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SURGE IN HEATSTROKE CASES

16 succumb to heat fury

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Heatwave continues to take its toll on the population as more than 16 vulnerable people died in the last 24 hours due to heat-related illness, including heatstroke in the Delhi-NCR in the grip of intense weather for the past few days. As per the data available from various hospitals in the city, many are battling with the situation.

In the last 24 hours, one patient each died at Ram Manohar Lohia (RML) Hospital and Safdarjung Hospital while five patients died at other various Government hospitals, including Lok Nayak Hospital (LNJP), according to the Government hospitals officials.

At the Centre-run RML Hospital, the authorities received 22 patients in the last two days. There have been five deaths and 12 to 13 patients are on ventilator support. To give reprieve to such patients, the hospital has set up a first-of-its-kind heatstroke unit.

At the Safdarjung Hospital, there have been a total of 60 heat-stroke cases, including 42 who have been admitted. The hospital has reported six casualties, including a 60-year-old woman and a 50-



People use scarfs to shield themselves from the hot sun in New Delhi on Wednesday

Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

year-old man who died on Tuesday. According to LNJP Hospital authorities, four patients have died due to suspected heatstroke in the last two days. "There were two deaths on Tuesday due to suspected heat stroke and two casualties on Wednesday. There are 16 heat stroke patients admitted," said a hospital official.

One of the victims, aged around 39, died during treatment on June 15. He was a motor mechanic who

collapsed while working at his shop in Janakpuri. He was brought in with high-grade fever. It's not only the national Capital but various pockets across the Northwest and Central India are registering some of the highest recorded temperatures in years, causing mortalities. In the adjoining region of Noida, at least 14 people reportedly died in the last 24 hours due to suspected heatstroke, according to the health department. However, post-

mortem reports are awaited to ascertain the exact cause of death, said the officials. The maximum temperature recorded in the national Capital crossed 45 degrees as Pitampura recorded the highest temperature in the city of 45.1 degrees Celsius, six notches above the normal. Safdarjung, considered as a parameter for the whole of Delhi, recorded 43.6 degrees Celsius as the maximum temperature, 4.8 degrees above the normal.

Monsoon off to a slow start

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The 2024 monsoon season in India is off to a slow start, characterised by delayed progress and uneven rainfall distribution across the country with the India Meteorological Department saying the country will witness below-normal monsoon rainfall in June this year. This is likely to impact agricultural yields and food security, especially the Kharif crop, given that it is largely sown in June and July. While southern and some northeastern regions may see normal to above-normal rains, many areas in northwest and Central India face significant shortages. With at least 52 per cent of India's cultivated area relying on monsoon rains, the implications for agriculture are considerable.

India-Canada ties hit new low over Nijjar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/ AGENCIES ■ NEW DELHI/OTTAWA

Even as Canada's Parliament marked the first anniversary of slain Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF) chief Hardeep Singh Nijjar's death by holding a moment of silence in the House of Commons on Tuesday, India reminded the world of the Kanishka bombing in 1985, the most heinous terror-related air disasters in the history of civil aviation. Nijjar was shot dead outside a gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia, on June 18 last year. Canadian police have arrested four Indian nationals in connection with the murder. Diplomatic ties remain frosty between the two countries over anti-India activities being carried out from the soil of Canada and alleged



involvement of Indian agents in the killing of Nijjar, a Canadian citizen. "India stands at the forefront of battle against the menace of terrorism and works closely with all nations to tackle this global threat", India's Consulate General in Vancouver said as it reminded the world of the Kanishka bombing, the most heinous terror-related air disaster in the history of civil aviation.

The Montreal-New Delhi Air India 'Kanishka' Flight 182 exploded 45 minutes before it was to have landed at London's Heathrow Airport on June 23, 1985, killing all 329 people on board, most of them Canadians of Indian descent. The bombing was blamed on Sikh militants in retaliation to 'Operation Bluestar' to flush out militants from the Golden Temple in 1984. The Consulate General of India has planned a memorial service to mark the anniversary of the bombing. "India stands at the forefront of countering the menace of terrorism and works closely with all nations to tackle this global threat", the Consulate General of India in Vancouver posted a social media message later Tuesday.

MP's daughter runs car over sleeping man

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI

Daughter of a Rajya Sabha member was arrested by the Chennai Police on Tuesday morning in connection with the death of a painter who was sleeping on the pavement. On Monday night Beeda Madhuri (33), daughter of Rajya Sabha MP and former Kavali (Nellore) MLA Beeda Masthan Rao, was driving her BMW car accompanied by her friend and ran over Satish who was lying on the pavement. Masthan Rao belongs to YSR Congress. According to police, the deceased was under the influence of alcohol. Maduri arranged for shifting the grievously injured Satish to hospital and drove away. But he succumbed to injuries late Monday night and this gave rise to massive protest by the residents of the locality, most of them belonging to the working class. Maduri on being informed about the death of Satish, surrendered before the traffic investigation wing of Chennai Police and she was charged under Section 304 (A) od the Indian Penal Code , for causing death by negligence. Section 304 (A) carries with of punishment of imprisonment for two years or fine or both and is a



Cops at the accident site in Chennai

cognisable and bailable offence which could be triable by the magistrate of the first class. She was let off on bail. Though the locals alleged that she was under the influence of alcohol, the police refuted the same and said there was nothing to suggest that the lady had consumed alcohol. But they were not forthcoming when asked whether her blood sample has been collected and sent for testing.

New lease of life for Nalanda



Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurates the new campus of Nalanda University at Rajgir, in Nalanda district, on Wednesday. Bihar Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary and Union Minister S Jaishankar are also seen. (Detailed report on Page 4)

PTI

Two terrorists killed ahead of Modi's Srinagar visit

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

In course of the security forces' drive to sanitise Jammu and Kashmir ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Srinagar visit for this year's International Yoga Day function on June 21, two terrorists were gunned down in the Hadipora area of PD Sopore in North Kashmir's Baramulla district. Two security personnel, including one Army jawan, also received injuries during the operation. Meanwhile, the Jammu and Kashmir Police have declared Srinagar city as a temporary "red zone", and banned the operation of drones ahead of PM's visit. This will be Modi's first visit to Jammu and Kashmir after being sworn in as the Prime Minister for the third time.

Till the time of filing of this report, the identity of the slain terrorists could not be ascertained as the security forces were still conducting searches in the area and were yet to retrieve the bodies of the slain terrorists from the encounter site. Chinara Corps, in a post on X, stated that the operation was



Security forces personnel during an encounter with militants, in Hadipora, Baramulla

PTI

conducted on receipt of specific information about the presence of terrorists in the area. "On specific intelligence input regarding the presence of terrorists, a Joint operation was launched by the Indian Army and Jammu and Kashmir police on Wednesday in the Hadipora area of PD Sopore; two terrorists were eliminated; the operation is still in progress." Meanwhile, in a significant development, the Jammu and Kashmir police have arrested

one person for harbouring terrorists behind the terror attack on a pilgrim bus in Reasi on June 9. Addressing a press conference in Reasi SSP Mohita Sharma said, "A breakthrough has been achieved in the case of the terrorist attack on the pilgrim bus which was coming from Shiv Khori on 9th June. In this case, one accomplice of the Reasi terrorists identified as Hakam, 45, has been arrested by the J&K Police at Reasi.



