAF maintenance crew worked diligently to ensure serviceability

of all the aircraft throughout the duration of the exercise and all assigned missions could be undertaken with more than 100 sorties being flown during the exercise. Key takeaways from the exercise included insight on interoperability with international partners and a collaborative understanding of employment philosophy in a multinational environment. Experience of ferrying long distances, while undertaking Air to Air refuelling enroute, was both an enriching and thrilling takeaway, especially for the younger crew. Undertaking their return journey, the contingent is planned to split enroute along with their mutual support elements and participate in exercise with Air Force elements of Greece and Egypt, before landing back in India on 24 Jun 24. Enriched with the Red Flag exercise experience, the IAF keenly looks forward to hosting the participating contingents from other countries during Ex-Tarang Shakti-2024, which is the first ever Indian multinational air exercise to be held later this year.

Centre's flagship NSAP for elderly, widow set for makeover

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Central flagship, National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), a welfare programme launched by the Government to provide financial assistance to the elderly, widows, and persons with disabilities living below the poverty line in urban and rural areas is all set for a makeover. Soon after taking the charge as the Union Rural Development and Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Ministry, new Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan indicated that he was keen to restructure the scheme being the important economic and social security cover for the vulnerable groups in the society. "We have to structure the project for an ideal life for the elderly, widows and the disabled, for which we have to take every problem seriously, and for this, if there is a need to change the rules and regu-



lations of the scheme, then amendments should also be made," he told his officials. The NSAP includes several schemes such as the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS), Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS), and Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS), among others. These schemes provide

monthly pension amounts to eligible beneficiaries to support their livelihood and improve their quality of life. However, the pension amount has been very paltry. The last revision to the pension amount was in 2012, when the central contribution increased from Rs 200 per month to Rs 500 per month for those aged 80 years and above. For IGNDPS and IGNWPS,

central contribution was enhanced to Rs 300 per month. For those below 80 years, it has been Rs 200 per month since 2007. The CAG in its report last year had found gaps in the scheme. Now, the new Minister at the Helm, the officials said that the scheme is poised for improvement, expanded scope, or may be adapted to new circumstances or needs. It can also imply that there might be reforms or restructuring underway to enhance the program's impact or efficiency. Emphasising on the importance of District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committees (DISHA), he said that there is a need to strengthen the Disha Committees further. The Minister added that he will write a letter to all the newly elected MPs to request them to ensure that the meetings of Disha Committees are held on time so that every small problem and progress can be continuously paid

attention. DISHAs have been formed to ensure better coordination among all the elected representatives in Parliament, State Legislatures and Local Governments (Panchayati Raj Institutions/Municipal Bodies) for efficient and time-bound implementation of the central welfare schemes in the States. The Rural Development Minister emphasised on implementing the action plan for the next 100 days in a strong and effective manner. He said that we all have to work together with full strength on every scheme of rural development, only then Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dream of a developed India will be fulfilled. Minister of States for Rural Development Dr. Chandra Shekhar Pemmasani, Kamlesh Paswan, Rural development Secretary, Shailesh Kumar Singh and senior officials of the Ministry were also present in the meeting.

Gene responsible for fragrance, safety against pathogens in lavender found

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a discovery that is particularly significant for India, which is exploring lavender cultivation as part of the Aroma Mission launched in 2016, a team of researchers has found that gene, LaMYC7, plays a crucial role in the aromatic plants for enhancing its distinctive both the fragrance as well as safeguarding the plant against pathogens, a team of researchers has found. Understanding the genetic mechanisms of lavender's aromatic and defense properties can help breeders develop more resilient varieties with higher essential oil yields given that many farmers in Kashmir under the Mission supervised by the Central Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) are starting to cultivate the crop, often growing it alongside apple orchards. The study published in the



journal Horticulture Research is conducted by a team from the State Key Laboratory of Plant Diversity and Specialty Crops at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The researchers explained that the LaMYC7 transcription factor regulates the biosynthesis of key terpenoids, such as linalool and caryophyllene, which are responsible for lavender's characteristic aroma. These terpenoids also play a vital role in the plant's defense mechanisms

against pathogens, particularly Pseudomonas syringae, a significant threat to plant health. Talking about the research techniques, they said they employed advanced techniques including RNA sequencing, transgenic technology, and enzyme assays to explore the function of LaMYC7. These methods revealed that LaMYC7 enhances terpenoid biosynthesis, thereby boosting lavender's resistance to pathogens, said the study.

Meghwal hopeful about UCC implementation

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Union Law and Justice Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal on Sunday expressed hope about implementation of the Uniform Civil Code, contending that some states have started to bring it into force.

Meghwal made the remark while speaking at the sidelines of a conference on 'India's Progressive Path in the Administration of Criminal Justice System' here.

"In BJP manifesto, we have mentioned about the UCC. There are states like Goa and Uttarakhand that have started implementing them. The coalition which has been formed in the Centre is a very strong government and there is nothing to worry about," Meghwal said here on Sunday. Last week, soon after Meghwal, an MP from the



Bikaner constituency, said that the UCC is still on the BJP's agenda, the JDU, said that any such move must come through consensus. JD(U) leader KC Tyagi said that while the party is not against UCC, it wants that such a move should come through a consensus. The Union Law minister criticised the incidents of alleged post-poll violence in West Bengal and said that the central government is alert about them.

He said that such post-poll violence is not healthy for a democratic country like India. "Election is a significant part of the democracy. There

should not be any violence after the completion of any election. It (Post-poll violence in Bengal) is in our knowledge and the (central) government is also alert (about it). The rule of law is there in the country. This is not good for democracy," Meghwal said. The BJP on Saturday formed a four-member committee to look into the alleged political violence in West Bengal, as the party accused Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of remaining a mute spectator. A BJP statement said, "Mamata Banerjee remains a mute spectator, while criminals of her party, attack and intimidate opposition workers and voters with impunity. Even the Calcutta High Court has taken note of these excesses and extended deployment of CAPF till June 21 and has listed the matter for hearing on June 18."

NRI assault in Himachal: Punjab Police will file Zero FIR, says Minister Dhaliwal

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Punjab Minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal on Sunday said the Punjab Police will register a 'Zero FIR' in connection with assault on a Punjab-origin Non-Resident Indian (NRI), who alleged that he was beaten by a group of men over parking in Himachal Pradesh's Dalhousie.

A 'Zero FIR' can be filed at any police station, irrespective of the place of incident or jurisdiction, and can later be transferred to the appropriate police station.

Dhaliwal's statement came in the wake of NRI Kawaljit Singh, who is undergoing treatment at a hospital in Amritsar, claiming that he was targeted as he was a Punjabi. The Himachal Pradesh Police, however, has maintained the incident is not linked with any 'inter-state or inter-community dispute.'

Dhaliwal, who on Sunday



visited the hospital where Singh is under treatment, said, "I have asked the victim's family to give its statement to the police."

He said he also tried to talk to the Director General of Police of Himachal Pradesh, who said he was out of the state.

Dhaliwal said that in a day or two, he would meet the Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister and the DGP and would hand over a copy of the FIR to them.

NRI Affairs Minister

against the culprits," he said. Singh and his Spanish wife, who had been living in Spain for 25 years, returned to Punjab recently. Singh said he had gone to Dalhousie with his wife and a relative a few days ago.

According to his allegations, he was attacked by a group of around 100 people following an argument over some parking issue. He also accused the HP Police of showing apathy in the matter. However, an IPS officer from the state claimed such was not the case.

"Singh had come to Khajjiar in Chamba district and was doing palm reading for some women. Someone felt offended by this act and there was a scuffle. Later, both parties reached a compromise in front of the police," IG (Northern Range) Santosh Patial had said on Saturday. "He had given in writing that he wanted no legal action and left," the officer said.

Siddaramaiah defends hike in petrol and diesel prices



PTI ■ BENGALURU

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday defended the hike in petrol and diesel prices saying that it will ensure funding essential public services and development projects. With the opposition BJP and its ally JD(S) coming down heavily on the Congress government for increasing the petrol and diesel prices by Rs 3 and Rs 3.5 per litre respectively, Siddaramaiah said even after the hike, taxes on fuel remains low compared to most southern states.

"The Government of Karnataka has increased VAT on petrol to 29.84 per cent and on diesel to 18.44 per cent. Even after this hike, our state's taxes on fuel remain lower than most South Indian states and similar economy-sized states like Maharashtra," the Chief Minister said in a statement.

According to him, the VAT on petrol is 25 per cent plus Rs 5.12 additional tax, and on diesel in Maharashtra it is 21 per cent. Karnataka's revised rates are still more affordable, he pointed out.

"Karnataka's VAT adjustment ensures we can fund essential public services and development projects. The state remains committed to balanced and responsible governance," Siddaramaiah emphasised. Stating that despite the VAT hike, diesel prices in Karnataka are still lower than in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, the Chief Minister said, "We remain committed to keeping fuel prices reasonable for our citizens." He also took a dig at the opposition BJP, which has decided to stage statewide protests on Monday. "The then double engine BJP government collaborated to divert Karnataka's resources to other states. The state BJP govt kept reducing VAT on petrol and diesel while the Central govt increased its own taxes," the Chief Minister charged. He alleged that this manipulation by the previous BJP government in the state led to reduced revenue for Karnataka, "while the Central government collected more for its coffers, cheating Kannadigas."

Siddaramaiah said that the Central Excise duty on petrol was Rs 9.48 per litre and Rs 3.56 on diesel before the BJP came to power in 2014. However, during the tenure of the BJP government, the Central Excise Duty on petrol and diesel was steeply increased, reaching a record high of Rs 32.98 and Rs 31.83, respectively, in May 2020. Subsequently, the Excise duty on petrol and diesel was cut by Rs 13 a litre and Rs 16 litre, respectively, between November 2021 and May 2022, he added.

In protest against planned airport, Parandur villagers say they will relocate to Andhra

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Residents of Parandur and neighbouring villages in Kanchipuram district have announced their decision to relocate to Andhra Pradesh to draw the Tamil Nadu government's attention to their nearly 700-day-old protest against the greenfield airport proposed to be established near here. The Tamil Nadu government issued the notification for acquisition of land for the Parandur airport soon after the results of the Lok Sabha polls were declared.

Chief Minister M K Stalin had in August 2022 announced that a second airport for Chennai would come up at Parandur at an estimated outlay of Rs 20,000 crore that can handle 10 crore passengers annually. The government's decision did not go down well with the



residents of 13 villages who immediately commenced their strike stating that the project would affect their livelihood as majority of their farm lands would be acquired for construction of the airport. However, the state government has assured that the villagers would be 'adequately compensated.' Nearly 15 protesters have planned to call on Chittoor district Collector on June 24 and seek permission to move to Andhra Pradesh. "We have planned to meet him on June 24 as our protests

will enter 700th day. The Tamil Nadu government is not showing any interest to address our demands. Initially, about 15 members are planning to relocate," G Subramanian, secretary, Villagers Against the Parandur Airport Movement, told PTI. "We want the Tamil Nadu government to invite us for talks. They should withdraw their proposal for the airport. We are firm in our decision," he added. Residents of Ekanapuram, Nelvo, Valathur, Ediyarpakkam, Madapuram, Akkammapuram villages surrounding Parandur have been on strike since August 2022 urging the government to withdraw its decision. Their agitation will enter its 700th day on June 24. According to sources, the government has issued a notification recently to

initiate land acquisition, setting the ball rolling for the project. As of now the government is proceeding with its plan to set up the airport. "It has issued notifications as well. We want our demands to be addressed," Subramanian said. Considering the growing passenger and cargo volumes, the Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation Ltd (TIDCO) took up the work for identifying the land for another airport as the current facility in Meenambakkam in Chennai can only handle upto 3.50 crore passengers. Whereas, the new airport will be able to handle 10 crore fliers annually. Four sites were selected for the airport and the Airports Authority of India (AAI) recommended two of them and finally Parandur was zeroed in on.

Assam secretariat becomes India's first eco-friendly State Govt headquarters

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

The Assam Secretariat on Sunday became the country's first green state government headquarters with the inauguration of a 2.5 MW solar power project on its campus, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said. Installed at a cost of Rs 12.5 crore, the grid-connected rooftop solar power plant will save Rs 30 lakh in electricity bills every month, he said while addressing the official programme here.

"Today, we took a giant leap forward in our goal to become a Net-Zero Govt, as I inaugurated a 2.5 MW Solar Project in Janata Bhawan, making #AssamGreenSecretariat, India's first Green Secretariat," Sarma said in a post on X after the function. From now onwards, the secretariat complex will run



entirely on solar power, resulting in savings of Rs 30 lakh every month on electricity bills, he added. The Chief Minister also said the government has decided that all official complexes will be fitted with solar panels, beginning with the medical colleges and universities across the state. The power installations at all government offices will have automatic disconnection facilities at 8-9 pm, except home, finance and CM secretariat, he added. "So far, the electricity bills of

all ministers, senior officials and other staff staying at official quarters were being paid by the government. This 75-year-old practice will stop in July. We will pay our bills on our own," Sarma said. After implementing all these steps, which will result in saving of cost and power both, the state-run Assam Power Distribution Company Ltd (APDCL) will explore the possibility of reducing power tariff by Re 1 from April 1, 2025 to provide relief to consumers, he added.

After AIADMK declares Vikravandi bypoll boycott, DMDK follows suit

PTI ■ CHENNAI

The Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam, which fought the recent Lok Sabha polls in alliance with the main opposition AIADMK, announced on Sunday that it will boycott the July 10 bypoll to the Vikravandi assembly constituency. The DMDK's decision came following the announcement by the AIADMK on June 15 that it was giving the bypoll a miss, alleging that the ruling DMK would unleash "violence" and not allow people to vote "independently". The DMDK, founded by late actor-politician Vijayakanth, said it does not have "faith" in this

bypoll. In a statement, DMDK General Secretary Premalatha Vijayakanth said her party had so far contested all the general elections and bypolls but it would now "boycott" the Vikravandi bypoll. "The reason is: Elections should be conducted honestly in a democratic manner," she said, adding that in the present-day context, elections are, however, held in the "wrong" fashion. Hinting at abuse of power, without explicitly naming Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK, Premalatha said, "We do not want the hard work of our cadres to go to waste; we are not inclined to waste our time and money since we have no faith in this bypoll."

Minister: We consulted with all before deciding to implement new criminal laws from July 1

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Union Minister of State for Law and Justice (Independent Charge) Arjun Ram Meghwal on Sunday said the new criminal laws will be introduced from July 1, dismissing opposition allegations of not being consulted before the decision was made. Meghwal said the Indian Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Evidence Act will be replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and Bharatiya Sakshya Act. He added that necessary training programmes and infrastructure development for implementing the new laws are already underway.



"The three new laws will be implemented from July 1 for providing timely, speedy, and error-free justice," Meghwal said during the inaugural session of 'India's Progressive Path in the Administration of Criminal Justice System' held here on Sunday. Meghwal addressed allegations of inadequate consultation, saying, "Some

people claim they were not consulted. This is untrue. The demand for change of colonial laws has been long-standing, and the process began long ago." The minister explained that although suggestions were sought from all states, only 18 states and six Union Territories responded. "Even the Chief Justice of India,

chief justices of 16 high courts, five law academies, and 22 law universities provided their suggestions," he said. "We contacted all MPs, but only 142, including members from both houses, responded. Suggestions were also requested from all MLAs nationwide, with only 270 responding. We consulted widely, but not everyone provided feedback," Meghwal added. "These laws were formulated after four years of thorough consideration. Claims of no consultation are false. Full consultations were held, including 58 meetings chaired by Home Minister Amit Shah," he emphasised. Meghwal further explained the necessity of moving away from colonial-era laws due to

societal advancements and technological involvement. "With changing times and new technologies, there must be improvements. Citizens were not receiving timely justice, so we have included zero FIR, mercy petition, and gender neutrality. The system had issues, which is why changes are being made," he reasoned. He concluded by stating that the new laws are people-centric and timely, aligning with India's rapid development. Also present at the event were Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court TS Sivagnanam, secretary of the ministry of law and justice Rajiv Mani, and member secretary of the Law Commission of India Reeta Vasishta.