Setback for Kejriwal as court rejects bail plea

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The judge hearing Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's bail petition extended his judicial custody till July 3. On Wednesday, he was produced before the court through video conference on expiry of his judicial custody granted earlier. The counsel appearing for Kejriwal opposed the ED's application seeking extension of his judicial custody, saying there were no grounds to justify his continued incarceration. Opposing the bail application of Kejriwal, the Enforcement Directorate on Wednesday claimed that Kejriwal demanded ₹100 crore bribe from the South Group for his party in a money laundering case linked to the alleged excise scam. The ED told the court that if AAP, which has been arrayed as an accused in the case, the person in charge of the party will be held culpable. The ED told the court that when former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia was made an accused in the case, the AAP was not named as an accused. "Kejriwal demanded bribe. He asked for bribe of ₹100 crore. Kejriwal asked for funds for the AAP. Kejriwal demanded kickbacks from South Group. You can't say he is not guilty of offence. If AAP commits a crime, then every person in charge of the party will be deemed to be guilty," the ED told Special Judge Niyay Bindu. "Now AAP has been made an accused. Kejriwal is responsible for the conduct (of the party)," it added. Kejriwal is the National Convenor of AAP.

Water crisis: Atishi writes to Modi, vows to go on strike

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid heatwave and water crisis, Delhi Water Minister Atishi on Wednesday said that she has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the water crisis in the national Capital and threatened to go on an indefinite strike from June 21 if the issue is not resolved within a couple of days. Addressing a press conference here, Atishi said Delhi is grappling with a water crisis since Haryana is not releasing the capital's share of water. "Yesterday, Haryana released 513 MGD of water to Delhi as against 613 MGD. One MGD of water is for 28,500 people. The shortfall in water supply has rendered nearly 28 lakh people in Delhi waterless, she added. The Minister said people are not only battling heatwave conditions but also water shortage. "I have written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the water crisis requesting him to resolve the issue. If the crisis is not solved within two days, I will go on an indefinite strike from June 21," she said. Atishi said they have written multiple letters to the Haryana government to resolve the issue. Atishi, in her letter said that it must be known that on May 29, the temperature in Delhi was 52.9 degrees Celsius, which was unprecedented. On Tuesday last, the temperature was 47 degrees. Even at 10 pm the temperature was 41



Delhi Minister Atishi addresses a press conference

Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

degrees. Delhi has not experienced this much heat in the last 100 years. In this scorching heat, the need of water for the people of Delhi has increased. But when Delhiites need water in large quantities, there is a water shortage in Delhi. There is a panic for water in the city. She further wrote that the total water supply in Delhi is 1050 MGD, out of which 613 MGD water comes from Haryana. But for the last two weeks, the water coming from Haryana has reduced considerably. If we look at the figures of June 18, only 513 MGD water was sent by Haryana to Delhi. That means Delhi is getting 100 MGD less water. "1 MGD of water provides water to approximately 28,500 people in a day. Due to shortage of 100 MGD

water, 28 lakh people are not getting water. That means Haryana government has stopped water supply to 28 lakh Delhiites. Prime Minister ji, You tell me, is it right to keep 28 lakh Delhiites thirsty?" the Water Minister said. "Prime Minister ji, the people of Delhi are very troubled. Now I cannot see this trouble. I have tried everything possible, but the Haryana government is not ready to give water to the people of Delhi. Now I am requesting you with folded hands that you provide water to 28 lakh people of Delhi. In case the city does not get water, I will have to do 'Satyagraha' from 21st June and sit on an indefinite hunger strike," the city's water minister concluded in her letter.

BJP hold protests, slams Kejriwal Government for city water woes

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP leaders and workers took out protest marches on Wednesday across the national Capital over the water crisis in the city, and slammed the ruling Arvind Kejriwal government. Holding responsible for water crisis here, Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva took part in the protest at Andrews Ganj, where he was accompanied by New Delhi MP Bansuri Swaraj and accused Atishi of indulging in theatrics to distract attention from theft and black marketing of water, and said that the AAP government should be sacked for its inaction. "This water crisis was created by the AAP government," he said. Sachdeva attacked the AAP government, saying its free water scheme has proved to be a "sham". "The corrupt Kejriwal government of Delhi which made the people of Delhi yearn for every drop of water and in the last ten years made DJB its earning centre. By giving priority to its personal interests, it not only loot-



ed the Jal Board but also did not hesitate in emptying the treasury of Delhi," he said. Blaming Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his party leader for collusion with the 'tanker mafia', Sachdeva said, "The way working women are standing in lines for water by staying awake all night and children are staying without bathing for many days, all this is the result of Kejriwal and his MLAs' collusion with the tanker mafia." He claimed that in 2006, when BJP MLA Sushil Chaudhary was in power at Indira Camp, a pipeline was installed here, but since then, whether it is the Congress government or the AAP, both have done

only corruption. North west Delhi BJP MP Yogendra Chandolia led the padyatra in Rithala's Mandir Marg and said, "It is very unfortunate that the AAP government, which has hollowed out the Jal Board like termites, has not been able to provide water even after being in power for the last 10 years. We will also raise this issue in the Parliament so that the people of Delhi can get clean water." New Delhi BJP MP Bansuri Swaraj claimed that the AAP is running away from its responsibilities by giving it a political colour. "But the reality is that the BJP councillors in Delhi are making tankers available to the common people by putting

pressure on the DJB through their efforts," she stated. BJP MP from South Delhi Ramvir Singh Bidhuri has called the threat of water minister Atishi to sit on a hunger strike from June 21 another drama. He reminded Atishi that it is the responsibility of the Aam Aadmi Party government to provide drinking water to the people of Delhi, but it has completely failed in this. Leading the protest march in Kishan Ganj Colony, Chandni Chowk MP Praveen Khandelwal said that water supply in Delhi is currently dependent on tankers. "Despite water supply being much more than 1000 MGD, people are still dependent on tankers. More than 54% of water is being wasted in Delhi. There is no accounting for the Rs 8,400 crore received by the Delhi Jal Board over the past nine years. Before 2014, the Jal Board had a profit of ₹600 crore, but now it is running a loss of Rs 73,000 crore. Despite such corruption, Ms. Atishi is blaming the Haryana government for her faults," he said



City's peak power demand breaks all previous records

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Massive consumption of electricity amid a punishing heatwave sustaining over weeks pushed peak power demand of Delhi to an all-time high level of 8,656 MW on Wednesday afternoon, said discom officials. The peak power demand was on Tuesday recorded at 8647 MW, the second highest in this summer season. According to the real time data of State Load Dispatch Centre (SLDC) Delhi, the peak power demand reached 8,656 MW at 15:06:55 hrs on Wednesday. On their part, BRPL and BYPL successfully met the peak power demand of 3778 MW and 1886 MW in their respective areas. Delhi experienced the warmest night in 12 years on Tuesday with the minimum temperature settling at 35.2 degrees Celsius, over eight notches above the season's normal, the weather office said. The maximum temperature of the day is expected to be around 44 degrees Celsius. Wednesday was the 31st day in a row Delhi's peak power demand crossed the 7,000 MW. Delhi's peak power demand never crossed 7,000 MW during the month of May 2023 and crossed the 7,000 MW in May only once in 2022. Given this condition, experts

said air conditioning accounts for a whopping 30-50% of a household's or business's annual energy costs. By increasing the temperature setting on your AC by just 1°C, you could slash your electricity consumption by approximately 6%. Due to the extra ordinary heat-wave and consequently unprecedented power demand, the power systems are under stress. Even though they have been able to take the extreme power load, it is advisable that consumers should use the AC thermostat at 26-27 °C for comfortable and cost-effective cooling during the peak hours - 2 pm-4 pm and 10 pm-12:30 am. Increasing AC temperature by 1 degrees C reduces electricity consumption by 6 per cent. Set your AC thermostat at 24 °C for comfortable and cost-effective cooling, they said adding judicial use of electrical equipments like ACs, especially during peak hours (2 PM to 4 PM) and 10 PM to 12 Midnight helps in conserving energy. Avoid using electricity guzzling gadgets like ACs and Washing Machines together during the peak hours (2 PM to 4 PM) and 10 PM to 12 Midnight. Keep air-conditioned room doors closed as much as possible to retain cool air and use ceiling fans alongside the AC to circulate air and reduce the AC's workload.

Bharadwaj directs action against officers for not inspecting shelter homes

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Urban Development (UD) Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj on Wednesday directed the CEO of Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) to take appropriate action against three senior officers for not complying with his orders of inspecting shelter homes. On June 10 and June 11, Delhi Minister directed the CEO of DUSIB, to assign three senior officers, to conduct surprise inspections of at least five homeless shelters each day and submit the list of deficiencies found to him by Tuesday. "Taking into account the prevailing heat wave, I had given verbal instructions to the CEO regarding appropriate arrangements in homeless shelters. Later on June 10 had flagged news stories regarding issues with night shelters. On June 11, I had given written directions to the CEO, DUSIB, to



assign three senior officers to do surprise inspections of at least five homeless Shelters. The three officers namely S.K. Singh, P.K. Jha and Fonia were supposed to inspect these shelters and submit the list of deficiencies found to the undersigned on June 18," Bharadwaj said. The Officers were instructed to ensure arrangements are made for Water

dispensers and Water based air coolers in Shelter homes. He further stated that while he had expected to receive the report of atleast 90 shelter homes by Tuesday but no such report has been received. "Therefore, you are directed to take appropriate action against the officers for not complying with the directions," he stated in a letter to the CEO of DUSIB, adding that the night shelters are managed by private agencies and are paid for their services. "In the first place, agencies should provide the services without fail. However, if services are not being provided and officers are complacent, then senior officers are expected to do surprise checks and identify the deficiencies. This is to ensure accountability of the agencies as well as officers of DUSIB," he said adding that the non-receipt of reports from the senior most officers of DUSIB is not acceptable.

MCD completes survey of 17.94 lakh houses

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has conducted a survey of over 17.94 lakh houses so far of which four each has been identified in the "dangerous state" category and require "urgent repair" ahead of the monsoon expected to come in the city by the end of the month. The MCD has completed its annual exercise for nearly 64 per cent of the houses till date across its zones, which has been fully completed in areas like South Zone and 98.73 per cent of the work has been accomplished in Karol Bagh. The highest number of houses were surveyed in Najafgarh zone at 2,41,931 followed by South zone at 2,37,118 and Central zone at 2,12,811, according to a report compiled till June 18. As per the report, one house in the Shahdara South zone was identified to be requiring repair under A (Maintenance) category and three houses



were identified in Rohini zone under B (Building) category. The civic body also identified four buildings in the Shahdara South zone marked in the dangerous category that are on the verge of collapse. These buildings were identified in a period of 14 days in a survey conducted between June 1 and June 14, data in the report shows. The civic body officials refused to provide information on action taken against the identified dangerous and repairable buildings. The process to

identify more such buildings to avoid any untoward incident during the rainy season is currently ongoing. Monsoon is expected to arrive in Delhi by the end of this month, according to the weather department. There are a total of 27,66,198 houses across the 12 zones of the MCD that come under its jurisdiction. The civic body had completed the survey of about 12.19 houses till May 31. The MCD this month carried out the survey in 5,74,198 houses in a span of 14 days, data showed

Man shot dead inside Burger King outlet in Rajouri Garden

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A man in his early 30s was shot dead inside a Burger King outlet in west Delhi's Rajouri Garden on Tuesday's night in a shocking crime at one of the busiest and posh areas of the national Capital. The police are yet to identify the victim, even as a foreign-based gangster purportedly took the responsibility of the killing through a social media post. Hours after the incident, a social media post emerged in which foreign-based gangster Himanshu Bhau took the responsibility of the attack. The post states that they have avenged the killing of 'Shaki Dada' who was eliminated allegedly by their rival gang. The post also mentions the names of alleged gangsters Naveen Bali, Neeraj Bawana, Kala Kharampur and Neeraj Faridpur. The gang which operates in Delhi and Haryana is notorious for demanding extortions, an officer said, adding police are verifying the authenticity of the social media post. A senior police officer said the victim's mobile phone is missing and no other identity proof has been recovered. A bus ticket and a phone charger were recovered from his pocket along with a gamchha (scarf). According to the customers at the outlet, two shooters entered the fast food outlet around 9.45 pm and opened fire at the victim where he was shot atleast 15 times. The accused, including the shooters and their accomplice, who waited outside during the shooting, fled the spot in



two-wheelers. The man suffered multiple bullet wounds and was rushed to a hospital, where doctors declared him dead. The victim's mobile phone and IDs are missing. The police found nothing but a bus ticket and a phone charger from his pockets. Police sources said the victim has been identified as Aman, and a gang rivalry led to the killing. Aman, the sources said, had been called to the food outlet as part of a trap. CCTV footage shows the man entering the Burger King outlet and sitting at a table where a woman was already waiting. The woman vanished, and she reportedly took Aman's phone and wallet. The woman, police sources say, has a criminal record and attempts are being made to track her down. They have also launched a search for the woman who was with the victim during the incident.