Amaravati development works will be completed in 30 months: Minister Narayana

PTI ■ AMARAVATI

Andhra Pradesh Municipal Administration Minister P Narayana on Sunday said here that the Amaravati capital city development works will be completed in two-and-a-half years' time. Narayana said the state capital of Amaravati will be developed as one of the top five capital cities in the world and that the plans devised in the past will be implemented to meet this target.

"In the coming two-and-a-half years' time, we will complete the development works of state capital Amaravati," Narayana said, speaking to reporters after assuming office at the state secretariat.

According to the minister, all development work initiated in the capital has involved the

Singapore government, especially in designing the city in such a way that all districts will benefit financially. He said that Singapore, China, Japan, Russia, Malaysia and other countries were visited to craft the best designs for Amaravati. Narayana said tenders worth Rs 48,000 crore were called in the past to ensure that all amenities are made available in the majority of the area in the capital, and that bills of Rs 9,000 crore were already paid. He said these works included construction of the residential quarters of bureaucrats, legislators and others, which were completed up to 90 per cent.

After the land pooling notification was issued on January 1, 2015 for Amaravati as capital city, farmers handed



over 34,000 acres of land to the government by February 28, 2015, Narayana claimed. However, the capital city development project was neglected by the previous YSRCP government, he said. The minister said he will review the plans with officials from today, and in the next 15 days some clarity would emerge on how to prioritise the capital city works. He said that the capital development

master plan devised in the past would be implemented, especially in three phases. The first phase of city building development works would cost Rs 48,000 crore, he said, and added that the second phase would focus on constructing metro rail infrastructure. Further, Narayana said 'Anna Canteens', which provide cooked meals at subsidised prices will be revived in three

weeks' time. 'Anna Canteens' offer breakfast, lunch and dinner at Rs 5 each, totalling Rs 15 per day. He held a review meeting with municipal officials on reviving these canteens, which were introduced during the erstwhile TDP government between 2014 and 2019, but former CM Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy had discontinued them. Back then, the state government had entrusted the responsibility to ISKCON to provide the three meals a day at Rs 73, bearing the subsidy cost of Rs 58 after people bought them at Rs 15 per day. Narayana said that up to 2.25 lakh people used to relish 'Anna Canteen' food on a daily basis while more than 4.6 crore meals were served during the earlier TDP government.

PTI ■ DEVBHUMI DWARKA

As many as 115 packets of charas worth Rs 62 crore have washed up on the shores of Devbhumi Dwarka district in Gujarat in the last 10 days, police said on Sunday. Taking cognisance of abandoned drugs found in the coastal areas in the past, the district police had launched an operation to look for packets that were dumped by smugglers mid-sea and got washed ashore, an official said. In a search involving drone surveillance, a police team recovered 30 packets of charas, worth Rs 16 crore, near Javernagar on June 7, the police said in a release. A packet was found near Mojav on June 10, while 10 more were recovered between Mojav and Shivrampur villages the next day, it stated.



As many as 64 drug packets were found in different places near Chandrabhaga, Vachchu and Gorij villages on June 15, the release said. With this, the total number of packets found in the last 10 days reached 115, it stated. A forensic examination ascertained that the contraband was charas,

weighing 123.72 kg, and the total value of the substance was Rs 61.68 crore, the release said. A special operations group (SOG) of Dwarka district and local police patrolled coastal villages and conducted awareness programmes for residents and fishermen, it stated.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Heatwave crisis

To mitigate the health impacts of extreme heat, urgent Govt action is essential

This summer has been unlike any other. The relentless heat intensifies with each passing day, and there is no relief in sight. India is currently grappling with one of the most intense heat waves in recent history, with temperatures soaring above 45 degrees Celsius in many regions. This extreme heat is taking a significant toll on the health of the people, straining healthcare systems, and prompting urgent government action to mitigate the crisis. The immediate health impacts of the heatwave are severe and widespread. Hospitals across the country are reporting a surge in cases of heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke. Heat exhaustion, characterised by symptoms like heavy sweating, muscle cramps, and fatigue, can escalate into heatstroke. Heatstroke is a life-threatening condition that occurs when the body's temperature regulation fails, leading to confusion, unconsciousness, and potentially fatal organ damage. Chronic health conditions are also being exacerbated by the extreme heat.



Individuals with cardiovascular diseases are at increased risk of heart attacks and strokes as the body struggles to cool itself, leading to higher heart rates and blood pressure. Respiratory issues are worsening too, with higher levels of air pollutants combining with the heat to create a hazardous environment for those with asthma and other lung conditions. It is time the Indian Govt declared a health emergency and implemented measures aimed at protecting public health and alleviating the impact of the heatwave. The government must actively disseminate information through various media channels, advising people to stay indoors during peak heat hours and drink plenty

of water. The office timings must be changed. Some states like Rajasthan are doing good jo. External coolers have been installed on public buses to mitigate the soaring temperatures. In response to the extreme heat, the Jaipur administration has initiated the use of artificial rain. Large water tankers have been stationed along the roads to spray water on pedestrians, adopting this method to combat the sweltering conditions. The rest of the country could take a cue from Rajasthan. Indeed, healthcare systems are under significant pressure, with hospitals and clinics witnessing a sharp increase in heat-related medical emergencies. To cope with the surge, additional medical staff must be deployed, and temporary medical facilities must be set up in some areas to handle the overflow of patients. What we are witnessing can be attributed to climate change. Urban areas must have more green spaces which help lower temperatures. Climate experts warn that such events are likely to become more frequent and severe in the coming years due to climate change, necessitating comprehensive plans to protect public health. By investing in sustainable infrastructure, enhancing healthcare system capacities, and promoting public awareness, India can build resilience against future heatwaves and safeguard the health of its population in an increasingly warming world.



Ashy prinia bird feeds its babies, in Chikmagalur, Sunday

PTI

Reimagining success in long-term relationships

By fostering mutual support, effective communication, and shared goals, couples can build a resilient bond that withstands the test of time

Fairytales and romantic comedies have long shaped our dreams of love, painting idyllic pictures of happily ever after. However, reality tells a different story. Long-term relationships in the real world are far messier and more dynamic than their cinematic counterparts. It is essential to understand that the happily ever after narrative may not be practically achievable. Instead, we must delve into a more nuanced perspective on what constitutes success and fulfillment in lasting partnerships. As we reimagine and reinvent the path to success in long-term relationships, we must remember that unrealistic expectations and ideals can only lead to disillusionment. Facing real-life challenges, including conflict, growth, and change, is an inevitable part of any enduring partnership. In this rapidly changing world, it is prudent to navigate these complexities, offering a more realistic and ultimately more satisfying vision of long-term relationship success. Healthy relationships are dynamic ecosystems, not static stalemates. They thrive on creating an environment



where personal exploration and growth enhance the partnership's foundation. In such relationships, partners continuously evolve as individuals, with their passions, priorities, and goals shifting over time. Strong, lasting relationships develop on the foundation of good communication, creating a safe space for vulnerability where feelings, needs, and desires can be openly expressed. This openness enhances trust and emotional intimacy, leading to a deeper bond between partners. Acceptance is also crucial for lasting fulfillment. People, like relationships, are a beautiful mosaic of strengths and quirks. While individual growth is important, strong relationships benefit from a shared compass. Whether it's a passion for travel or a dream of building a family together, having common core values provides a sense of purpose

and unity. It is also vital to develop skills for healthy conflict resolution, as disagreements are inevitable in a long-term relationship. Maintaining the spark in a deeply satisfying relationship involves creating space for individual pursuits outside of the partnership. This fosters a sense of self and helps in developing a personal identity, which can reignite the spark and reduce co-dependency. For long-term fulfillment, intimacy must go beyond the intense passion of the initial stages. Prioritizing quality time, focusing on physical affection, and creating shared experiences play essential roles in nurturing intimacy. Social media can put intense pressure on couples to maintain a 'Perfect Couple' image, but real life cannot be perfect 365 days a year. The ability to weather storms together as a team is what demonstrates the strength of love. Prioritizing self-love is the foundation for a fulfilling relationship, as partners content with themselves can contribute positively to the partnership. If couples encounter endless challenges, seeking professional

support from a counselor can be invaluable. A successful long-term relationship is not about achieving an unattainable state of bliss but about embracing the journey with its inevitable twists and turns. By focusing on communication, shared goals, and individual interests, partners can build a connection that evolves and deepens over time. The happily ever after may not be a permanent destination, but the journey of building a satisfying partnership can definitely be a deeply enriching experience. The essence of a successful long-term relationship lies in embracing the journey with all its complexities and imperfections. By appreciating each other's unique qualities and navigating conflicts with grace, couples can build a resilient and dynamic partnership. Real love is all about supporting each other through life's challenges and celebrating the moments of joy.

(Author is Dubai-based award-winning Poet, Novelist, Writing Retreat Curator and Founder of TheWriteScene.com. Views expressed are personal)



DEEBA SALIM IRFAN

Biblical rhetoric stirs controversy

As Netanyahu faces mounting pressure, his future leadership hangs in the balance amidst growing calls for a more humane approach to the conflict

In politics, symbolism matters. In the biblical-civilisational land of Palestine or Ha'aretz Hamuvtakhat ('Promised Land') which birthed Abrahamic faiths, symbolism is even more significant. Therefore, Israel's most extreme-right Prime Minister ever i.e., Benjamin Netanyahu, upped the incendiary rhetoric by invoking the 'Amalek' narrative to appeal to the basest of instincts. Netanyahu provoked, "You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible" – referencing the Biblical Amalekites who were seen as the archetypal enemies of the Jews. It was suggestive of not sparing any of the so-called modern 'Amaleks' (read, Palestinians). Many were horrified at the attempt to seek justification in holy scriptures, to defend the indefensible. Similarly, many are deeply concerned at the import and usage of the Palestinian expression "From the river to the sea" as the same finds mention in the terror group Hamas's charter, which is construed as the complete extermination of the Israeli State and the Jews. The polemics are deeply symbolic. Israel is today conducting a brazen and no-holds barred retaliation (already accounted for over 35,000 Palestinian deaths) that remains unheeding and unconcerned to global calls for restraint. In some ways, the horrific 7th Oct attack by the terror group Hamas was serendipitously timed for the already unpopular, dictatorial, and tainted Benjamin Netanyahu. Expectedly, after the attack the opposition parties put their differences aside and joined the National Unity Government to stand together in the face of national crisis. It also distracted the attention from Netanyahu's misgovernance till then and offered a much-needed distraction. Netanyahu grabbed the opportunity of the wounded moment to launch an unprecedented revenge that has now got his initial allies like the USA to rethink. After many supportive vetoes in the Security Council, the US was forced to agree with motions that called out the disproportionality of Israeli revenge.



Netanyahu cared two-hoots and persisted with his onslaught, as he gambled that it allowed him time and space to do even more fear mongering, 'othering', and manufactured-outrage that could somehow justify his continuation.

Already, Israel (especially under Netanyahu) has regularly cocked a snook at the United Nations by becoming the most 'sanctioned' nation in the world. It also cares little about international condemnation. But perhaps it has overplayed its trademark belligerence for now, as the reactions from countries that were once clearly pro-Israel (e.g., the USA) or cautiously guarded (e.g. Western European nations) are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their stand, as the global outcry over Israeli excess becomes louder. While typically it wouldn't have mattered to Israel under Netanyahu – but perhaps now it does, given that it could backfire on the public mood in Israel which in any case is tiring of the bloodshed and even more wary of Netanyahu's ability to lead the nation, hereinafter.

Three Western countries i.e., Spain, Ireland and Norway have announced that they will now recognise a Palestinian State (with borders that existed prior to the 1967 war, with Jerusalem as the joint capital). It is a wholly symbolic move



ISRAEL IS TODAY CONDUCTING A BRAZEN AND NO-HOLDS BARRED RETALIATION THAT REMAINS UNHEEDING AND UNCONCERNED TO GLOBAL CALLS FOR RESTRAINT

that comes with the rider that they are willing to change the contours of the sovereign borders after the final negotiated settlement of the 'two-nation' formula, something Netanyahu has opposed tooth-and -nail. It is an attempt to defame Netanyahu's stand and propel the national mood towards ceasefire and rapprochement. Given that these three countries are 'Western' and have ostensibly no axe to grind with Israel (unlike any of the Arab Sheikdoms or Iran) and hence their action is only rooted in genuine concern and morality. A country like Norway, is in any case the beacon of ethics and humanity, in the global comity of nations – hence that bears its own significance with such an action. It could therefore impact and galvanise public opinion within Israel to put internal pressure on Netanyahu. Such a development, if it were to accrue, is possibly Netanyahu's worst nightmare come true. His survival and legitimacy are predicated on the still popular notions of extracting 'justifiable' revenge, and the sudden siding of Western powers (once pro-Israel) towards his nemesis i.e., Palestine, deligitimises those notions. Even its staunchest ally, the United States of America, is facing consequences of affording an initial 'blank cheque' onto Israel with rising protests across its campuses, some-

thing Joe Biden can ill-afford in the election year. Americans have now become mealy-mouthed and wishy-washy in their support towards Netanyahu and have started talking about ceasefire, reiterating the 'two-state' formula as the way forward and talking about direct dialogue with the Palestinians. Whereas the United Kingdom, Malta, Australia, and Slovenia have gone one step further and threatened to follow suit with Norway, Spain, and Ireland in recognising the Palestine State. While all of this is still in the realm of symbolism without any concrete interference in the expanding Israeli footprint and flattening of the Gaza Strip – it will be significant in checkmating Netanyahu's amoral politics and untenable approach in Gaza Strip. Even Netanyahu's instinctive reaction that such moves by one-time allies tantamount to 'rewarding' Hamas will not have too many takers as truly neutral countries like Norway are not known to take sides in conflict one way or the other, or even to 'derecognize' Israel, but only to drive peace with the insistence of the 'two-nation' formula of Oslo Agreement and peace, as the only way forward. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DEMOCRATIC MATURITY

Madam — Apropos the news story "The robustness of India's political system," published on June 15, this is my response. Civil society thrives on a shared acceptance of rules and practices, whether documented or not. The UK's unwritten constitution exemplifies this, demonstrating that selfregulation and mutual respect can maintain order even amid disagreements. This contrasts with countries with written constitutions that struggle with orderly conduct, often resorting to courts for conflict resolution. Recent Indian parliamentary elections highlight the maturity and fairness of the electoral process. The electorate's peace-fulexercise of political choices reflects their thoughtful judgment. However, cabinet appointments based on the Prime Minister's prerogative, including non-elected members, have sparked debate. While some see this as a deviation from norms, it's crucial to recognise the inherent flexibility in political decision-making. The formation of a 70+ ministerial house underlines the complexity and balance required in such decisions, showcasing the artistry and maturity of the Indian political system. Despite negative press, these decisions should be accepted as part of theevolving political landscape.

Saanvi Jain | Jamshedpur

COMBATING HEALTH MISINFORMATION

Madam — Apropos the news story "Addressing misinformation about health supplements," published on June 15, this is my response. In today's digital age, people often trust online resources more than fellow human beings. It's common during travel to follow Google Maps rather than ask a local for directions. Even when a local provide correct guidance, we view them with scepticism. For the present generation, Google and WhatsApp have become libraries and teachers. This trend extends to healthcare, where many rely on internet sources rather than visiting a physical doctor. While the internet offers easy access to information, it

'Ghar Wapsi' remains a distant dream



Apropos the news story "Kashmiri Pandits see return of spring," published on June 15, this is my response. Reading about the Mela Kheer Bhawani fills me with mixed emotions. The return of spring in Kashmir, symbolised by the

gathering of Kashmiri Pandits at the Ragnya Devi temple, is a poignant reminder of their longing for home. Ashok Kumar's words, "Spring has come back again," capture the bittersweet nature of their visit—celebrating their heritage while yearning for a permanent return. Despite the recent surge in violence, the steadfast faith of these devotees is admirable.

The image of local Muslim families setting up shops and offering support during the festival underscores a spirit of communal harmony that Kashmir desperately needs. However, the reality remains harsh. Successive Governments have failed to secure a lasting solution for the displaced Pandits. The construction of a Yatri Niwas for pilgrims is a small step, but it falls short of addressing the broader issue of resettlement. True 'ghar wapsi' remains a distant dream, overshadowed by security concerns and political inertia.

Aarush Kapoor | Vijayawada

also harbours a significant amount of misinformation, especially concerning health supplements. Misleading advertisements and exaggerated claims about vitamins and dietary supplements can lead to serious health risks. Profit-driven motives overshadow consumer safety, causing individuals to potentially forgo evidence-based treatments. To combat this, promoting scientific literacy and critical thinking among consumers is crucial. Social media platforms must enhance content moderation and regulatory bodies need to enforce strict penalties on manufacturers spreading misinformation. Education and stringent regulations are vital to ensure public health and consumer safety.

Vihaan Sharma | Udaipur

GOD EMPOWERS GOODNESS

Madam — Apropos the news story "God's varied interest in humanity," published on June 15, this is my response. The BhagavadGeeta suggests that God is deeply invested in us, especially those who seek to live righteously. According to its teachings humans can be categorised

based on their relationship with God and their actions. Devotees, who worship with devotion, are closest to God and achieve liberation. They embody God's teachings and inspire others.

Next are God's instruments, like Arjuna, who carry out divine instructions and are rewarded in heaven but must return to earth after their merits are exhausted. Social workers, like King Janaka, perform welfare acts, benefiting humanity and earning God's favour. Good people, characterised by their inherent goodness and philanthropists, who selflessly help others, are also recognised by God. Common people, primarily driven by passion and survival, form the society's backbone. The Geeta emphasises that God empowers those with virtuous intentions, guiding them and ensuring they receive His support, ultimately highlighting the importance of living a life aligned with divine principles

Meera Rao | Raipur

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Enhancing productivity through strategic
break management



Are you someone who is making yourself available 24/7? Or the one who prefers clearing all work mails every now and then over a family get together? Well, if yes, then folks it may be the time to set healthy boundaries at work. Pausing amidst busy days allows the mind and body to recharge and refocus. According to various studies and research, it has been found that the most productive employees have worked for 52 minutes followed by a 17-minute break. Furthermore the studies also suggest that the mind of an individual is not made for nonstop work. It becomes essential to take regular breaks for sustaining high performance and avoiding mental fatigue. Regardless of individual's job profile, taking regular breaks is a simple yet effective strategy to enhance the overall work performance and well-being. Continuous work without breaks can lead to burnout, which is characterized by exhaustion and decreased productivity. Breaks help to recharge mentally and physically. Regular breaks improve focus and concentration. Stepping away from tasks periodically helps individuals return with a clearer mind and renewed energy. By integrating breaks into the work routine, an individual can maintain high productivity, reduce stress and improve their physical as well as mental health. In short, prioritizing breaks is an investment in their long-term career success and personal happiness for it can foster creativity and innovation. It is often believed that when an individual takes a pause from work, the brains become free to wander and explore new ideas and can lead to unexpected solutions



The importance of taking breaks from work has become even more pronounced after the COVID-19 pandemic due to several factors that have altered the way people work and live. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for regular breaks from work to manage increased stress, digital fatigue and blurred work-life boundaries. These breaks are essential for maintaining productivity, creativity, physical health and overall well-being in a rapidly changing work environment. Incorporating regular breaks such as a short family vacation or if not a vacation, just incorporating microbreaks into the workday or midday exercise breaks can lead to numerous compounding benefits, thereby making it a simple yet effective strategy for maintaining both productivity and well-being. When an individual will take all forms of breaks, they will seek positive emotions of excitement, joy, happiness, inspiration, pride and much more which will ultimately supercharge the cognitive restoration. There is no denying the fact that any individual can get too wrapped up in work stress when work is the only source of identity, validation and confidence they have but it becomes crucial at times for individuals to get in contact with activities that are completely unrelated to their professional life such as an unrelated hobby or a casual conversations about non work topics with friend groups that could often generate laughter, encouragement and much more. As is often said, contentment isn't the same as complacency. All of us should urge ourselves to be content, swim in gratitude and radical acceptance of now in a world that is never going to be happy. Remember, whether you're a high-powered executive, a teacher, a creative artist, a healthcare worker, a customer service representative or any other employee working, the benefits of taking breaks are universal and can significantly enhance your productivity, mental health and the overall job satisfaction. So try to grant yourself full permission to punctuate work hours with rejuvenating pauses. *(The writer is an educator; views are personal)*

The healing symphony of yoga and music

Yoga and music intertwine to foster physical wellbeing and mental relaxation, offering a holistic approach to health and harmony



June 21 holds a special place in the hearts of millions around the world. It is a day when the ancient science of yoga and the universal language of music unite, creating a symphony of wellness and harmony. "International Yoga Day (IYD)" and "World Music Day (WMD)", both celebrated on this date, offer a unique opportunity to explore the interconnections between physical, mental and emotional well-being. Yoga, with its deep roots in Indian culture and music — an intrinsic element of human expression — converge to create a holistic approach to health and happiness. Originating in India over 5,000 years ago, Yoga integrates physical postures, breath control, meditation and ethical principles to achieve harmony between mind, body and spirit. The earliest references to yoga are found in the Rigveda and it was further elaborated in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita which defines Yoga as "The journey of the self, through the self, to the self". Further, Patanjali's 'Yoga Sutras', written around 400 CE, systematically outlined the eight limbs of yoga, providing a framework for physical, mental and spiritual practices. Over the centuries, yoga evolved with contributions from various yogis and saints, adapting to cultural changes and diversifying into numerous styles such as Hatha, Ashtanga, Kundalini and so on. Yoga has transcended cultural and geographic boundaries in contemporary society, gaining global recognition for its myriad health benefits. Scientific research confirms its effectiveness in improving physical fitness, mental clarity and emotional resilience. For instance, studies published in reputable journals like the 'European Journal of Preventive Cardiology' highlights yoga's ability to enhance cardiovascular health by lowering blood pressure, cholesterol levels and body mass index. The 'Journal of Psychiatric Practice', which suggests 'yoga' can complement treatment for major depressive disorder by integrating physical postures and meditation techniques laying emphasis on mindfulness and breath control fosters inner calm and concentration, thus enhancing cognitive function. Also, the 'International Journal of Yoga' enhances emotional regulation and positive effect with practices like guided meditation and pranayama that are particularly effective in cultivating emotional stability and resilience. Presently, millions of individuals worldwide adopt yoga not merely for physical fitness, but as a comprehensive approach to health and well-being. For instance, in the United States, yoga participation has increased dramatically over the past decade, with a significant percentage of the population practicing yoga regularly. Similarly, in Europe, yoga has been integrated into public health programs and educational curricula, emphasizing its role in promoting overall wellness. Thus, International Yoga Day has become a global event following its proposal by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the United Nations General Assembly in 2014. The resolution, co-sponsored by 177 nations, emphasizes yoga's holistic benefits for health and well-being. This day aims to enhance global awareness of yoga and encourage its practice, promoting unity and peace. Under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, International Yoga Day has gained unprecedented global recognition, empha-



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sizing the timeless relevance of yoga in today's world. Simultaneously, World Music Day celebrates the joy of music in all its diverse forms, underscoring its power to heal and unite. Today, celebrations worldwide feature mass yoga sessions, workshops and educational events, highlighting yoga's universal appeal and its capacity to unite people across cultural and national boundaries. Similarly, "World Music Day", also known as 'Fête de la Musique', is celebrated on June 21, coinciding with International Yoga Day. Originating in France in 1981-82, according to one theory, this day has grown into a global event dedicated to celebrating the universal language of music. It encourages musicians of all levels to perform in public spaces, promoting free and diverse musical expressions. Music's power to unite, heal and uplift resonates deeply, making this celebration an important cultural event. Music has long been recognised for its therapeutic effects, aiding in emotional healing and mental wellness. Research indicates that music can reduce stress, alleviate pain and improve cognitive function. In the context of yoga, music enhances the practice by creating a serene atmosphere, aiding concentration and facilitating deeper relaxation. The synergy of yoga and music can profoundly influence one's well-being, offering a comprehensive approach to mental and emotional health. Yogi and mystic, *Sadhguru* once said, "Yoga is not just about bend-

ing and twisting, it's a process of creating a situation where your body and mind are in tune with nature and music," which can be seen during the Shivaratri celebrations which Isha Foundation organizes every year, blending music, meditation and yogic practices. This connection between yoga and music does elevate the practice, enhancing the flow of positive energy and creating a meditative State conducive to inner peace. As B.K.S. Iyengar, a pioneering yoga guru, had put it that "Yoga, an ancient but perfect science, deals with the evolution of humanity. This evolution includes all aspects of one's being, from bodily health to self-realization." The integration of music into yoga practices helps achieve this holistic development, fostering mental clarity and emotional stability. According to a June 21, 2022 report from TOI, Dr. Pratiksha Gadkari, a physiotherapist, emphasized the benefits of yoga in enhancing joint flexibility and range of motion. She highlighted its role in improving balance through posture and movement, while also noting the calming effects of music on the mind. Dr. Gadkari suggested that starting exercise routines with soothing music can boost energy and promote a fresh start to the day. The report also quoted Amar Kulkarni, a renowned singer and music teacher who practices yoga regularly. He drew parallels between yoga and music and mentioned how both disciplines can generate internal energy and positive vibes. Kulkarni pointed out

yoga's emphasis on '*Omkar Sadhana*', which resonates with the foundation of Indian classical music in '*Omkar*'. He highlighted how these practices complement each other, enhancing respiratory strength through physical exercise and drawing inspiration from the energy of sound. However, some 'Yog Acharyas' also believe that in certain styles of yoga, the incorporation of music varies and may not universally be deemed suitable. For instance, within the contexts of 'Vinyasa' and 'Anusara' methodologies, music has gained greater acceptance. Conversely, in Iyengar sessions, the auditory environment typically consists solely of the teacher's guidance. Here, the utilization of music, when employed, hinges upon the instructor's discretion, which may be argued. In today's fast-paced world, where stress and mental health issues are prevalent and have hit the youth largely, the combination of yoga and music offers a sanctuary for healing and rejuvenation. This synergistic approach can alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety, providing a natural remedy to combat the pressures of modern life. Together, yoga and music intertwine to foster physical well-being and mental relaxation, offering a holistic approach to health and harmony. It's time we start to breathe in with rhythm and experience divinity in our inner peace. *(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhii Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)*

Mushroom farming empowers women in rural Bihar

Women in Bihar thrive through mushroom cultivation, achieving financial independence and contributing significantly to local economies

Mushrooms are rapidly gaining recognition and popularity in the culinary world for their unique taste and versatility. Dishes such as mushroom curries, pudding, pickles and snacks are becoming favourites on many people's palates. Along with this growing culinary trend, mushroom farming is expanding swiftly across various States in India, including Bihar. According to National Horticulture Board data, Bihar produced approximately 28,000 metric tonnes of mushrooms in 2021-22, accounting for 10.82 per cent of the total mushroom production in India. In the previous year, the State produced a total of 23,000 metric tonnes of mushrooms.



The Bihar Government is providing up to a 50 per cent subsidy to farmers engaged in mushroom cultivation, which is boosting production and increasing farmers' incomes. Under the Integrated Horticulture Mission scheme, these subsidies have also raised farmers' morale, leading to a surge of women farmers entering the field. In many districts of Bihar, women have established a

distinct identity in mushroom production, often surpassing their male counterparts. For the past ten years, Manorama Singh, a farmer, has been recognised for her mushroom production not only in the Vaishali district but across the State. She cultivates mushrooms herself and also trains nearby farmers in mushroom farming. Manorama prepares mushroom seeds and makes the necessary compost. Mushroom farming has emerged as a powerful catalyst for financial independence among many women. Neelam Devi, a 34-year-old farmer from Bandra block in Muzaffarpur district, was married off at a very young age due to her family's poor

financial condition. She always aspired to be self-reliant. One day, she learned about a mushroom farming training programme offered by an NGO called 'Atma'. She joined the programme, received training and began cultivating mushrooms in a room of her house. Despite facing disapproval and opposition from her in-laws, Neelam remained steadfast and determined to pursue her goal. Gradually, she began to achieve success and earn significant profits from mushroom production. Today, she has become so proficient in this field that she is teaching 200 women how to cultivate mushrooms, supporting them in their journey to become self-reliant.

For her commendable work, Neelam has been honoured as a successful farmer by Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Pusa. Her reputation as a mushroom trainer and producer has spread far and wide. Those who once opposed her, including her in-laws, now take pride in her determination and passion. Like Neelam, dozens of women farmers in Muzaffarpur are creating a new identity through mushroom farming and earning substantial profits annually. 45-year-old farmer Lal Bahadur from Kothiya village in Kanti block, about 17 km from the Muzaffarpur district headquarters, believes that both women and men find mushroom cultivation bene-

ficial because it is easy to grow. It can be cultivated easily at home, with low costs and high profits. The mushroom crop is ready in just 25 days. He shared that initially, he too lacked knowledge about mushroom farming. Then, in 2012, he met Dr. Daya Ram, a professor at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Pusa. After training with him in mushroom farming, Lal Bahadur began raising awareness about mushroom cultivation among farmers in the surrounding villages. He explained that initially, due to a lack of proper information, people did not support him. They believed that mushrooms were wild plants, known in the village as 'gobar chhata', some of which are

highly poisonous. After much explanation, people began to understand the difference between edible mushrooms and gobar chhata. Once this distinction was clear, the villagers started mushroom farming with him and women actively participated. Lakshmi Devi, another farmer from the same village, shared how Lal Bahadur's understanding of mushroom farming opened a new avenue for them in farming. "Before we knew about mushroom farming, we would go to the city for labour work, but even then, it was difficult to make ends meet. Since we started mushroom cultivation, our household situation has improved." In recent years, the demand for mushrooms has increased

significantly across various districts in Bihar. From hotels and restaurants to wedding functions and feasts, mushroom dishes are becoming a status symbol. Beyond the capital city of Patna, mushrooms are now easily available in the vegetable markets along the roadsides in cities like Hajipur, Samastipur and Muzaffarpur. As the mushroom market continues to grow, so does its demand. This increasing demand has opened new doors for farmers, allowing them to benefit from this trend. Not only are they gaining financially, but these women farmers are also contributing to strengthening Bihar's economy. *(The author is a rural writer from Muzaffarpur, Bihar. Charkha Features;)*

Israel army to pause daytime fighting in Gaza

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Israel's military announced on Sunday that it would pause fighting throughout daytime hours along a route in southern Gaza to free up a backlog of humanitarian aid deliveries destined for desperate Palestinians enduring a humanitarian crisis sparked by the war, now in its ninth month. The "tactical pause" announced by the military, which applies to about 12 kilometres (7.4 miles) of road in the Rafah area, falls far short of a complete ceasefire in the beleaguered territory that has been sought by the international community, including Israel's top ally, the United States. If it holds, the limited halt in fighting could help address some of the overwhelming needs of Palestinians that have surged even more in recent weeks with Israel's incursion into Rafah. The army said the pause would begin at 8 am (0500 GMT) and remain in effect until 7 pm (1600 GMT). It said the pauses would take place every day

until further notice. The pause is aimed at allowing aid trucks to reach the nearby Israel-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing, the main entry point for incoming aid, and travel safely to the Salah a-Din highway, a main north-south road, the military said. The crossing has suffered from a bottleneck since Israeli ground troops moved into Rafah in early May. COGAT, the Israeli military body that oversees aid distribution in Gaza, said the route would increase the flow of aid to other parts of Gaza, including Khan Younis, Muwasi and central Gaza. Hard-hit northern Gaza, which was an early target in the war, is being served by goods entering from a crossing in the north. The military said the pause came after discussions with the United Nations and international aid agencies. Aid agencies, including the UN, did not immediately respond to requests for comment. The pause along the southern route comes as Israel and Hamas are weighing the



Israeli police disperse a protester against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government during a call for the release of hostages held in the Gaza Strip by the Hamas militant group, in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Saturday

AP/PTI

latest proposal for a cease-fire, a plan that was detailed by President Joe Biden in the administration's most concentrated diplomatic push for a halt to the fighting and the release of hostages taken by the militant group. While Biden described the proposal as an Israeli one, Israel has not fully embraced it and Hamas has demanded changes that appear unacceptable to Israel.