Corruption in education treachery with country: AAP slams BJP over NEET mess

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak on Wednesday accused the BJP of institutionalising paper leaks and demanded the resignation of the Union Education Minister over irregularities in the NEET. Addressing a press conference, Pathak said corruption in education was no less than committing treachery with the country. "A huge corruption has come to the fore in NEET exam in the last few days. The NEET exam is very important for the country. All the admissions in medical colleges happen through NEET. "There are around 1 lakh



seats and 24 lakh students appear for these exams. Students start preparing for these exams well in advance and even their families are involved in prepa-

rations. Corruption in education is no less than treason with the country," he said. Pathak said the AAP does not want to make it a "political issue" but Prime

Minister Narendra Modi must give his response on the matter. Earlier, the youth wing of the AAP protested outside Union Education minister Dharmendra Pradhan's residence here on Wednesday, demanding the cancellation of the NEET exam following alleged irregularities. AAP MLA Sanjeev Jha led the protest. "Due to the alleged irregularities in the conduct of the exam, the students have been affected. We demand that the probe in the NEET exam matter be carried out in a time-bound manner and under the supervision of a retired Supreme Court judge," he said.

Ugandan woman found dead in her South Delhi home

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 42-year-old female Ugandan national was found dead in her home at South Delhi's Panchsheel Vihar area on Tuesday. According to the police officials, no foul play has been found so far and proceedings under Section 174 of the CrPC are being carried out. "On Tuesday, at 10.51 pm, a PCR call was received at Malviya Nagar Police Station regarding a Uganda National woman lying unconscious in a house at Panchsheel Vihar in Malviya Nagar," DCP South Ankit Chauhan said. When police responded to the call by her female friend

and reached the house, they found the woman lying on the floor unconscious. "She was shifted to AIIMS hospital where she was declared brought dead," the DCP added. On inquiry, police found the woman had been living in the house for the last three months with another Ugandan female friend. Both of them worked as hairdressers. According to police, on Tuesday, her friend left the room around 3.30 pm. When she came back around 5.30 pm, she found her roommate on the floor and called some people from her community, who approached the police.

24-year-old man personating as sexagenarian held at IGIA

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 24-year-old man allegedly personating as a sexagenarian bound for Canada has been apprehended by the CISF at the Delhi international airport. The passenger Guru Sewak Singh, with dyed hairs and beard, was intercepted on Tuesday evening at Terminal-3 of the Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport and has been handed over to the Delhi Police, official said. The man was first checked by CISF personnel as his activities were found to be suspicious. He initially produced his identity in the

form of a passport bearing the name Rashvinder Singh Sahota, 67. He was supposed to board an Air Canada flight flying out of Delhi on Tuesday, the officer said. "The man's appearance, voice and skin texture seemed significantly younger than the details provided in the passport. Closer observation revealed that he had dyed his hair and beard white and was wearing glasses to appear older," he said. The passenger, following further interrogation, disclosed his correct identity as Guru Sewak Singh, 24, and the photo of a passport in this name was also found in his mobile phone, the officer said.

Chhattisgarh cabinet reorganizes 5 Tribal, SC, OBC welfare authorities



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

In a move to reform the functioning of five of the authorities formed for the welfare of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Classes, the Chhattisgarh cabinet on Wednesday decided to reorganize them.

These authorities namely Bastar, Surguja, Mid-Area Tribal Development, Scheduled Caste Development Authority and Chhattisgarh State Rural and Other Backward Classes Development Authority will now directly

be headed by the Chief Minister.

A government official briefing the cabinet decision said that this was done for making the authorities more effective and thereby improving the welfare activities in these areas.

One of the local MLAs will be nominated in these authorities as Vice Chairman, while all other regional MLAs will be the members of these authorities, he informed.

The Principal Secretary or Secretary to the Chief Minister will be the Member Secretary of these authorities.

“Significant development works were, however, done in Scheduled Caste and tribal dominated villages, Majra-Tola, Para-Mohallas, wards and rural areas in the past, but in the year 2019, the then government made radical changes in the functions of these authorities. This not only diluted their importance, but also made them ineffective with lack of transparency and monitoring”, the official claimed.

Keeping in view the ‘ineffective’ situation, the cabinet has now approved the proposal to reorganize them and frame new fund-related rules for these five authorities, he added.

The Cabinet in another major decision gave approval for the wholesale purchase of foreign liquor directly from the manufacturing units.

The procurement of foreign liquor was earlier done through FL-10 licensees as the license system prevailed.

Ending this system, the government has now entrusted Chhattisgarh State Beverage Corporation with the responsibility to directly procure foreign liquor from manufacturers.

Sickle cell anaemia to be eradicated with collective efforts, claims CM

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai said on Wednesday that sickle cell anaemia disease will be eradicated through collective efforts.

He was addressing an awareness programme on World Sickle Cell Anaemia Day at the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Auditorium in Raipur. Ministers and MLAs were present.

Stressing the importance of prevention, Sai urged everyone to undergo sickle cell testing, especially before marriage.

To raise awareness in remote Bastar, Sai released a sickle cell booklet in Halbi and Gondi languages. He



highlighted that tribal communities are particularly affected.

He also flagged off an awareness

chariot and distributed genetic cards to patients.

A proposal has been submitted to

the Central Government to establish a national-level sickle cell research centre in the state to enhance prevention efforts.

An official communiqué said that a total of 1,11,06,561 sickle cell screenings have been conducted against the target of 1,77,69,535.

Of these, 2,90,663 were identified as carriers, and 22,672 tested positive.

Health Minister Shyam Bihari Jaiswal emphasised the role of mitanins in prevention efforts.

Tribal Welfare Minister Ramvihar Netam highlighted the collaborative efforts of the Health Department and Tribal Welfare Department to make the state healthy and developed.

Woman injured in Maoists’ IED blast

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

A woman was critically injured on Wednesday when an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) planted by Maoists was blown off after she stepped on it in Bijapur district, about 430 kilometres south from state capital Raipur.

A senior police official said that the incident took place around 6.30 am when Jogi, a resident of Nadpalli village under Usoor police station area, had gone to the jungle to collect forest produce.

She accidentally stepped on the pressured IED triggering a blast, which caused serious injuries to her legs, the police

official said.

Jogi was immediately taken to a health centre at Usoor where she was given preliminary treatment and thereafter she was shifted to the Bijapur district hospital.

Maoists often plant IEDs along roads, under construction roads and dirt tracks in forests to target security personnel patrolling in interiors of the region. Scores of civilians had fell prey to such traps in vast forested Bastar region which is made up of about 40,000 sq km areas.

According to police, five persons have been killed in Maoist-planted IED blasts at separate places in Bijapur district in the last two-and-a-half months.