Israel's eight-month military offensive against the Hamas militant group, sparked by the group's October 7 attack, has plunged Gaza into a humanitarian crisis, with the UN reporting widespread hunger and hundreds of thousands of people on the brink of famine. The international community has urged Israel to do more to ease the crunch and has said the ongoing fighting, including in

Rafah, has complicated aid deliveries throughout the war. From May 6 until June 6, the UN received an average of 68 trucks of aid a day, according to figures from the UN humanitarian office, known as OCHA. That was down from 168 a day in April and far below the 500 trucks a day that aid groups say are needed. The flow of aid in southern Gaza declined just as the humanitarian need grew. More than 1 million Palestinians, many of whom had already been displaced, fled Rafah after the invasion, crowding into other parts of southern and central Gaza. Most now languish in ramshackle tent camps, using trenches as latrines, with open sewage in the streets. COGAT says there are no restrictions on the entry of trucks. It says more than 8,600 trucks of all kinds, both aid and commercial, entered Gaza from all crossings from May 2 to June 13, an average of 201 a day. But much of that aid has piled up at the crossings and not reached its final destination.

A spokesman for COGAT, Shimon Freedman, said it was the UN's fault that its cargos stacked up on the Gaza side of Kerem Shalom. He said the agencies have "fundamental logistical problems that they have not fixed," especially a lack of trucks. The UN denies such allegations. It says the fighting between Israel and Hamas often makes it too dangerous for UN trucks inside Gaza to travel to Kerem Shalom, which is right next to Israel's border. It also says the pace of deliveries has been slowed because the Israeli military must authorise drivers to travel to the site, a system Israel says was designed for the drivers' safety. Due to a lack of security, aid trucks in some cases have also been looted by crowds as they moved along Gaza's roads. The new arrangement aims to reduce the need for coordinating deliveries by providing an 11-hour uninterrupted window each day for trucks to move in and out of the crossing.

Sunak running out of time to change tune

AP ■ LONDON

With less than three weeks until Britain's election day, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is running out of time to change an ominous tune for his Conservative Party. The UK leader — who in recent days travelled to a Group of Seven summit and a Swiss conference on the Ukraine war — has been dogged by questions about whether voters are about to bring his time in office to an abrupt end on July 4. Polls continue to give the left-of-centre opposition Labour Party under Keir Starmer a double-digit lead over Sunak's Conservatives, who have been in power for 14 years under five different prime ministers. Sunak's attempts to close the gap have had little apparent impact. The biggest splash he's made in the campaign so far was a gaffe — the prime minister's decision to skip an international ceremony in France on June 6 marking the 80th anniversary of the D-Day invasion. He has been apologetic ever since. Commentators are starting to talk about doomsday scenarios for the Conservatives, who have governed Britain for almost two-thirds of the past 100 years and won 365 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons in the 2019 election. University of Strathclyde politics professor John Curtice, one of Britain's most respected polling experts, said Conservative support is at its lowest point in UK polling history, and Sunak "must be beginning to doubt his decision to call the election early."

In the past week, both Conservatives and Labour have released their election manifestos, the detailed packages of promises that form the centrepiece of their pitch to voters. The Conservatives focused on reducing immigration and lowering taxes, pledging 17 billion pounds (USD 22 billion) in tax cuts by 2030, to be paid for largely by slashing welfare costs. Labour promised to get the economy expanding after years



of sluggish growth by establishing a new industrial policy, investing in infrastructure, cutting planning red tape and building 1.5 million new homes. It has promised not to increase personal taxes, but the Conservatives say the tax burden will rise under Labour. Critics say neither party is being upfront about the tax increases that would be needed to repair public services left threadbare after years of Conservative-led spending cuts, Brexit, a global pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis triggered by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. "The gaping hole in both parties' manifestos is a reckoning with the scale and severity of the fiscal problems that will confront whoever wins the election," said Hannah White, director of Independent think-tank the Institute for Government. The Conservatives' electoral prospects worsened when populist firebrand Nigel Farage entered the race at the helm of the right-wing party Reform UK. Though it is unlikely to win many seats in Parliament, Reform's vote share appears to be rising, largely at the expense of the Conservatives. In recent days, the Conservative message has shifted from aiming at victory to warning that voting Reform could help Labour win a landslide. "If you vote for anybody else other than a Conservative candidate, you're going to get a Labour government with a large majority," Transport Secretary Mark Harper told the BBC on Sunday.

Two killed in shooting at Texas park

Texas (AP): A shooting in a Texas park left two people dead and several wounded on Saturday, authorities said. The victims were shot shortly before 11 pm Saturday during a Juneteenth celebration at Old Settlers Park in Round Rock, about 19 miles (30.5 kilometres) north of Austin. An altercation began between two groups during a concert at the event and someone started shooting, Round Rock Police Chief Allen Banks said during a news conference at the scene. The two victims who were pronounced dead at the scene were not involved in the altercation, Allen said. The shooting occurred near a vendor area away from the stage set up for the concert, Allen said. Police officers and fire department personnel who were attending the event immediately began providing emergency medical care to multiple wounded victims, who were then transported to local hospitals, Allen said.

Nine injured in Detroit suburb shooting

AP ■ ROCHESTER HILLS (US)

Nine people were injured, including two young children and their mother, after a shooter opened fire at a splash pad in a Detroit suburb where families gathered to escape the summer heat Saturday. Law enforcement tracked a suspect to a home, where the man died by a self-inflicted gunshot wound, authorities said. An 8-year-old boy was shot in the head and in critical condition Saturday night, Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard said during a news conference. The boy's mother also was in critical condition after being wounded in the abdomen and leg, and his 4-year-old brother was in stable condition with a leg wound. Authorities initially said they believed as many as 10 people had gunshot wounds from the shooting in Rochester Hills, but that number was revised after they checked with area hospitals. The other six victims, all 30 or older, were in stable condition, Bouchard said. They

included a husband-and-wife couple and a 78-year-old man. The shooting happened just after 5 pm at a city park featuring a recreation area with a nonslip surface where people can turn on sprays and fountains of water to play in. Bouchard said the attack appeared to be random, with the shooter driving up to the park, walking to the splash pad and firing as many as 28 times, stopping multiple times to reload. At least one witness reported that the shooter appeared to use two hand guns during the attack, but that has not yet been confirmed, the sheriff said. In the chaos, "People were falling, getting hit, trying to run," Bouchard said. "Terrible things that unfortunately all of us in our law enforcement business have seen way too much." The gunman was "apparently in no rush. Just calmly walked back to his car," the sheriff said. Police heard the 911 call reporting the shooting as it came in, Bouchard said, because the



agency uses a service that simultaneously sends emergency calls to first responders. An officer was at the scene within two minutes, he said. Bouchard said the first deputies who arrived immediately began providing first aid including tourniquets. Officers also were able to quickly come up with a likely address, and a car matching the suspect's vehicle was at the residence. Deputies surrounded the home and tried to make contact with the suspect inside, to no avail,

Bouchard said. They sent a drone inside the home and then entered to find the suspect was dead. Another weapon was found inside. The quick containment of the suspect may have prevented a "second chapter" to the shooting, the sheriff said, displaying a photo of a semiautomatic rifle on a table inside the home. The suspect did not live in Rochester Hills and investigators do not yet know why he went to the splash pad, accord-

ing to Bouchard. Officials did not release the man's name. Bouchard described him as a 42-year-old white man and said officials believe he lived with his mother. The man's mother was notified, Bouchard said. "In terms of the why, I don't know," Bouchard said of the gunman's motive. At the splash pad, authorities found a handgun, three empty magazines and 28 spent shell casings. At the home, they recovered a semiautomatic rifle and another handgun believed to have been used by the suspect to take his life, Bouchard said. Police cordoned off the area with tape and dozens of yellow evidence markers lay on the ground among colourful folding chairs. "When I got on scene I started to cry because I know what a splash pad is supposed to be," a place where people gather and have fun, Rochester Hills Mayor Bryan Barnett said. The shooting was a reminder "that we live in a fragile place," Barnett said.

US military targets Houthi radar sites after a merchant sailor goes missing

AP ■ DUBAI

The US military unleashed a wave of attacks targeting radar sites operated by Yemen's Houthi rebels after one merchant sailor went missing and the vessel he was on caught fire in the latest Houthi strike on shipping in the crucial Red Sea corridor, authorities said Saturday. The attacks come as the US Navy faces the most intense combat it has seen since World War II in trying to counter the Houthi campaign — attacks the rebels say are meant to halt the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. However, the Iranian-backed rebel assaults often see the Houthis target ships and sailors who have nothing to do with the war while traffic remains halved through a corridor vital for cargo and energy shipments between Asia, Europe and the Mideast. US strikes destroyed seven

radars within Houthi-controlled territory, the military's Central Command said. It did not elaborate on how the sites were destroyed and did not immediately respond to questions from The Associated Press. "These radars allow the Houthis to target maritime vessels and endanger commercial shipping," Central Command said in a statement. The US separately destroyed two bomb-laden drone boats in the Red Sea, as well as a drone launched by the Houthis over the waterway, it said. The Houthis, who have held Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since 2014, did not acknowledge the strikes, nor any military losses. That's been typical since the U.S. began launching airstrikes targeting the rebels. The Central Command said one commercial sailor from the Liberian-flagged, Greek-owned bulk cargo carrier Tutor

remained missing after an attack Wednesday by the Houthis that used a bomb-carrying drone boat to strike the vessel. "The crew abandoned ship and were rescued by USS Philippine Sea and partner forces," Central Command said. The "Tutor remains in the Red Sea and is slowly taking on water." The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said Saturday afternoon that the Tutor was "still on fire and sinking." The missing sailor is Filipino, according to the state-run Philippine News Agency, which cited Migrant Workers Secretary Hans Leo Cadac. He said most of the Tutor's 22 mariners were from the Philippines. "We're trying to account for the particular seafarer in the ship and are praying that we could find him," he said on Friday night.

New Caledonia reopening its international airport and shortening curfew

Paris (AP): The French Pacific territory of New Caledonia is shortening its overnight curfew and reopening its international airport that was closed to commercial flights for more than a month because of deadly violence that wracked the archipelago where pro-independence Indigenous Kanaks want to break from France. La Tontouta airport that links New Caledonia's capital, Nouméa, to Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore and other Pacific hubs will reopen Monday, the territory's high commissioner announced in a statement on Sunday. The overnight curfew is also being shortened by two hours, its start pushed back from 6 pm to 8 pm, because of "the improvement in the situation and in order to facilitate the gradual return to normal life," the high commissioner said. Violence that flared on May 13

over controversial voting reforms led to nine deaths, including two gendarmes, and widespread destruction of shops, businesses and homes. Tourists trapped by the airport's closure were evacuated on military flights. With France now plunged into frenzied campaigning for snap parliamentary elections, French President Emmanuel Macron has suspended the reforms that would have altered voting rights in New Caledonia. The revolt prompted France on May 15 to impose a state of emergency on the archipelago and rush in reinforcements for police who were overwhelmed by armed clashes, looting and arson. Both sides of New Caledonia's bitter divide — Indigenous Kanaks who want independence and those loyal to France — erected barricades, either to revolt against authorities or to protect homes and properties.

S'pore rushes to clean up oil slick after boat hits ship

AP ■ KUALA LUMPUR

An oil spill caused by a dredger boat hitting a stationary cargo tanker has blackened part of Singapore's southern coastline, including the popular resort island of Sentosa, and sparked concerns it may threaten marine wildlife as a clean-up operation was underway on Sunday. The Netherlands-flagged dredger Vox Maxima struck the Singaporean fuel supply ship Marine Honour on Friday. It damaged the cargo tank on Marine Honour, which leaked oil into the sea. Singapore's Maritime and Port Authority said in a statement late Saturday the oil leak from the vessel had been contained, and that the oil that escaped from the damaged tanker had been treated with dispersants. But due to the tidal current, it said the treated oil had land-

ed along shorelines including at Sentosa and other southern islands, a nature reserve and a public beach park. Sentosa, which attracts millions of visitors annually, houses one of Singapore's two casinos, golf courses and Southeast Asia's only Universal Studios theme park. Part of the beachfront at the public park and at the nature reserve have been closed to facilitate clean-up efforts, it said. The Sentosa beach will remain open to the public but sea activities and swimming are prohibited. On Sunday, workers in orange suits were seen scooping up sand in a clean-up operation at an empty beach in Sentosa. Black water washed up on the oil-stained shore. Authorities have deployed 18 crafts for the clean-up efforts and laid close to 1,500 meters

of container booms, temporary floating barriers to trap the oil spill. "More will be laid over the next few days to prevent further spread of oil onto the shore, and facilitate the recovery of the trapped oil off the affected shorelines and lagoons to prevent them from going back to sea," the statement said. Conservationists and biologists are monitoring the full extent of the damage on marine and wildlife. Local conservation group Marine Stewards reportedly said there were photos of dead fish, otters and kingfishers covered in oil slick. Group founder Sue Ye told Singapore Straits Times that oil spills smother and suffocate fish, birds and marine animals that have to go to the surface for air, such as turtles and dolphins.

Li promises more pandas, urges Aus to put aside differences

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia on Sunday focused on positive aspects of the bilateral relationship including shared giant pandas and a rebounding wine trade as he promised a new breeding pair of the rare bears and urged both countries to put aside their differences. China's most powerful leader after President Xi Jinping arrived late Saturday in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia state, which has produced most of the Australian wine entering China since crippling tariffs were lifted in March that had effectively ended a 1.2 billion Australian dollar (\$790 million) a year trade since 2020. Li visited Adelaide Zoo, which has been home to China-born giant pandas Wang Wang and Fu Ni since 2009, before he was to have lunch at a restaurant at Adelaide winery Penfolds Magill Estate.

He announced that the zoo would be loaned another two pandas after the pair are due to return to China in November. "China will soon provide another pair of pandas that are equally beautiful, lively, cute and younger to the Adelaide Zoo, and continue the cooperation on giant pandas between China and Australia," Li said in Mandarin, adding that zoo staff would be invited to "pick a pair." Li was impressed by the 18-year-old male Wang Wang's appetite and indifference to his high-ranking visitors. "The panda is very obsessed with eating and doesn't pay attention to us even when we are the people from its hometown visiting," Li said at the panda enclosure. "It has completely treated here as its second hometown," Li said. "Very pretty, adorable, with charming naivety." The pair are the only pandas in the Southern Hemisphere and failed to produce offspring in

Australia. Foreign Minister Penny Wong thanked Li for ensuring that pandas would remain the zoo's star attraction. "It's good for the economy, it's good for South Australian jobs, it's good for tourism, and it is a signal of goodwill, and we thank you," Wong said. Tom King, the managing director of Penfolds, one of Australia's oldest wineries, told Chinese state media ahead of Li's arrival that such visits helped strengthen economic and cultural ties. "It's pleasing to see the stabilizing of relations between the Australian and Chinese governments, including regular high-level visits between the two countries," King was quoted as saying by the Global Times newspaper last week. Li's visit is the first to Australia by a Chinese premier in seven years and marks an improvement in relations since Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's center-left Labor Party was elected in 2022.



Li noted that Albanese in November was the first Australian prime minister to visit China since 2016. "China-Australia relations were back on track after a period of twists and turns, generating tangible benefits to the people of both countries," Li said, according to a translation released by the Chinese Embassy in Australia on Sunday. "History has proven that mutu-

al respect, seeking common ground while shelving differences and mutually beneficial cooperation are the valuable experience in growing China-Australia relations, and must be upheld and carried forward," Li added. Hundreds of pro-China demonstrators, human rights protesters and democracy activists gathered outside the zoo before Li's visit. Among the protesters was for-

mer Hong Kong lawmaker Ted Hui, who fled to Australia three years ago to avoid a prison sentence for his activism. He said the panda offer was a cynical move to soften China's image and to distract from the government's human rights failings. "It's a public relations move by the Chinese regime and, disappointingly, the Australian government is reciprocating by welcoming him and shaking hands," Hui said. Hui said Li showed cowardice by entering the zoo by a rear entrance while most of the protesters and China supporters had gathered at the main entrance. But Hui and other protesters were able to shout slogans at Li from a distance inside the zoo. China initiated a reset of the relationship after the previous conservative administration's nine years in power ended. Relations collapsed over legislation that banned covert foreign interference in Australian

politics, the exclusion of Chinese-owned telecommunications giant Huawei from rolling out the national 5G network due to security concerns, and Australia's call for an independent investigation into the causes of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing imposed an array of official and unofficial trade blocks in 2020 on a range of Australian exports including coal, wine, beef, barley and wood that cost up to AU\$20 billion (\$13 billion) a year. All the trade bans have now been lifted except for Australian live lobster exports. Trade Minister Don Farrell predicted that impediment would also be lifted soon after Li's visit with Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao. Wong said Li's visit was the result of "two years of very deliberate, very patient work by this government to bring about a stabilization of the relationship and to work towards the

removal of trade impediments." "We will cooperate where we can, we will disagree where we must and we will engage in our national interest," Wong told Australian Broadcasting Corp. before joining Li for lunch. Li's agenda becomes more contentious after he left Adelaide late Sunday for meetings in the national capital, Canberra, on Monday and a Chinese-controlled lithium processing plant in resource-rich Western Australia state on Tuesday. Albanese has said he will raise with Li during an annual leaders' meeting recent clashes between the two countries' militaries in the South China Sea and Yellow Sea that Australia argues endangered Australian personnel. Albanese will also raise the fate of China-born Australian democracy blogger Yang Hengjun, who was given a suspended death sentence by a Beijing court in February.

Pilgrims commence final rites of Haj as Muslims celebrate Eid al-Azha

AP ■ MINA (SAUDI ARABIA)

Masses of pilgrims on Sunday embarked on a symbolic stoning of the devil in Saudi Arabia under the soaring summer heat. The ritual marks the final days of the Haj, or Islamic pilgrimage, and the start of the Eid al-Azha celebrations for Muslims around the world.

The stoning is among the final rites of the Haj, which is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. It came a day after more than 1.8 million pilgrims congregated at a sacred hill, known as Mount Ararat, outside the holy city of Mecca, which Muslim pilgrims visit to perform the annual five-day rituals of Haj. The pilgrims left Mount Arafat on Saturday evening to spend their night in a nearby site known as Muzdalifa, where they collected pebbles to use in the symbolic stoning of pillars representing the devil.

The pillars are in another sacred place in Mecca, called Mina, where Muslims believe Ibrahim's faith was tested when God commanded him to sacri-

fice his only son Ismail. Ibrahim was prepared to submit to the command, but then God stayed his hand, sparing his son. In the Christian and Jewish versions of the story, Abraham is ordered to kill his other son, Isaac. On Sunday morning, crowds headed on foot to the stoning areas. Some were seen pushing disabled pilgrims on wheel-chairs on a multi-lane road leading to the complex housing the large pillars. Most pilgrims were seen sweltering and carrying umbrellas to protect them against the burning summer sun.

An Associated Press reporter saw many pilgrims, especially among the elderly, collapsing on the road to the pillars because of the burning heat. Security forces and medics were deployed to help, carrying those who fainted on gurneys out of the heat to ambulances or field hospitals. As the temperature spiked by midday, more people required medical help. Despite the suffocating heat, many pilgrims expressed joy at being able to complete their pilgrimage. "Thank God, (the



Muslim pilgrims gather at top of the rocky hill known as the Mountain of Mercy, on the Plain of Arafat, during the annual Haj pilgrimage, near the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on Saturday

AP/PTI

process) was joyful and good," said Abdel-Moaty Abu Ghoneima, an Egyptian pilgrim. "No one wants more than this." Many pilgrims will spend up to three days in Mina, each casting seven pebbles at three pillars in a ritual to symbolize the casting away of evil and sin. While in Mina, they will visit

Mecca to perform their "tawaf," or circumambulation, which is circling the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque counterclockwise seven times. Then another circumambulation, the Farewell Tawaf, will mark the end of Haj as pilgrims prepare to leave the holy city. The rites coincide with the four-day Eid al-Azha, which

means "Feast of Sacrifice," when Muslims with financial means commemorate Ibrahim's test of faith through slaughtering livestock and animals and distributing the meat to the poor. Most countries marked Eid al-Azha on Sunday, others, like Indonesia, will celebrate it Monday. Once the Haj is over, men are

expected to shave their heads and remove the shroud-like white garments worn during the pilgrimage, and women to snip a lock of hair in a sign of renewal and rebirth. Most of the pilgrims then leave Mecca for the city of Medina, about 340 kilometers away, to pray in Prophet Muhammad's tomb, the Sacred Chamber. The tomb is part of the prophet's mosque, one of the three holiest sites in Islam, along with the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. All Muslims are required to make the Haj once in their lives if they are physically and financially able to do so. Many wealthy Muslims make the pilgrimage more than once. The rituals largely commemorate the accounts of Prophet Ibrahim and his son Prophet Ismail, Ismail's mother Hajar and Prophet Muhammad, according to the Quran, Islam's holy book. More than 1.83 million Muslims performed Haj in 2024, Saudi Haj and Umrah Minister Tawfiq bin Fawzan al-Rabiah said in a briefing, slightly less than last

year's figures when 1.84 million made the rituals. Most of the Haj rituals are held outdoors with little if any shade. It is set for the second week of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month in the Islamic lunar calendar, so its time of the year varies. And this year the pilgrimage fell in the burning summer of Saudi Arabia. The heat soared to 47 C (116.6 F) at Mount Arafat on Saturday. This year's Haj came against the backdrop of the devastating Israel-Hamas war, which has pushed the Middle East to the brink of a regional conflict. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip weren't able to travel to Mecca for Haj this year because of the closure of the Rafah crossing in May when Israel extended its ground offensive to the city on the border with Egypt. And they will not be able to celebrate the Eid al-Azha as they used to do in previous years. Dozens of Palestinians gathered Sunday morning near a destroyed mosque in Gaza's southern city of Khan Younis to perform the Eid prayers. They were surrounded by debris and rubble of collapsed houses. In

the nearby town of Deir al-Balah in central Gaza, Muslims held their prayers in a school-turned shelter. Some, including women and children, went to cemeteries to visit the graves of loved ones. "Today, after the ninth month, more than 37 thousand martyrs, more than 87 thousand wounded, and hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed," Abdulhalim Abu Samra, a displaced Palestinian, told the AP after wrapping up the prayers in Khan Younis. "Our people live in difficult circumstances." Also in the occupied West Bank, Palestinians convened for the Eid prayers in Ramallah, the seat of the Western-backed Palestinian Authority. In Lebanon where the militant Hezbollah group traded nearly daily attacks with Israel, a steady stream of visitors made their way into the Palestine Martyrs Cemetery near the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut early Sunday morning, bearing flowers and jugs of water for the graves of their loved ones, an annual tradition on the first day of Eid.

Russian forces rescue staff taken hostage

AP ■ MOSCOW

Security forces stormed a detention center in southern Russia on Sunday, killing inmates accused of links to Islamist terror cells who had taken two staff members hostage, state-funded news channel RT reported.

Journalists on the scene reported the sounds of gunfire, while multiple ambulances were seen arriving at the prison in footage on social media. The hostages at the pretrial detention center in Rostov-on-Don were uninjured, Russia's Federal Penitentiary Service said in an official statement. It said that the hostage takers had been "liquidated," but did not comment further. A number of local news outlets, including RT, reported that at least some of the prisoners had been killed. Earlier, state news agency Tass,



citing unnamed sources in law enforcement, had said that six hostage takers were in the central courtyard of the Rostov region's Detention Center No. 1, armed with a penknife, a rubber baton and a fire ax. The prisoners include men accused of links to the Islamic State group, it said. Images posted on social media appeared to show at least two of the hostage-takers wearing a headband that resembled the Islamic State's flag. Other images showed prisoners wield-

ing knives. RT reported that three of the hostage-takers had already been sentenced on terrorism charges, including disseminating extremist information and plotting to blow up a Russian courthouse. IS have carried out a number of attacks on Russian soil in recent years. An affiliate of IS claimed responsibility for the most recent attack in March, when gunmen opened fire on a crowd at a concert hall in suburban Moscow, killing 145 people.

'Territorial integrity of Ukraine basis of any peace'

AP ■ OBBURGEN (SWITZERLAND)

Eighty countries jointly called on Sunday for the "territorial integrity" of Ukraine to be the basis for any peace agreement to end Russia's two-year war, though some key developing nations at a Swiss conference did not join in.

The joint communique capped a two-day conference at the Bürgenstock resort in Switzerland marked by the absence of Russia, which was not invited, but that many attendees hoped could join in on a roadmap to peace. About 100 delegations, mostly Western countries but also some key developing nations, were on hand for the conference — and experts were on watch to see how and if at all they might line up behind the outcome document. Participants India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates — which were represented by foreign ministers or lower-level envoys — were among

those that did not sign onto the final document, which focused on issues of nuclear safety, food security and the exchange of prisoners. Brazil, an "observer" country, did not sign on but Türkiye — which has sought to an intermediary between Russia and Ukraine — did.

The final document said the UN Charter and "respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty ... can and will serve as a basis for achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine."

Viola Amherd, the Swiss president who hosted the event, told the final news conference that the fact that the "great majority" of participants agreed to the final document "shows what diplomacy can achieve."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy hailed the "first steps toward peace" at the meeting, and said the joint communique remains "open for accession by everyone who respects the UN Charter."



Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz speaks during the opening plenary session of the Summit on Peace in Ukraine in Obbungen on Saturday

AP/PTI

Analysts say the two-day conference will likely have little concrete impact toward ending the war because the country leading and continuing it, Russia, was not invited — for now. Russia's key ally, China, which did not attend, and Brazil have jointly sought to plot alternative routes toward peace.

The meeting also endeavoured to return a spotlight to the war at a time when conflict in Gaza, national elections and other concerns have seized global attention. The three themes of nuclear safety, food security and prisoner exchanges featured in the final statement. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia

Meloni said they amounted to "minimum conditions" for negotiations with Russia, alluding to how many other areas of disagreement between Kyiv and Moscow will be harder to overcome.

Qatar's prime minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, noted a day earlier how his rich Gulf country hosted talks with both Ukrainian and Russian delegations on the reunification of Ukrainian children with their families that has so far resulted in 34 children being reunited. White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan, speaking to reporters at the resort on Saturday, said it's "going to take work" and countries stepping up to build on efforts by nations like Qatar. "It's going to take a spotlight from the international community, not just from only voices from the United States or Europe, but from unusual voices as well to say what Russia has done here is more than reprehensible and must be reversed," he said.

Pak SC moved against dismissal of plea seeking Imran's disqualification

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A petition has been filed in Pakistan's Supreme Court against the dismissal of a plea seeking former prime minister Imran Khan's disqualification for concealing his alleged daughter Tyrian White while submitting his nomination papers for the 2018 general elections. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) last month dismissed the petition. The petition alleged that the 71-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party founder had not disclosed his alleged daughter — Tyrian White — in his nomination papers for contesting the 2018 general elections. Khan's PTI party won the 2018 general elections, and the former cricketer-turned-politician served as the prime minister of Pakistan from August 2018 to April 2022. The IHC rejected the petition after noting that a three-judge bench had previously dismissed it.

Justice Tariq Mehmood Jahangiri read the opinion of the two judges given last year and ruled that the case has already been dismissed. The petitioner, Mohammad Sajid, through his counsel Saad Mumtaz Hashmi, moved the Supreme Court on Saturday, pleading that the full bench of the IHC has erred in considering the concurring opinion of two of the three judges as court judgment. According to the petitioner, Khan did not mention the existence of his alleged daughter, when he filed nomination papers to contest the election from the Mianwali constituency and only furnished the details of his spouse, Bushra Bibi, and two sons living abroad, namely Qasim Khan and Sulaiman Khan. The petitioner said since Khan furnished a false affidavit, he was liable to be disqualified. The petition pleaded that it was an undeniable fact that White, born on June 15, 1992,

was the real daughter of Khan after her paternity was confirmed by the judicial record in the courts in California, the United States. A single bench hearing the matter decided on Feb 2, 2023 that the case be heard by a full bench comprising three judges. After that, the matter was taken up by IHC Chief Justice (CJ) Aamer Farooq, Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani and Justice Arbab Mohammad Tahir. After the hearing, they reserved the judgment on March 30, 2023.

However, before the Chief Justice could have given his opinion, the concurring opinion of two other judges was uploaded on the IHC's website mentioning that the petition was dismissed by a majority of two to one. The CJ then ordered an inquiry besides ordering the removal of the concurring opinion of the two judges from the website, as it could not have been uploaded before the case was fixed for announcement of judgment. Later on May 10, 2023, the CJ decided to recuse himself from hearing the case and directed that the "opinion of the two judges be sealed" and ordered that the matter be fixed before a full bench to "decide the case afresh".

The petitioner claimed the petition was fixed before the IHC full bench on May 21, 2024, but the bench rather than hearing the case afresh dismissed the petition. Challenging the dismissal of his petition instead of hearing it afresh, the petitioner argued that the opinion of two judges uploaded on the website did not constitute a judgment in view of the law declared by the Supreme Court in several verdicts. The IHC full bench was not bound by the concurring opinion of two judges given in the earlier round of hearing of the petition, he said.

'PML-N spreading propaganda to avenge Nawaz's defeat'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's leading right-wing Islamic leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman's party has alleged that the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was spreading false propaganda against its ideology and central leadership because of its supreme Nawaz Sharif's electoral defeat in the February 8 elections, a media report said on Sunday. Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) leader Mufti Kifayatullah said the victory of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) nominee Shahzada Muhammad Gushtasap Khan in the NA-15 Manshera-cum-Torghar constituency by defeating former premier Nawaz Sharif was the result of the party's political strategy, the Dawn newspaper reported. Shahzada Gushtasap Khan, who fought as an Independent after the Pakistan Election Commission deprived former prime minister Imran Khan's

party of its election symbol of a cricket bat, polled 1,05,249 votes while Nawaz Sharif got 80,382 votes. Kifayatullah said Khan had contested the February 8 elections from NA-15 on the orders of his party chief. Kifayatullah further said that his party's ideology was different from the PML-N's. He said his party is committed to the cause of sharia in the country through a peaceful political struggle. The JUI-F leader claimed that the PML-N was using retired Captain Mohammad Safdar, son-in-law of Nawaz Sharif, to challenge his party's ideology and mission to avenge the former three-time premier's electoral defeat. "The PML-N has never remained popular in the NA-15 constituency stretched over to the rural parts of Mansehra and neighbouring Torghar district and it was me who secured over 53,000 votes in the general elections held in 2018," Kifayatullah said. The JUI-F leader said that Safdar

couldn't suffer his father-in-law's defeat in the elections and was searching for reasons behind Sharif's failure. He claimed that Safdar was involved in his and his leadership's character assassination. "Our party has been waging a political war against the largest poll rigging in the country's history, which paved the way for the installation of the PML-N government in the centre," Kifayatullah said. Notably, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had recently invited his former ally Maulana Rehman to become a part of the ruling coalition led by his party and play a role in resolving the political tensions in the country. Sharif, who is heading a coalition government supported by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's Pakistan Peoples Party and other smaller parties, visited the residence of the JUI-F chief, 70, to enquire about his well-being on Thursday, the newspaper reported.

Key TTP commander killed in Pakistan's northwest

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A top militant commander of the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was killed on Sunday in an encounter with security forces in Pakistan's restive Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. TTP commander Waliullah was killed by the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) of Bannu in an intelligence-based operation in the Lakki Marwat district in the province, the Express Tribune newspaper reported.