Vision Doc meet emphasises establishing a Global Skill Park



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh NITI Aayog meeting held on Wednesday on ‘Quality Education’ emphasised setting up a Global Skill Park to benefit youth.

The meeting was held in Raipur to prepare the document ‘Amritkaal: Chhattisgarh Vision @ 2047.’

Education Department officials said that by creating a Global Skill Park, education can become employment-oriented by providing training to

the youth according to their talents.

They gave an in-depth briefing about various programmes of the School Education Department for quality education in relevance to the document.

The meeting centred on value-based education, skill development, result-oriented education, new-age topics, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

A presentation was delivered on the major goals set for quality education, major challenges, and vision.

Education Department officials said that by creating a Global Skill Park, education can become employment oriented by providing training to the youth according to their talents.

The government is preparing a vision document called ‘Amritkaal: Chhattisgarh Vision @ 2047’ which will contain a detailed roadmap to transform the region from a developing state to a developed one.

Moily, Chaudhary to review Congress LS debacle in C’garh



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

All India Congress Committee (AICC) on Wednesday constituted a fact-finding committee to assess the reasons of poll debacle of Congress in the recently held

parliamentary elections. Senior Congress leaders Veerappa Moily and Harish Chaudhary are the members in this two-member fact-finding committee. Congress was almost wiped out in the 11 parliamentary seats in the state and had won only in Korba seat.

AIIMS-R excels at AFMC Conference

The study aimed to use the Geographic Information System (GIS) and Google Earth historical images to monitor changes in the land area of a legacy dumpsite located at Sarona in Raipur and to assess the impact of waste management strategies being implemented currently.

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

All India Institute of Medical Sciences Raipur (AIIMS-R) excelled at the Armed Forces Conference on ‘Climate Change and Environmental Susceptibility: The Public Health Perspective’ organized by the prestigious Armed Forces Medical College (AFMS), Pune.

One of the teams from AIIMS-R won first prize in oral presentation, while another team secured 4th place in a quiz competition at



the conference held recently.

Hunny Sharma, a Ph.D. student, won the first prize for his oral paper entitled ‘Application of Geographic Information System and Google Earth Engine for Spatial Analysis of Land Use by the Legacy Dumpsite at Raipur, Chhattisgarh: A Time Series Analysis.’

The study aimed to use the Geographic Information System (GIS) and Google Earth historical images to monitor changes in the land area of a legacy dumpsite located at Sarona in Raipur and to assess the impact of waste management strategies being implemented currently.

This novel method may help evaluate such dumpsites in the absence of real-time

data and play a pivotal role in sustainable land use and environmental conservation. Such monitoring and remediation of dumpsites will ensure a safer environment, protecting public health.

In addition, a team comprising Dr. Ravichandra CV and Dr. Shripal Choudhary from the School of Public Health participated in the postgraduate quiz competition on climate change during the conference.

The team secured 4th place among 27 teams from various medical colleges that participated in the conference.

AIIMS-R Director, Lieutenant General Ashok Jindal (Retd) congratulated the students for achievement and exhorted all to excel in future endeavors.

Elderly woman with non-healing spinal fracture gets renewed life

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

A 79-year-old woman suffering from a non-healing vertebral compression fracture got fresh lease of life after she was treated with a procedure called vesseloplasty, an official communiqué said on Wednesday.

The procedure was performed by a team led by interventional radiologist Dr. Vivek Patre at Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar Memorial Hospital in Raipur.

Vertebral compression fractures (VCFs) occur when the bony block or vertebral body in the spine collapses, which can lead to severe pain, deformity, and more.

The woman had a D (dorsal) 12 vertebral fracture, due to which she was in agony for the last 9 months and had been unable to sit for a month.

Dr. Patre said vesseloplasty is an imaging-guided procedure in which a thick needle is inserted. Space was cre-



ated in the vertebral body through a manual drill inside the needle.

Then, while monitoring through fluoroscopy and the DSA machine, bone cement was injected through a balloon container with the help of a needle. Due to the perforated structure of the balloon, there is no leakage, he said.

After the entire proce-

dures was completed, the woman was able to sit after half an hour and she was discharged the same day, he said.

Earlier, the facility of vesseloplasty was only available in big hospitals in metropolises. This is the first time this procedure has been performed with this type of new technology in a hospital in Chhattisgarh.

‘Clinical trials underway on gene editing as potential therapy for sickle cell disease’

AGENCIES ■

As traditional treatments

such as blood transfusion, hydroxyurea, and other medicines have primarily focused on managing symptoms and preventing complications, experts on World Sickle Cell Day on Wednesday said that recent advancements in sickle cell anaemia and innovations in medical technology have led to the development of several promising new therapies.

According to Dr Meet Kumar, Clinical Director, Haematology & Bone Marrow Transplant, Marengo Asia Hospitals, Gurugram, clinical trials

carried out gene editing as a potential treatment method for sickle cell disease.

As per preliminary findings, normal haemoglobin production may be enabled, which could significantly reduce sickle cell disease symptoms and effects.

As per experts, in sickle cell disease, the blood can get too thick and clot, causing various brain problems like silent strokes, regular strokes (both where blood flow is blocked and where there is bleeding), and other issues. This happens because the thick blood can block the blood vessels in the brain. “Silent cerebral infarcts occur in about 40 per cent of

children by 18 years. Headaches occur in about 36 per cent of children with sickle cell anaemia. Ischemic stroke occurs in about 10 per cent of children, and hemorrhagic stroke occurs in children at a rate of about 3-10 per cent,” Dr Praveen Gupta, Principal Director & Chief of Neurology, Fortis Hospital, told IANS.

Sickle cell disease may affect the brain in various ways, including cognitive dysfunctions like working memory, verbal learning, visual motor function, inadequacy in general intellectual functioning, problems with language and attention, as well as headaches, seizures, and others, the

experts noted.

Dr Gaurav Kharya, Founder and Director, Cellogen Therapeutics, said that gene therapy represents one of the most promising advancements in the treatment of sickle cell disease. This approach involves modifying the patient’s own hematopoietic stem cells to correct the genetic defect responsible for the disease. He further mentioned that the modified stem cells are “then reintroduced into the patient’s body”.

“Early clinical trials have shown promising results, with some patients achieving significant improvements in symptoms and quality of life,” Kharya added.

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Printed and Published by Vijay Budhia for and on behalf of CMYK Printech Limited, “The Pioneer Building”, 11, Civil Lines, Near Raj Bhavan, Opp. Sanskriti Bhavan, Raipur-492007 Telephone:(0771) 2223260/70 and Printed at Kavya Prakashan, Express Tower, Adarsh nagar, Mowa, Raipur-492005, Editor-in-Chief Shobori Ganguli, Resident Editor: Sujeet Kumar, Delhi Office: 100k Milap Bhawan, 8/A Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110 002, Phone: 011-40110455, Corporate Office:- 201-205, 208-210, 2nd Floor, Pratap Bhawan 5, B.S.Z. Marg, New Delhi-110002 Phone: 011-69342500, Lucknow Office: 4th Floor, Sahara Shopping Centre, Faizabad Road, Lucknow 226016. Telephones: 0522-2346443, 2346444, 2346445.