The operation was conducted in Tajuri Road near Malang Adda following which the armed terrorists opened fire on the police. Waliullah was killed in retaliatory firing by the security forces, the paper said. He was a local commander of the TTP Tipu Gul group and was the son-in-law of Commander Atiqur Rahman



alias Tipu Gul Marwat, the paper said. Waliullah was wanted in several cases of bomb blasts on CTD Bannu, DI Khan and local police, and attacks on

police and security forces. The TTP, set up as an umbrella group of several militant outfits in 2007, is believed to be close to al-Qaeda. The group has been blamed for several deadly attacks across Pakistan, including an attack on army headquarters in 2009, assaults on military bases, and the 2008 bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad. Separately, at least four people of a family were killed and two injured in a roadside blast triggered by a remote-control device in northwest Pakistan on Sunday. The incident occurred in the Kurram area, bordering Afghanistan. The vehicle of a tribal elder was targeted with an IED when it was on its way to a nearby market. The deceased included a child also. The injured were shifted to a hospital. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack yet. Police have launched a search operation in the area.

Feasibility study on land connectivity with India in final stages: Lanka Prez

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe said on Sunday that the feasibility study on a proposal to establish land connectivity with India is in its final stages. Wickremesinghe, who was travelling in the northeastern district of Mannar to inspect the development work in the region, said that the preliminary work of the feasibility study was over and the final phase would be completed soon. This proposal and the prospect of a power grid connection between the two nations are likely to be discussed during the visit of External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to Lanka this week. Wickremesinghe said a commercial venture to sell the excess renewable energy to

India would also be discussed during the minister's visit. On Saturday, the Lankan foreign ministry here announced that Jaishankar would arrive in Colombo on June 20. However, there was no official announcement on Jaishankar's visit from India's Ministry of External Affairs. If confirmed, this could be Jaishankar's first official standalone visit abroad after he was appointed India's External Affairs Minister in the new government early this month. Officials here confirmed that all Indian projects in Sri Lanka, including the Adani group's wind power project in Mannar and the creation of an industrial zone in the eastern port district of Trincomalee, would be discussed during the visit.

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has pledged to end Pakistan's dependency on foreign aid and IMF bailouts and surpass neighbouring nations in economic activity, as he outlined a series of bold reforms to reduce the cash-strapped government's expenses and revive the economy. Sharif addressed the nation on Saturday and expressed hope that the next deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout package would be the last in Pakistan's history. The Pakistan government is currently in talks with the IMF for a loan estimated to be between USD 6 billion to USD 8 billion, as it strives to avert a default in a slow-paced economy. Sharif emphasised that every penny would be spent on the

progress of the nation and its people. He expressed commitment to reduce expenses and, within five years, provide education and skills to the youth. "Inshallah, this will be the last IMF programme in Pakistan's history. We will stand on our feet and surpass our neighbouring countries in economic activity," he said in the televised address. Sharif was addressing the nation after his government completed 100 days of rule. Sharif had taken oath on March 4 after stitching together a coalition with five other parties and foiling the chances of jailing former prime minister Imran Khan to stage a political comeback. Sharif said that there were countries in the world that sought assistance from the IMF once and never needed it again. "We have approached the IMF 24 to 25 times. I assure you today if we

adhere to our programme and targets, the next IMF agreement will be the last in Pakistan's history," he said. "I informed foreign nations that I am here for trade relations, not to ask for

loans. I believe this is how Pakistan will break the debt cycle," he added. Sharif highlighted the importance of tough decisions for the sake of the nation.

NOTICE INVITING E-TENDER

No.E-507204/3

The Mission Director, Samagra Shiksha, Assam, invites bids from PWD (Bldg) registered appropriate class of contractor for 3 building works in different schools as per the detailed notice inviting tender which can be downloaded from the website <https://www.assamtenders.gov.in>.

The last date of submission of tender is 09-07-2024 upto 2:00 PM.

 Sd/-Mission Director, Samagra Shiksha Axom Kahilipara, Guwahati-19

Janasanyogi/CF/271/24/17-Jun-24

Income tax relief for those in lowest slab may need to be considered in Budget: CII

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Income tax relief for the people in the lowest slab may need to be considered in the upcoming full Budget for 2024-25 considering the high levels of inflation, according to newly-elected CII President Sanjiv Puri. In an interview with PTI, he also suggested creation of an institutional platform for consensus building between the Centre and states to successfully carry out all reforms, including those related to land, labour, power and agriculture. The industry body also said it does not see compulsions of coalition politics hampering the reforms in the third term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In stead, it believes that the performance of Indian economy and the success of policies in the previous two stints would set the base to accelerate the process. “Broadly, I would say at this point of time it is public capex, adherence to fiscal glidepath, roadmap for investment in the social infrastructure, green fund and greater investment in the rural sector. These are the broad principles,” he said, when asked about CII’s expectations from the upcoming full Budget for 2024-25. The wholesale inflation rose for the third consecutive month in May at 2.61 per cent on account of rise in prices of food articles, especially vegetables, and manufactured



items. The wholesale price index (WPI) based inflation was 1.26 per cent in the previous month. It was (-) 3.61 per cent in May 2023. Earlier this month, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may consider “further policy actions” only if it is confident of headline inflation staying put at 4 per cent. Das said it is the central bank’s core objective to align the inflation rate with the 4 per cent target, and added that no action on rates will be possible till the RBI is confident of it remaining at or below 4 per cent. As per CII’s estimate, Puri said inflation is “probably going to be around 4.5 per cent this year” on the back of an expected good monsoon, which has in the past led to

moderation of food inflation. On the tax side, he added, “What we are suggesting is that the process of simplification should continue. There are certain suggestions relating to capital gains, which are different for different instruments. Can it be rationalised?” Puri further said there are some operational difficulties in TDS (tax deducted at source) and multiplicity of rates and CII would prefer simplification of these. “...Over a period of time as far as customs is concerned, we should move to a three-tier structure, primary at the lowest level, intermediates in between and then the finished goods and all over a period of time should be moderate rates with some exclusions, as deemed appropriate,” he added.

Under the old regime, Income tax exemption limit is applicable on income up to Rs 2.5 lakh for individuals whereas under the new regime, the exemption limit is on income up to Rs 3 lakh. The CII president also expressed optimism that the reform process should strengthen going forward. Puri said he was hopeful that food prices may moderate on the back of a good monsoon going forward, sharing that CII estimates inflation to be around 4.5 per cent in the near future, and expects the Reserve Bank to cut the key interest rate somewhere in the second half of the current financial year starting from October. “We think that in the second half of the year, we should see some easing of interest rates,” the CII president said.

SOP in final stages to facilitate visa for Chinese technicians needed in manufacturing units: Official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After formulating a standard operating procedure (SOP) for streamlining visa approvals for Chinese professionals whose expertise is required by vendors under the PLI scheme, the government is in the final stages to put in place similar processes for other manufacturing units, an official said. The move assumes significance as some domestic manufacturing firms have flagged the issue of delay in getting visas for Chinese technicians, who are required for works like installation or repair of certain machines, besides training workers in India. “Most of the PLI (production-linked incentive scheme) visas have been taken care of. For general manufacturing also, we are trying to create a better streamlined SOP... That is with the Ministry of Home Affairs. It’s at the final stages. We are hoping to sort it out. We have done a lot of sensitisation,” the official said. The rollout of SOPs does not require any approval from the Union cabinet as it is an internal process to relax norms “a bit” for facilitating visa applications of Chinese professionals or technicians whose expertise is required by domestic manufacturing units, the official added. Normally, these experts require a visa for 3-6 months.



Hailing the move, an industry official said an SOP will help greatly as these manufacturing units need some expertise from Chinese professionals. “The SOP will be a very good decision. Chinese technicians are working in countries like Vietnam and Cambodia in the footwear sector. They are affordable also compared to Taiwanese or other experts. It will help upscale our production,” leading footwear manufacturer and Chairman of Chennai-based Farida Group Rafeeq Ahmed said. The PLI scheme was announced in 2021 for 14 sectors, including telecommunication, white goods, textiles, manufacturing of medical

devices, automobiles, speciality steel, food products, high-efficiency solar PV modules, advanced chemistry cell battery, drones, and pharma with an outlay of Rs 1.97 lakh crore. So far, Rs 9,700 crore has been disbursed to PLI beneficiaries. In 2023-24, the figure was Rs 6,800 crore, the official said. Investments by Chinese firms in India are also subject to greater scrutiny after the issuance of press note 3 by the government in April 2020. Under Press Note 3, the government has made prior approval mandatory for foreign investments from countries that share a land border with India. These countries are China,

Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Afghanistan. As per that decision, FDI proposals from these countries need government approval for investments in India in any sector. India has received only USD 2.5 billion foreign direct investments (FDI) from China during April 2000 and March 2024. According to industry experts, trade and investment relations between the two countries are not so cordial after the border standoff. The Indian and Chinese militaries have been locked in a standoff since May 2020 and a full resolution of the border row has not yet been achieved, though the two sides have disengaged from a number of friction points. India has been consistently maintaining that peace and tranquillity along the LAC were key for normalisation of overall ties. Indian companies face issues in exporting goods to China because of non-tariff barriers there. India’s exports to China in 2023-24 stood at USD 16.65 billion as against USD 15.3 billion in 2022-23, while imports surged to USD 101.74 billion from USD 98.5 billion in 2022-23. The government has taken a series of steps, such as rolling out PLI schemes and mandatory quality control norms, to reduce dependence on Chinese goods.

With 30 per cent topline growth, Godrej Appliances expects to join billion-dollar club in FY25

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Home-grown firm Godrej Appliances expects to become a billion-dollar company by the end of this fiscal, led by a 30 per cent growth in topline, a senior company executive said. The company is “very optimistic” about the short-term and mid-term outlook of the domestic market, during which it will launch new products and has plans to launch around 50 new models across categories in FY25, its Business Head & Executive Vice President Kamal Nandi told PTI. Godrej Appliances, a unit of Godrej & Boyce, recorded 60 per cent overall growth in the first quarter, led by an unprecedented demand for air-conditioners. “We have registered over 60 per cent growth in Q1 and expect to close the quarter at 50-60 per cent growth. While demand is slower in the south and west, north and east are improving. Overall, we expect to close the quarter with over 50 per cent growth,” Nandi said. In categories such as air-conditioner, Godrej Appliances recorded over 100 per cent growth in sales, as some other makers have reported. In the air-cooler segment, the Godrej group firm saw over 125 per cent growth and more than 25 per cent in the refrigerators segment in the



June quarter so far. “Even if consumption slows in the festive season and the September quarter, we anticipate a normal growth of about 15 per cent over last year, aiming to close the year around 30 per cent, plus growth overall,” he said. Godrej Appliances closed 2023-24, around Rs 6,000 crore. According to Nandi: “We are expecting a 30 per cent increase, aiming for close to Rs 8,000 crore.” Asked if Godrej Appliances would become a billion-dollar company by the end of FY25, Nandi said, “Yes, we are expecting to reach that target.” Godrej Appliances operates in segments such as air conditioning, refrigerators, washing machines and kitchen appliances such as microwave ovens. Besides, it is also present in the commercial appliances space, such as in vending machines, and is expanding its range of medical refrigerators.

Indian room air-conditioner market to reach ₹50,000 crore by FY29: Voltas

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The India room air-conditioners (RAC) market is likely to grow at a healthy CAGR of 12 per cent to reach Rs 50,000 crore by FY 2028-29, Tata group firm Voltas said in its latest annual report. The competition in the Indian RAC market has “intensified” with the presence of homegrown and leading foreign players, said Voltas, a market leader in the segment. Moreover, the competitive “intensity is going to increase” further in the near future, the company said while discussing challenges and opportunities. Factors like increasingly hot summers, rising disposable

incomes, and the quest for a better lifestyle with easy access to consumer finance are likely to drive growth for this room air-conditioner segment. “The Indian RAC market is expected to grow at a healthy CAGR of 12 per cent to reach a figure of Rs 50,000 crores by 2028-29,” said Voltas. Voltas sold over 2 million AC units in 2023-24, which, according to the company, was the highest number of ACs ever sold by any brand in a single year. “Voltas also sold 1 million AC units in an incredibly short time frame of just 110 days from January 1, 2024, till April 20, 2024,” it said. This season several companies have reported over two-fold growth in April and May as



sales skyrocketed in the blistering summer, when the mercury was touching around 45 degrees, creating a new record at several places. “Moving ahead, Voltas aims to reinforce its market leadership through the expansion of Exclusive Brand

Outlets (EBOs) and other channels,” it said. Besides RAC, competitive intensity is also going to increase in Commercial Air Conditioning (CAC) where leading foreign players have started focusing on this sector. “The demand for commercial

air conditioning is increasing across industries and commercial establishments, and driven by a focus on comfort and sustainability,” the report said. Earlier, the Consumer Electronics and Appliances Manufacturers Association had said that this year, it expects record sales of RAC, taking the annual sale of around 14 million units in 2024. However, Voltas, in its report, also said the recent implementation of QCO (Quality Control Orders) norms affects the imports of components, which pose challenges for the industry. Still, the Indian air condition industry is highly dependent on imports for components,

which is around an average of 65 to 70 per cent of the product value. Over commercial refrigeration (CR) products, Voltas’ annual report stated it will continue to grow over 10 per cent per annum till FY 2028-29. In this segment, “many of the product categories are likely to register high double-digit growth,” it claimed. “Under the ‘Make in India’ initiative, many brands have set up new facilities and expanded local manufacturing. With this large local manufacturing base in key categories, competition has become intensive, leading to market share and profitability challenges,” it noted.

CBIC cautions public against frauds in name of Indian Customs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) on Sunday asked public to stay alert and discern the modus operandi of fraudsters committing fraud in the name of Indian customs. In a statement, the CBIC said various incidents have come to light through news portals/social media platforms of fraudulent persons posing as Indian Customs officers cheating the

public of their hard-earned money across the country. These frauds are primarily done using digital means like phone calls or SMS, and are focused on extracting money through the ‘purported’ fear of immediate penal actions. In order to counter these frauds through public awareness, CBIC is mounting a multi-modal awareness campaign that includes newspaper advertisement, SMS/e-mails to the general public, social media campaign, besides awareness

campaigns by CBIC field formations. The CBIC also advised the public to take measures to safeguard themselves from becoming a victim of such scams by discerning the modus operandi of fraudsters, protecting their information, verifying antecedents of caller and reporting such acts by staying alert. Some of the common modus operandi used by fraudsters are fake calls/SMS. Fraudsters posing as courier officials/staff target the

unaware people via calls, text messages or e-mails claiming that Customs have held a package or parcel and requires payment of Customs duties or taxes before it can be released. Then these fraudsters impersonate as customs/police/CBI officials demanding payment of customs duty/clearance fees for packages/gifts that purportedly have been received from a foreign country. Targeted individuals are asked to make payments for the release of their goods.

PwC India expects upswing in small, mid-size M&A transactions

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

PwC India anticipates an upswing in the India markets, especially in small to mid-size M&A (merger and acquisition) transactions and growth fundings driven by increasing investors’ confidence. The year 2023 witnessed the emergence of a nuanced M&A landscape, with investors showing interests in diverse strategies and larger-scale ventures, even amid an overall decrease in PE investment, said Sanjeev Krishan, Chairperson, PwC in India. While PE deals were higher in

volume, strategic deals dominated the top deals -- and domestic deals with group-level consolidations were a prominent theme. The first quarter of 2024 marked a resurgence in deal value and volume. According to a PwC report, top 10 deals of 2023 included JV buyouts, strategic investments, PE buyouts, and stock mergers, and contributed to 21 per cent of the total deal value. While PE deals were higher in volume overall, strategic deals dominated the top deals with domestic deals and group-level consolidations as a significant theme.

Essar to invest ₹30,000 crore in green hydrogen plant in Gujarat

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Essar Group plans to invest Rs 30,000 crore over the next four years in setting up a green hydrogen plant at Jamnagar in Gujarat as the metals-to-infrastructure conglomerate eyes clean energy as a key pillar for its new phase of growth. The conglomerate is looking to decarbonise its oil refinery in the UK, construct a green steel plant in Saudi Arabia, and build an LNG and electric ecosystem to decarbonise long-haul heavy trucks, Prashant Ruia, director of Essar Capital, which manages the group’s portfolio of investments, said. It is also considering an entry into mining of critical minerals, mainly used in electric vehicle batteries, solar panels and wind-turbine magnets.

Essar Future Energy plans to develop 1 gigawatt of hydrogen capacity along with associated green molecules capacity of 1 million tonne per annum in Jamnagar over the next four years, he said in an interview with PTI. “We are going to invest around Rs 30,000 crore (in the green hydrogen project in Jamnagar),” he said. Essar will use 4.5 GW of renewable energy by a sister concern Essar Renewables to split water molecules to produce hydrogen and oxygen. Hydrogen, the cleanest known source of energy in the world, so produced can be used to power vehicles, generate electricity, power industry and heat homes and businesses. Hydrogen, which on burning produces only water, however cannot be shipped and is



instead used to make green ammonia which can be easily transported. “The idea is to create green molecules that can be transported directly rather than green ammonia. Because you carry green ammonia and then you

convert it into hydrogen. That cost is very high. So we are trying to build a complex which can make green molecules from hydrogen and largely in the biofuels space and export that,” Ruia said. The conglomerate, which

turned debt-free in 2022 after selling some infrastructure assets, will expand its capacity to generate electricity from coal alongside building a renewable energy platform. “The idea is to grow to about 10,000 MW over the next 3-5 years,” he said. This includes Essar Power expanding its 1,200 MW Salaya-DevBhoomi Dwarka thermal power plant by an additional 1,600 MW to meet Gujarat’s base-load needs. In the realm of green mobility solutions, Essar is focused on building an LNG and electric ecosystem to decarbonise long-haul heavy trucks, contributing to a cleaner transportation sector, he said. It has a fleet of 450 to 500 LNG-powered trucks that are used by different industries for their logistics needs, he said.

Trucks are the biggest polluters on the road, producing some 110 tonne of carbon dioxide per truck. There are 4 million trucks in the country and the number are slated to double in the near future. Replacing diesel in trucks with LNG, helps cut CO2 emissions by 30-35 per cent. Also, gas does not produce nitrogen oxides (NOx) and sulfur oxides (SOx) which cause acid rain and air pollution. Alongside, the group also has a fleet of electric trucks. Emissions from electric vehicles are zero. “So what we’re trying, if you take the combination of the two you can reduce about 60-70 per cent of the CO2,” he said. Essar is also building a retail network to supply liquefied natural gas (LNG) to trucks, he said adding LNG-powered trucks can run for 1,300-

1,400 kilometers on a full tank while electric trucks have a range of around 150-km. “So short-range is electric and longer range can be LNG,” he said. Besides, the group is producing gas from coal seams from a block in West Bengal, he said. Its arm, Essar Oil and Gas Exploration and Production Limited (EOGEP), India’s leader in the coal bed methane industry, contributes nearly 65 per cent of the country’s total coal bed methane production and aims to increase its contribution to India’s total gas production to 5 per cent within the next five years. Gas produced from coal-seams, called coal-bed methane, can be used as CNG for running automobiles as well as generating electricity

and making fertilizer. “We are today India’s largest CBM player. We do about a million cubic meters of gas per day which is very small,” he said. “Our idea is to grow that so we are investing Rs 2,000-3,000 crore to increase the gas-based portfolio.” The firm is also exploring for shale gas in the Raniganj CBM block in West Bengal. “India has not yet had a commercial success shale. We all know the revolution in the US because of shale. So we feel that there are some opportunities there. We are going to explore that... So please do not get excited yet but we are trying,” he said. Essar plans to invest USD 3.6 billion to decarbonize its Stanlow refinery in the UK and another USD 4 billion to set up a green steel plant, which will use hydrogen, in Saudi Arabia.

JP NADDA'S TO-DO LIST

Back as Union Health Minister, Nadda has his task cut out for him: Restoring NEET credibility, achieving Universal Health Coverage with reduced Out-of-Pocket Expenses for the poor, and harnessing tech to extend healthcare access to remote areas among others, experts tell **ARCHANA JYOTI**

Cancer, blood disorder patients need a healing touch



DR NITA RADHAKRISHNAN
Associate Professor and HOD of pediatric haematology-oncology at Child PGI, Noida, UP

- All cancer patients and all aplastic anemia patients should be eligible for PMJAY scheme
- Patients with thalassemia should have access to NAT tested safe blood
- Patients with hemophilia should have access to long acting factors and non-factor replacement treatment that offers advantage of prevention of bleeds
- Bone marrow transplantation (Allogeneic) should be covered under Ayushman Bharat



JP NADDA TOOK CHARGE AS UNION MINISTER, MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND FAMILY WELFARE IN DELHI RECENTLY. PRATAPRAO JADHAV, ANUPRIYA PATEL, MOSes (MoHFW) AND UNION HEALTH SECRETARY APURVA CHANDRA WERE ALSO PRESENT DURING THE OCCASION

Enhanced access and quality healthcare a key



DR MAHIPAL S SACHDEV
Padmashri Awardee
Chairman & Medical Director Centre for Sight Group of Eye Hospitals

- Strengthen Primary Healthcare: Expand and utilize Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs) for comprehensive primary care, early disease detection, and preventive healthcare.
- Enhance Healthcare Access and Affordability: Refine the Ayushman Bharat scheme for broader coverage and address service delivery gaps to maximize impact.
- Improve Immunization Coverage: Continue Mission Indradhanush to maintain high immunization rates, especially in low-coverage regions, and include new vaccines.
- Boost Eye Care Services: Strengthen the National Programme for Control of Blindness (NPCB) to improve screening, treatment, and outreach in rural areas.
- Promote Public Health and Sanitation: Expand Swachh Bharat Abhiyan to enhance sanitation and hygiene.
- Address NCDs: Develop strategies to manage diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, promoting healthy lifestyles and accessible treatments.
- Enhance Mental Health Services: Integrate mental health into primary healthcare, ensuring accessible and affordable mental health care for all.
- Ensure Health Workforce Development: Invest in training and capacity building for healthcare professionals, strengthening medical education and continuous professional development.
- Foster Innovation and Research: Support

healthcare innovation through research and development, leveraging technology to improve healthcare delivery and outcomes.

- Expand Public-Private Partnerships: Utilize under-utilized private healthcare capacity through schemes like Ayushman Bharat, especially in underserved areas.
- Improve Government Healthcare Facilities: Focus on enhancing existing government healthcare infrastructure and service provision.
- Rationalize Service Charges: Streamline reimbursement processes for private hospitals under schemes like CGHS, ensuring good quality care for beneficiaries.
- Simplify Compliance Processes: Simplify statutory compliance for hospitals, particularly for smaller setups, and develop frameworks recognizing day care and short-stay treatment services.
- Restore NEET Credibility: Ensure the credibility of NEET to maintain trust in the medical college entrance process and the quality of medical education.

Surging AMR demands urgent action

The silent pandemic of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is an urgent health priority, posing a significant threat to public health, food security, the environment, and the global economy. AMR arises from the excessive and irresponsible use of antibiotics, compounded by poor sanitation, inadequate diagnostics, and lack of regulation on over-the-counter antimicrobial availability. The National Action Plan to Combat AMR (NAPAMR), initiated in 2017, is currently under revision, with NAPAMR 2.0 in progress. The updated plan emphasizes a 'One Health' approach, integrating human, animal, and environmental health to provide a comprehensive response. However, effective implementation demands robust efforts at both state and healthcare facility levels. Despite only five states having developed their State Action



DR SANGEETA SHARMA
Professor & Head, Neuropsychopharmacology, IHBAS & President, DSPRUD, Delhi.

Plans (SAPs), there is an urgent need for nationwide enforcement. NAPAMR 2.0 must address the gaps identified in the initial plan, incorporating a triple shield strategy focused on Infection Prevention and Control (IPC), Diagnostic Stewardship (DS), and Antimicrobial Stewardship (AMS). IPC aims to reduce the spread of infections through stringent hygiene protocols, while DS ensures accurate and

Prioritise prevention, support for cancer survivors, strengthen healthcare infrastructure

Only 1% of female cancer patients in India undergo cervical cancer screening, highlighting a significant gap in preventive healthcare. Comprehensive nationwide screening initiatives are necessary to raise awareness and accessibility. Hence, educating women about the importance of regular screenings and ensuring healthcare facilities is the need of the hour. Early Diagnosis and Treatment Advancements: Early diagnosis has led to an increase in cancer survivors. Emphasizing "prevention is better than cure" is crucial, advocating for regular health check-ups and awareness of available screening tests to detect cancers early when treatment outcomes are better. Support Systems for Cancer Survivors: There's a need for comprehensive support



DS NEGI
Chief Executive Officer, Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute & Research Centre (RGCIRC), Delhi

years and potentially increasing coverage limits for critical illnesses like cancer is required. The current Rs. 5 lakh coverage is not adequate for extensive cancer treatments, which can cost significantly more. This adjustment would alleviate financial burdens on patients and their families during critical healthcare episodes. Expansion of Healthcare Infrastructure: The healthcare sector needs substantial government support to expand primary healthcare facilities, incentivize private sector participation, and increase the availability of healthcare professionals. This includes policies to boost healthcare expenditure to 2.5% of GDP, aligning with global healthcare standards and enhancing overall healthcare access and quality.

Integrate Oral health in UHC



DR MAHESH VERMA
Padmashri Awardee, Vice-Chancellor, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University (GGSIPU), Delhi

Invest funds in collaborative upstream discovery

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of drug development. Many drugs were quickly developed globally but were not readily available to developing countries, including India. This underscores the necessity of investing in our drug development capabilities to prepare for future viral pandemics. Drugs are the first line of treatment for saving lives before vaccines can be widely administered. A crucial aspect of preparedness includes supporting upstream R&D, such as discovery research to identify promising novel antivirals. This is vital for building a pipeline for future



DR KAVITA SINGH
Director, Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative, South Asia

resources, experience, and expertise, accelerating innovation in drug development. Policies encouraging innovative pooled financing mechanisms, engagement with multilateral development banks, funds under CSR, and contributions from the pharma/biotech industries are important for this risky venture. To effectively mentor drug discovery groups, a call from the government encouraging experts to contribute would significantly enhance our capabilities and ensure the success of these initiatives. Finally, prioritizing R&D through collaborative efforts is needed.

Volunteer docs for better healthcare

Anaemia is a significant public health challenge in India. Hence we would suggest the new Minister to announce a National Anemia Day. This will ensure that all efforts are concentrated towards eradicating anemia and improving public health outcomes across India. Also, addressing thalassemia effectively requires making it a notifiable disease so that by raising awareness, identifying hotspots, and promoting early detection and prevention, we can significantly reduce the prevalence of thalassemia in India. Our goal is to ensure that by 2030, India moves towards being free of



DR RAHUL BHARGAVA
Principal Director & Chief of BMT, Fortis Memorial Research Institute, Gurugram

thalassemia, improving the quality of life for future generations. At least one BMT Centre should be set up in the government hospital in each state. Here I would also suggest the new Minister to

Enhance med edu, access, and ethics



DR DS RANA
Nephrologist, Chairman-Sir Ganga Ram Trust Society, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital

Oral health has been significantly overlooked in India's National Health Policy (2017) and the Ayushman Bharat scheme, which currently only covers severe inpatient dental cases. This omission neglects a crucial component of overall health, as highlighted by the WHO in 2022, urging all countries to integrate oral health into their health policies. Oral diseases, are more prevalent than mental disorders, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancers combined. These cost approximately USD710 billion annually in treatment and productivity losses. Poor oral health also increases risks for NCDs. Hence, incorporate comprehensive oral health care Policy in the National Health Policy, making it an essential part of health services and Ayushman Bharat scheme to cover preventive and routine dental care. Because dental care is not covered under Ayushman Bharat, people avoid going doctors until they become life threatening. Integrate oral health into the government's 100 days programme, with clear, actionable steps.

Restore credibility of NEET, act against the culprits

The piousness and transparency of the NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) examination, a critical gateway for medical aspirants in India, has come under the shadow. It is facing numerous issues, including allegations of paper leaks and irregularities in results with so many toppers announced. This has led to a loss of trust among students and stakeholders. We want that confidence in the examination process is restored, fairness, and accountability of those responsible for the mishandling of the examination. One thing that is important is that there should be an unbiased committee which examine where the fault has occurred. NTA should be held responsible for the catastrophe it has caused in the NEET UG exams. Their clarification in each aspect is not doing justice to the dreams of 24 lakhs aspirants. Either they have yet not



DR ROHAN KRISHNAN
Orthopaedic Surgeon, MAMC, Delhi Co-founder, Federation of All India Medical Association (FAIMA)

discovered their error which is sad , or they are trying to hide something which is more sad and pathetic. It is high time that DG of NTA should resign and take moral responsibility of the mayhem and chaos. We are talking about 1500 students who will be given the chance to re-appear in the examinations, but not all those students who want to take re-exam and who believe that there has been some fault. We can give a chance to everyone who wants to re-appear and the best of the two marks will be considered for merit.

Challenges in med education, healthcare and emergencies

There seems to be concern and legal challenges around a significant medical exam that young doctors must take. This is causing distress among students and parents alike. Resolving this issue promptly is crucial to alleviate anxiety and ensure fairness in the medical education system. It is without saying that there is the overwhelming presence of the private sector in healthcare (accounting for over 75%). Hence there is a need for stronger collaboration between the government and private entities. This partnership could improve healthcare access and quality, especially in underserved areas. There's criticism that the government healthcare infrastructure is not up to the mark, leading to the dominance of private healthcare providers. Auditing government expenditures on healthcare to set fair pricing benchmarks for the private sector, could promote transparency and



DR AJAY SWAROOP
ENT, Chairman- Sir Ganga Ram Hospital

affordability. It is time that we are prepared for Covid-19 like health emergencies. This includes adequate infrastructure (such as oxygen supply and hospital beds) and healthcare personnel to handle crises effectively. Issues such as overcrowding and communication gaps between doctors and patients in government hospitals and private hospitals need to be addressed to curb growing violence among patients/medicos. There should be high-level committees or experts to propose policies to ensure equitable healthcare delivery.

Advanced healthcare tech enhances access, efficiency

Healthcare advancements developed for space missions have significantly influenced the medical field on Earth, particularly in enhancing accessibility, efficiency, and quality of care. Space-derived technologies, including robotic surgery and artificial intelligence have helped in transforming healthcare, in remote and underserved areas in India, where access to specialized healthcare is limited. By bridging the gap between rural areas and urban medical facilities, these tech ensures that patients in distant locations receive timely and expert care from specialists located in metropolitan cities. Further, AI has huge role in enhancing medical diagnostics and procedures. As AI can assist in real-time image analysis, anomaly detection, and decision support during surgery, integrating AI with medical expertise can lead to more accurate and timely interventions, even in the



MYLSWAMY ANNADURAI
Former Director of ISRO known as 'Moon Man of India'

most remote parts of the country. Also, India's reliance on imported medical equipment poses challenges, including higher costs and supply chain vulnerabilities. To address this, there is a need for closer collaboration between Indian medical practitioners and technologists to develop cost-effective, indigenous medical solutions. By focusing on research and development within the country, India can produce affordable and innovative medical equipment tailored to its-specific needs, reducing dependence on imports.

Medical education standards and the quality of doctors must be prioritized. Among these, it's crucial to emphasize the significance of medical educators finding their profession attractive and fulfilling. However, when selecting individuals for teaching positions, there should be no compromises. Only the most competent and dedicated educators should be chosen, as the quality of teachers directly influences the caliber of students they produce. *Doctors from both private and public sectors should provide medical assistance in rural areas. This can enhance healthcare access and quality, ensuring that comprehensive medical expertise reaches underserved communities, including quick emergency response and ambulance availability, is crucial, even in rural areas. *The medical framework operates on an undeniable foundation. Despite the perception that all patients seeking medical care are being taken advantage of, only 5 percent actually encounter such exploitation. Whereas, The majority of doctors strive to save and improve patient health.