MODI INAUGURATES NEW NALANDA VARSITY CAMPUS

Knowledge cannot be destroyed by fire: PM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI/RAJGIR(BIHAR)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday asserted that he wanted India to re-emerge as the world's "most prominent knowledge centre" with an "advanced and research-oriented" higher education system.

Modi, while inaugurating the new Nalanda University campus in Rajgir, called upon students to always remain curious and courageous.

The varsity is named after the world-renowned ancient seat of higher learning, which was razed by invading armies in the 12th century.

Modi said Nalanda bore testimony to the fact that "knowledge cannot be destroyed by fire", and that India was looking forward to playing its role in the 21st century, "which belongs to Asia", by becoming a developed country by 2047.

He underscored that history was proof that all developed countries became economic and cultural leaders only after they made a mark in the field of education.

"Our country, too, enjoyed



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Bihar Governor Rajendra Arlekar, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Deputy CMs Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Sinha and other delegates during the inauguration of Nalanda University, in Nalanda district, Bihar on Wednesday

such a status in the ancient times when seats of learning like Nalanda and Vikramshila were flourishing," said Modi, who also made a mention of the International Yoga Day celebrations, due in a couple of days, to stress that India was continuing with cultural exchanges on a global scale.

"It is my mission that India re-emerges as the world's most prominent knowledge centre. To this end, the spirit of

innovation is being inculcated into our children from a very early age. More than one crore children are getting exposed to latest technology at 'Atal Tinkering' labs. The Chandrayaan and Gaganyaan missions are also boosting their interest in science," he said. Modi also pointed out "till about a decade ago, we had only 100 startups. The number has swollen to more than 1.30 lakh. We are also filing a record

number of patents and publishing research papers. Our government has announced a special fund of Rs 1 lakh crore to give a fillip to research and innovation". "It is our endeavour to build, in India, the world's most comprehensive and complete skilling system, and advanced research-oriented higher education system. The efforts have started showing results. Our universities' global

rankings have improved. Till a decade ago, only nine educational institutions had QS rankings. Now, the number has reached 46," the PM asserted. The Prime Minister, who reached the venue after spending a few minutes at the ruins of the 'Nalanda Mahavihara', expressed delight at having got the opportunity "within 10 days" of return to power for a record third term in office.

He also highlighted that the country has "lived, through ages, a sustainable model in which progress was achieved while taking care of the environment".

The prime minister informed that on an average, India has witnessed setting up of one university every week in the last 10 years, along with establishment of an industrial training institute (ITI) every 10 days.

"There has been a new Atal Tinkering Lab every second day, two new colleges every day. We have 23 IITs. The number of IIMs has reached 21, from only 13 a decade ago. During the period, the number of AIIMS trebled to 22 and the number of medical colleges doubled.

Tibetans have right to self-determination: McCaul

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI/DHARAMSALA

The Tibetan people have the right to self-determination, US House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Michael McCaul said on Wednesday, asserting they have a unique culture and religion, and they should be able to freely practice their religion.

McCaul, who is leading the US Congressional delegation that met the Dalai Lama at Dharamsala, said that is why we are here today in defiance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Speaking at a facilitation function organised by the Dharamsala-based Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), he said even after violence and forceful removal from his home by the CCP, the Dalai Lama continues to preach tolerance, peace and forgiveness.

McCaul asserted that people are free in a democracy while they are enslaved in tyranny. "The Tibetan people possess a distinct religion, culture and historic identity and they should have a say in their own future. You should be able to freely practice your religion and that is why we are here



Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama being greeted by US representative Michael McCaul during a meeting with US Congressional delegation at his residence, in Dharamsala

today in defiance of CCP warning," McCaul said. "Our delegation received a letter from the CCP warning us not to come here, they repeated their false claim that Tibet is part of China since the 13th century but we did not let the CCP intimidate us and we are here today," he said, adding the Dalai Lama, people of Tibet and United States of America know that Tibet is not a part of China.

McCaul said the timing of this visit cannot be better as last week the House of Representatives and the Congress passed Resolve Tibet Bill, which makes it clear that

Tibet has its own unique culture, language and religion, and has the right to self-determination.

This bill, which will be signed in the coming days, also requires to aggressively challenge the CCP propaganda about Tibet, he added. The delegation consisting of former US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Congress members Mariannette Miller, Gregory Meeks, Nicole Malliotakis, Jim McGovern and Ami Bera led by McCaul, called on the Dalai Lama ahead of the function and held discussions.

Oram praises role of ASHA, anganwadi workers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Union Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram on Wednesday emphasised the critical role of ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) and anganwadi workers in combating not only the Covid-19 pandemic but also in achieving the government's ambitious goal of eradicating sickle cell disease in India.

Speaking at an event marking World Sickle Cell Day at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, Oram highlighted that while top experts and doctors contribute significantly to the National Sickle Cell Anaemia Eradication Mission, success hinges on the involvement of grassroots workers.

"ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) and anganwadi workers are the ones who work at the gram panchayat level. They worked



more than the top doctors during the pandemic. I can say this with confidence," said Oram, who recently assumed office as the tribal affairs minister for the third time. "Therefore, until we engage ground-level workers in this

mission, it will not be successful. When malaria was prevalent, a malaria inspector would visit every house in the village to take samples. We need to adopt a similar approach to eradicate sickle cell disease," he added.

The minister also said that while top doctors can plan and share their knowledge and resources, it is the ground-level workers who have to actually work.

Oram suggested involving major companies operating in tribal areas in the mission to tackle sickle cell anaemia.

On July 1 last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the National Sickle Cell Anaemia Eradication Mission in Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh, with the aim of eradicating the disease by 2047.

On the occasion, earlier Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated the government's commitment to overcoming sickle cell disease, and said it has been working on aspects like creating awareness, universal screening, early detection and proper care. "On World Sickle Cell Day, we reiterate our commitment to overcome this disease. Last year, we launched the National

Sickle Cell Anaemia Elimination Mission and have been working on aspects like creating awareness, universal screening, early detection and proper care," Modi said in a post on X. "We are also leveraging the power of technology in this area," he said.

Sickle cell disease is a group of inherited blood disorders that affect haemoglobin, causing red blood cells to become sickle-shaped and block blood flow, which can lead to serious complications such as stroke, eye problems, and infections.

The government aims to screen seven crore people up to 40 years of age as part of the mission. State governments have already screened 3.5 crore people, detecting 10 lakh active carriers and one lakh individuals with the disease.

A carrier is an individual who carries and can pass on a genetic mutation associated with a disease, and may or may not display symptoms.

Jaishankar travels to Lanka today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will travel to Sri Lanka on Thursday in his first bilateral visit abroad in his second consecutive term in office.

The visit reaffirms India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and underlines New Delhi's continued commitment to Sri Lanka as its "closest" maritime neighbour and time tested friend, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said. The MEA said Jaishankar's visit will add momentum to connectivity projects and other mutually beneficial cooperation across sectors between the two countries.

Jaishankar was last week part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's delegation at the G7 Outreach summit in Italy's Apulia region.

The trip to Sri Lanka will be Jaishankar's standalone bilateral visit after he assumed charge as the external affairs minister for the second term on June 11.

The MEA said the external affairs minister will have meetings with the Sri Lankan leadership on wide-ranging issues.

"This will be the external affairs minister's first bilateral visit after the formation of new government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi," it said.

"Reaffirming India's Neighbourhood First Policy, the visit underlines India's continued commitment to Sri Lanka as its closest maritime neighbour and time tested friend," the MEA said in a statement. "The visit will add momentum to connectivity projects and other mutually beneficial cooperation across sectors,"



it said. Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe was among seven top leaders from India's neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean region who attended the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Modi and the Union council of ministers at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on June 9.

Restore statues to original places in Parliament complex, demands Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge has written to Lok Sabha Speaker and Rajya Sabha Chairman over the shifting of statues of Mahatma Gandhi, B R Ambedkar and other national leaders to a new location in the Parliament complex and has demanded that they be restored to their original places.

Kharge said the statues of national leaders have been relocated to a separate corner "arbitrarily" without any consultation and this amounts to violation of the basic spirit of democracy.

"I wish to emphasise at the very threshold that such removal of these statues arbitrarily, without any consultation, violates the basic spirit of our democracy. Needless to mention that the statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and other national leaders were situated at prominent locations after due deliberation and consideration. Each statue and its location across the Parliament House complex held immense value and significance," Kharge said in his letter sent separately to the Speaker and Rajya Sabha Chairman.

The Congress chief, who is also the Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha, pointed out that there is a dedicated committee for installing portraits and statues of national leaders and MPs in the Parliament House Complex -



"Committee on the Installation of Portraits and Statues of National Leaders and Parliamentarians in the Parliament House Complex" but the panel has not been reconstituted since 2019.

"Hence, such decisions made without any proper discussion and deliberation with relevant stakeholders are against the rules and traditions of our Parliament. Therefore, I demand that the statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and other national leaders who greatly contributed for the unity and integrity of our nation must be relocated to their original locations with due respect and regard," he wrote. The Congress has taken strong objection to the shifting of the statues. The opposition parties have often held protest marches and agitations within the Parliament complex before the statues of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Indian Army launches skin bank facility

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Indian Army has launched a first-of-its-kind skin bank facility that aims to revolutionise the treatment of severe burn injuries and other skin-related conditions for service personnel and their families.

The defence ministry in a statement on Tuesday said the skin bank will be staffed by a team of highly-trained medical professionals, including plastic surgeons, tissue engineers and specialised technicians.

The Army Hospital (Research and Referral) here announced the opening of the skin bank facility, a first-of-its-kind to be established within the Armed Forces Medical Services, it said. "This landmark initiative aims to revolutionise the treatment of severe burn injuries and other skin-related conditions among service members and their families," the statement said. This bank will serve as a centralised hub for the collection, processing, storage and distribution of skin grafts,



providing a "critical resource" for military medical centres across the country, officials said. By establishing this facility, the armed forces are ensuring that personnel and their families have access to the most advanced skin replacement therapies, they said. The facility will adhere to the highest standards of quality control and safety, ensuring the integrity and reliability of the skin grafts, the statement said. DGMS (Army) and Col Comdt Lt Gen Arindam Chatterjee termed the launch of this skin bank as "a testament to the unwavering commitment to the

health and well-being of service members". He added that the facility will not only enhance the quality of care, but also strengthen the ability to support those who have been affected by serious injuries.

"By having a dedicated resource for skin tissue, we can provide our patients with the most effective and personalised treatments, ultimately improving their chances of recovery and rehabilitation," Commandant, Army Hospital (R&R) Lt Gen Ajith Nilakantan, was quote as saying in the statement.

INS Sunayna completes short refit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Indian Navy's ship INS Sunayna, an Offshore Patrol Vessel based at Southern Naval Command entered Port Victoria, Seychelles on June 15 in company of Seychelles Coast Guard Ship (SCGS) Zoroaster. Zoroaster had recently completed her short refit at Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers Ltd (GRSE), India, officials said here on Tuesday. Upon arrival, INS Sunayna was warmly received by officials of



Seychelles Coast Guard and Embassy of India. During the ship's visit, personnel from Indian Navy and Seychelles Defence Forces will engage in official and social interactions and cross deck visits. The ship will undertake joint EEZ surveillance with the

Seychelles Coast Guard during the deployment. The visit is aimed at further strengthening the camaraderie and mutual cooperation between Indian Navy and Seychelles Coast Guard in line with the vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

BJP, Congress war of words over NEET

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

BJP and Congress on Wednesday Bengaged in a political slugfest on NEET issue with the former demanding an apology from Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and the latter announcing it will hold nationwide protests on Friday over alleged irregularities in the medical entrance examination demanding justice for students.

Seeking an apology from Priynaka, the BJP also sought legal action against her a day after the Allahabad High Court said the NTA can take action against a NEET aspirant who submitted fake documents alleging the testing agency failed to declare her result.

Latching on the high court's order, BJP national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla alleged Priyanka had recently posted a social media message of this NEET aspirant who had made some "outlandish claims" about her result in NEET exam "including torn OMR, lesser marks being given to her". "Turns out this girl Ayushi Patel, who claimed her OMR was torn and marks were not correct, had provided fake documents even to court and made false claims about her OMR being torn," he wrote a social media message, citing Priyanka's June 10 post on the micro-blogging site.

He slammed the Congress accusing it of running a "jhooth ki dukan" and demanded that a probe be also conducted into the matter to ascertain if the Congress had "sponsored" Patel to make false claims.

Sharing on the social media the video of Patel claiming some irregularities in declaration of her NEET result recently, Priyanka had demanded that the government will have to take serious steps to correct these irregularities. "Lakhs of children prepare hard for exams like NEET and spend the most precious moments of their lives in this preparation. The whole family puts their faith and strength in this effort. But year after year, paper leaks and irregularities related to results of these exams have come to the fore," she had written in her post.



"Shouldn't the accountability of the agencies conducting the exams be fixed? Shouldn't the government give up its careless attitude and seriously consider the exam system?" she also asked. "We cannot see the dreams of our young friends being shattered like this. This injustice being done by the system with their hard work must stop. The government will have to take serious steps to correct these irregularities," she had said.