BANGLADESH LOOK TO SEAL SUPER 8 SPOT IN CLASH AGAINST NEPAL

PTI ■ KINGSTOWN (ST VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES)

Bangladesh will look to iron out their flaws and seal the second Super Eight spot from Group D when they take on a tricky Nepal in the T20 World Cup here on Monday.

With four points, Bangladesh are all set to progress further in the tournament from the last group in the competition but a spirited Nepal will pose a strong threat.

Even though they have not yet won a game and are out of race for the next round, Nepal's confidence will be sky high after they nearly pulled off a win against South Africa and will be keen on fulfilling their dream of beating a Test-playing nation before signing off.

The equation for Bangladesh, however, could change if they lose to Nepal by a big margin and the Netherlands manage to do the same against a struggling Sri Lanka - an unlikely scenario indeed but this tournament has thrown its share of surprises.

TEAMS (FROM):
Bangladesh: Najmul Hossain Shanto (c), Taskin Ahmed, Litton Das, Soumya Sarkar, Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Shakib Al Hasan, Tawhid Hridoy, Mahmud Ullah Riyad, Jaker Ali Anik, Tanvir Islam, Shak Mahedi Hasan, Rishad Hossain, Mustafizur Rahman, Shoriful Islam, Tanzim Hasan Sakib. Travelling reserves: Afif Hossain, Hasan Mahmud.
Nepal: Rohit Paudel (c), Aasif Sheikh, Anil Kumar Sah, Kushal Bhurtel, Kushal Malla, Dipendra Singh Airee, Lalit Rajbanshi, Karan KC, Gulshan Jha, Sompal Kami, Pratis GC, Sundeep Jora, Abinash Bohara, Sagar Dhakal and Kamal Singh Airee.
Match starts at 5:00AM IST.

SRI LANKA LOOK TO SIGN OFF ON A HIGH: Gros Islet (St Lucia): Wary of the Dutch firepower and current form, the 2014 champions Sri Lanka, who are placed fifth in Group D, will take on the third-placed Netherlands. Already out of reckoning for the



Super Eight round, Sri Lanka's pride will be at stake given they have had a tournament to forget, marred with multiple issues on and off the field. For the Scott Edwards-led Netherlands team, there will be a

great deal of motivation to bring out their best and hope for a big win as well as luck to favour them. Netherlands have notched wins in two out of three games in this tournament yet they find

themselves nearly eliminated in a tight Group D, from which South Africa have already sailed through.

TEAMS (FROM):
Sri Lanka: Wanindu Hasaranga (c), Charith Asalanka, Kusal Mendis

(wk), Pathum Nissanka, Kamindu Mendis, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Angelo Mathews, Dasun Shanaka, Dhananjaya De Silva, Maheesh Theekshana, Dunith Wellalage, Dushmantha Chameera, Nuwan Thushara, Matheesha Pathirana, Dilshan Madushanka.

Netherlands: Scott Edwards (c&wk), Aryan Dutt, Bas de Leede, Daniel Doram, Fred Klaassen, Logan van Beek, Max O'Dowd, Michael Levitt, Paul van Meekeren, Sybrand Engelbrecht, Teja Nidamanuru, Tim Pringle, Vikram Singh, Viv Kingma, Wesley Barresi.
Match starts at 6:00AM IST.

NEW ZEALAND EYE CONSOLATORY WIN OVER PNG: Tarouba (Trinidad and Tobago): A consolatory win over a lowly Papua New Guinea would be the best that the New Zealand can walk away with in this T20 World Cup, with curtains coming down on their campaign prematurely. For a team as consistent as New Zealand in ICC tournaments, the

Kiwis have paid a heavy price for being sluggish at the start as a couple of defeats upfront led to their surprisingly early exit.

The game will, however, carry a massive significance for the Kiwi group as Trent Boult has confirmed this is his last T20 World Cup for the country and the Kane Williamson-led side will be motivated to give their best against PNG, who have lost each of their three matches so far.

TEAMS (FROM):
New Zealand: Kane Williamson (c), Finn Allen, Trent Boult, Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway (wk), Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Daryl Mitchell, Jimmy Neesham, Glenn Phillips (wk), Rachin Ravindra, Mitchell Santner, Ish Sodhi, Tim Southee.

Papua New Guinea: Assadollah Vala (c), Alei Nao, Chad Soper, CJ Amini, Hila Vare, Hiri Hiri, Jack Gardner, John Kariko, Kabua Vagi Morea, Kipling Doriga (wk), Lega Siaka, Norman Vanua, Sema Kamea, Sese Bau, Tony Ura.

Australia crush Scotland by 5 wickets



PTI ■ GROS ISLET (ST LUCIA)

Australia did their arch-rivals England a massive favour with a five-wicket win over a gritty Scotland as the Richie Berrington-led side crashed out of the T20 World Cup Super Eight stage race here.

With England hammering Namibia earlier in the day in a rain-truncated game, all that Jos Buttler's side needed was Australia's win over Scotland to a get a lifeline.

Australia scored 186/5 while chasing 181 in 19.4 overs after Scotland fought right until the end to keep their hopes alive. After putting on a formidable total on board, Scotland had even reduced an edgy Australia to 60/3 at one stage but their most successful batters in this World Cup - Travis Head (68) and Marcus Stoinis (59) - delivered again.

"We spoke about sticking to our plans. Scotland are a good team, they have improved a lot and we certainly wanted to respect them," Australia skipper Mitchell Marsh said after the win.

"We just wanted to stay

consistent and if we fail, we fail our way. Whenever our team is challenged, it brings the best out of us. Today we were challenged and it was a good experience and a good game of cricket. We start fresh now," he added.

With Australia's chase appearing to be falling apart, the in-from Head and Stoinis joined forces to bring them back in the game.

On a wicket where batters could swing their willows without fretting much over the pace or movement off the surface, the two seasoned campaigners put the Scottish resolve to a stern test with a sturdy 80-run association for the third wicket off only 44 balls.

Head smacked four sixes and five fours to top score with 68 off a mere 49 balls but Stoinis was more aggressive, cracking nine fours and two sixes to make a quickfire 59 from a mere 29 balls.

But before that, there were some nervous moments for the former champions when David Warner (1) was removed from the equation early, skipper Mitchell Marsh

England enter Super 8 of T20 World Cup



failed to impose himself, and Glenn Maxwell's torrid run with the bat continued.

Maxwell was done in by one from Mark Watt that straightened enough to beat his bat and crash into the top of the off-stump, extending the all-rounder's struggles further with the bat, even though he claimed two wickets in the first half.

"I think the guys can hold their head high. We played some really good cricket throughout the tournament. It was a great learning for us. Obviously, we are a bit disappointed given the position we were in. We came here to qualify but couldn't do that," Scotland captain Berrington said.

Earlier, Scotland put their best foot forward in terms of setting a formidable total against the heavyweights, finishing at 180 for five after being asked to bat first.

Australia had expectedly rested some of their frontline pacers and their absence was felt with the others not producing as much impact and control as their first-choice bowling attack can.

Brandon McMullen was the star with the bat for the Scots as he took on the Australian bowling, hitting six sixes and two fours to race to 60 from a mere 34 balls and set up a strong platform for his side following an early blow.

Aston Agar had cleaned up opener Michael Jones for two in the first over but the pair of McMullen and George Munsey produced an excellent recovery for Scotland, putting on 89 runs for the second wicket in a mere 48 balls.

If McMullen was more belligerent of the two, Munsey played his part well with a 23-ball 35, which was studded with three sixes and a couple of fours.

After the pair was separated, Scotland skipper Richie Berrington took charge of taking his side forward as he forged multiple crucial stands with the following batters to take them to 180.

Berrington made 42 not out from 31 balls with two sixes and a four to keep pushing on for the Scots, even as Australia looked to pull things back in the last five overs, conceding 42 runs.

No concerns about Kohli's form, couple of dismissals will not change anything: Rathour



PTI ■ LAUDERHILL (FLORIDA)

Virat Kohli's string of single digit scores in the ongoing T20 World Cup is hardly a concern as he has been in superb touch during nets and is looking hungrier than ever ahead of the Super Eight, India's batting coach Vikram Rathour said.

Kohli, who was the highest run-scorer in the IPL, went through a dry run so far scoring 1, 4 and 0 against Ireland, Pakistan and USA respectively.

The moment the question popped up at the post-match media conference after the game against Canada got washed out on Saturday, Rathour was ready with the answer.

"I love it when every time I come there is a question about Virat Kohli, whether he is doing well or not. No concern at all, no concern at all," Rathour said.

"He (Kohli) has been batting

superbly from the tournament that he came from (IPL). Couple of dismissals here, doesn't change anything, he is batting really well."

Rathour is confident that India's No. 1 batter would come good when it matters the most.

"Actually, it's good that he is a little hungrier, he is really keen to do well and really switched on. It's a good space to be as a batsman, I think."

"Looking forward to some good games and we've watched some good innings from him."

The batting coach sidestepped the query about whether playing four all-rounders, including Shivam Dube and Axar Patel, is cast in stone or not.

"Again, we need to be a flexible team. We need to look at the conditions that are in front of us and be ready to deal with those. So as a team, we are going to be really flexible, I think."

"We'll react to what (conditions) we get on the day. We have enough sources in our team to deal with any kind of conditions," he said.

Some game time in Florida ahead of Super Eights would have surely helped, he said.

"But if the game had happened that would have really helped us. We were really looking forward to playing a game, to play a good game of cricket. There's always a concern when you play a game in conditions like this that some injury can happen."



Italy concedes goal after 23 seconds but recovers to beat Albania 2-1 at Euro 2024

AP ■ DORTMUND (GERMANY)

By conceding a goal after just 23 seconds, Italy made the worst possible start to its European Championship title defense.

Thankfully for the Azzurri, it soon got much better.

Italy recovered from letting in the quickest goal in the tournament's 64-year history to beat Albania 2-1 in Dortmund on Saturday in an atmospheric Adriatic derby that immediately threatened an upset.

Nedim Bajrami thrilled a heavily pro-Albanian crowd at Westfalenstadion by pouncing on a throw-in by Italy left back Federico Dimarco that failed to reach teammate Alessandro Bastoni, before taking a touch and smashing a rising shot inside the near post.

Within 16 minutes, the Italians were ahead as Bastoni headed in Lorenzo Pellegrini's cross to the back post in the 11th then Nicolò Barella struck home a swerving first-time shot from the edge of the area.

Barella was one of five survivors from the team that started for Italy in the penalty-shootout win over England in the 2021 European Championship final.

The pressure was on Italy's new-look side under Luciano Spalletti to win its opener given the other teams in Group B are three-time champion Spain and Croatia, a World Cup semifinalist in 2022. Spain beat Croatia 3-0 earlier Saturday.

Bajrami's goal gave the Azzurri a jolt and created some history - it was much quicker than the previous fastest in the tournament's lifespan, which was 67 seconds by Russia's Dmitri Kirichenko in 2004.

Yet they controlled the game

after that, dominating possession to a backdrop of jeers and boos from a sea of Albanian red in the crowd.

"They showed there was a gulf in class by playing good football... we played the game the right way," Spalletti said.

"The scoreline doesn't reflect the difference between the two teams."

It's now just one loss in 12 matches under Spalletti, who took over last August - three months after leaving Napoli following its Italian league triumph - and was tasked with restoring national pride after Italy failed to qualify for the World Cup for a second straight time.

Italy is clearly more at home in the European Championship these days as it goes for a record-tying third title.

Making its second appearance at a European Championship, Albania - coached by former Barcelona and Arsenal defender Sylvinho - nearly grabbed a draw in stoppage time only for Rey Manaj's deft chip to deflect just wide off the back of Gianluigi Donnarumma, Italy's goalkeeper and captain.

"We need to play in lots of Euros and World Cups so we can get better," Sylvinho said.

"The first 25 minutes were tough but we were up against one of the favorites to win the comp."

"We didn't play those first 25 minutes well but we stayed in the game."

Euro 2024 has gotten off to a fast start.

Saturday started with Switzerland beating Hungary 3-1 in Cologne and that, after host Germany's opening-night 5-1 thrashing of Scotland on Friday, means there has been 16 goals so far - an average of four a game.

PTI ■ AGARTALA

Bishweshwar Nandi, a recipient of the prestigious Dronacharya award for outstanding contribution to gymnastics, is pinning hopes on Tripura's gymnasts to shine on the global stage.

Nandi is also the coach of top gymnast Dipa Karmakar, who had finished fourth in the vault final at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

"Tripura has great prospects in gymnastics... Six to seven girls are showing potential to perform well not even at the national level but also on the global stage. Gymnastics is a highly competitive, injury prone and technical game. Proper guidance from the coach is very important," Nandi told PTI.

Tripura has great prospects in gymnastics: Nandi

He lauded the state government for providing good facilities at the Netaji Subhash Regional Coaching Centre (NSRCC) here for development of gymnastics.

"During the rigorous training, boys and girls develop injuries, which is a major concern in this sport. The coach needs to walk the extra mile to ensure that the gymnasts remain physically fit," Nandi said.

The award-winning coach said he is "in search of a second Dipa", which would become a reality "when proper coaching and environment meet at one point".

Asserting that Dipa shattered many



myths surrounding Indian gymnastics, Nandi said gymnasts from Odisha, Delhi, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and a few southern states are also performing well.

Dipa, hailing from Tripura, recently became the first Indian to win a gold medal at the Asian Senior Championships, after she clinched the yellow metal in the women's vault event in Tashkent.

"As I said, providing proper guidance to budding gymnasts is the most important duty of coaches in order to make them perform well at global tournaments," he said.

Kylian Mbappé and France aim to start with a win over on form Austria

AP ■ DUESSELDORF (GERMANY)

World Cup runner-up France is one of the favourites for Euro 2024 and starts its campaign Monday in Dusseldorf against Austria.

Poland and the Netherlands are the other teams in Group D. Kickoff is at 9 pm local time (1900 GMT). Here's what to know about the match:

MATCH FACTS: France had a strong 2023 with eight wins from 10 games and only one loss, to Germany. Four games this year have already included a 2-0 loss - again to Germany - in a March friendly and a 0-0 draw with Canada last week in France's last game before Euro 2024.

France's players have been speaking out on politics ahead of upcoming elections, with forward Marcus Thuram calling on French people to "fight daily" to keep the far right out of power. Teammate Ousmane Dembélé urged people to vote ahead of the first round of elections on June 30.

Coach Ralf Rangnick has revitalized

Austria since taking over in 2022 and turned down Bayern Munich to stay with the team.

Austria comes into Euro 2024 on a seven-game unbeaten run with just three goals conceded during that time. A 2-0 win over Germany in November and a 6-1 demolition of Turkey in March were the highlights.

TEAM NEWS: France midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni hasn't played since he missed Real Madrid's Champions League final with a foot injury. N'Golo Kanté played the defensive midfield role in France's two pre-tournament friendlies, his first international games since 2022.

Austria trained at full strength Friday in Berlin except for defender Gernot Trauner. Coach Ralf Rangnick said he was being rested but wasn't injured.

Attacking midfielder Christoph Baumgartner says Austria's attacking players will focus on helping out their defence by trying to put Kylian Mbappé and Dembélé under pressure.

BY THE NUMBERS: Mbappé is on



course to play his 80th game for France and a hat trick would take him to 50 career international goals. Mbappé scored in France's last two games against Austria, a 1-1 draw and a 2-0 win, both in 2022.

Atletico Madrid forward Antoine Griezmann will be only the fourth French player to make 130 international appearances if he plays against Austria.

Austria midfielder Christoph Baumgartner has scored in each of the team's last five games.

Germany is familiar territory for Austria's players. Eight of the starting line-up for its 1-1 friendly draw against Switzerland last week play for German clubs.

WHAT THEY'RE SAYING: "In just one week he reminded us all why he was one of the best midfielders in the world and we are very happy to have him with us." - France forward Marcus Thuram on teammate N'Golo Kanté's form after nearly two years away from the team.

"Now, there's a very special tingling feeling once again, of course."