The Allahabad High Court on Tuesday said Patel, who had alleged in her petition that the National Testing Agency (NTA) failed to declare her result and that her OMR answersheet was found torn, had submitted forged documents and the NTA can take legal action in the matter.

This came after NTA, on the direction of the high court's Lucknow bench, produced before it the original OMR answer sheet of the student which was found to be intact.

The NEET aspirant in her petition had claimed that NTA sent her a communication saying her result would not be declared as her OMR sheet was found torn. She had also posted a video on social media repeating the allegations that caused a stir amid the ongoing row over claims of irregularities in the conduct of the undergraduate medical entrance exam NEET.

The petitioner had demanded that her OMR sheet be evaluated manually. She had also called for an inquiry against NTA and demanded that the counselling for admission be stopped.

Meanwhile, Congress said it will hold protests in all state headquarters on Friday over the alleged irregularities in medical entrance exam NEET, demanding justice for the students.

Will work to protect dharma, unite society: Union Minister

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Union Minister of State for Home Bandi Sanjay Kumar on Wednesday said he would work to safeguard national interests, protect "dharma", unite society and try to bring funds for the development of Telangana and his Lok Sabha constituency of Karimnagar in the state.

Sanjay Kumar, who reached Karimnagar in Telangana for the first time after assuming charge as a minister, told reporters that credit for his elevation as union minister goes to the party activists and their hard work. Prostrating on the ground as a mark of respect for his 'karmabhoomi' soon after reaching Karimnagar where he rose through the ranks as a leader in the saffron party, Sanjay Kumar said it is only possible in the BJP for a person like him to rise from being a corporator in Karimnagar to a union minister.

He was accorded a rousing welcome by the party leaders and activists who showered flower petals on him. Recalling that party activists



had faced police action in the form of lathi charge, rowdy sheets and house arrests when he was Telangana BJP president during the previous BRS regime, he said he has now got recognition because of the hard work and sacrifices of the party workers. This post is dedicated to the party activists, he said. "I will use this responsibility of being union minister not for enjoying the post or to make money illegally, but for protecting the country and 'dharma', uniting society, and bringing funds for

Telangana and the Karimnagar Lok Sabha constituency. There is no question of misusing the post," he said. He also said he would remember the sacrifices of those who gave their life for the sake of Telangana statehood. He was given a guard of honour by the police and welcomed by government officials in Karimnagar. Sanjay Kumar retained the Karimnagar Lok Sabha constituency in the recent Lok Sabha polls by a margin of over 2.25 lakh votes.

Karnataka mulls policy to boost groundwater recharge

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Karnataka Minister for Minor Irrigation and Science and Technology N S Boseraju on Wednesday said the state government is contemplating formulating a new policy aimed at enhancing groundwater recharge throughout the state. The announcement was made during the inauguration of the three-day National Conference on Sustainable Groundwater Management for Water Security, organised by the Karnataka Science and Technology Academy. Speaking at the event, Boseraju pointed to the decline in groundwater levels and attributed this trend to the escalating urbanisation and deforestation. Emphasising the historical reliance on groundwater for industrial, agricultural, and domestic purposes, he said the depletion of this vital resource poses significant risks for future generations. "The exploitation of groundwater is intensifying while efforts to recharge it are diminishing. The natural recharge processes are



hampered by urban expansion. Immediate action is required to mitigate these effects, or our successors will suffer the consequences," Minister Boseraju was quoted as saying in a statement issued by his office. Noting that the current drought has highlighted the need for water conservation and to prevent further groundwater exploitation, the Minister underscored the importance of implementing rainwater harvesting systems and promoting groundwater recharge.

He called for a collective effort to adopt sustainable practices and said the Directorate of Groundwater is actively considering a policy that would provide incentives for such initiatives. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has also shown interest in this regard. Boseraju also stressed the importance of raising awareness about advancements in groundwater management through national conferences and urged cooperation with relevant departments for effective implementation.

Rain triggers landslides, flood-like situation in several Arunachal districts

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

Incessant rain over the past few days had triggered landslides and flood-like situations in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh, officials said on Wednesday. The state capital witnessed landslides at several locations, with waterlogging reported along the Doimuk-Potin Road and several stretches of the Itanagar-Yupia Road. A portion of NH-415 and a culvert were washed away at Karsingsa sinking zone on Tuesday morning, severing connectivity between Nirjuli and Banderdewa. Vehicular traffic between these areas has been diverted via Gumto Road. With the IMD forecasting heavy rains in the state capital over the next few days, the district administration has urged residents in vulnerable areas to move to safer locations or designated relief camps. Eight relief camps have been established in the state capital to aid those affected by landslides and flooding, officials said. Landslides also damaged a few vehicles and a newly

constructed house in Banderdewa. Fortunately, no loss of human lives has been reported. Similar reports of landslides have emerged from other districts. Major rivers and their tributaries in the state are in high spate, though still below the danger mark. West Siang District Disaster Management Officer (DDMO) Dorjee Nima reported that several hectares of agricultural fields were damaged after water from the Hu stream, a tributary of the Yomgo river, flooded fields in Taba Sora village under Kodum circle. Aalo township also experienced artificial flooding due to an inadequate drainage system, they added. Chief Minister Pema Khandu, who also holds the Disaster Management portfolio, convened a meeting on Wednesday with officials to review monsoon preparedness. "Chaired a review meeting today with the Department of Disaster Management to assess our monsoon preparedness, in the presence of Hon'ble Advisor Disaster Management Shri Nakap Nalo Ji," Khandu posted on X.

Former Haryana Congress leader Kiran, her daughter join BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A day after quitting the party, former Haryana Congress leader Kiran Choudhary and her daughter Shruti Choudhry, along with their supporters, joined the BJP in the presence of senior party leaders in New Delhi on Wednesday.

She took the primary membership of the BJP in the presence of Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, Union Minister Manohar Lal (Khattar), and National General Secretary Tarun Chugh.

Both Kiran Choudhry and Shruti Choudhry had resigned from the primary membership of the Congress on Tuesday, alleging the state unit of the party was being run as a 'personal fiefdom', in an apparent reference to former Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda.

Kiran Choudhry is daughter-in-law of former Haryana chief minister Bansi Lal and a sitting MLA from Tosham in Bhiwani district. Shruti Choudhry was the working president of the Haryana unit of the Congress.

Addressing a joint press conference along with the BJP leaders after joining the party, Kiran Choudhry said, "Now I am also painted in saffron



Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini felicitates former Haryana Congress leader Kiran Choudhry after she joined the BJP in New Delhi on Wednesday. Union Minister Manohar Lal Khattar and party leader Tarun Chugh also seen

RANJAN DIMRI/THE PIONEER

colour. But this colour was also the colour of Choudhary Bansi Lal." "We merged the Haryana Vikas Party into the Congress 20 years ago. Today, I call upon you to take the flag of the BJP in your hands, leaving the Congress's flag, and move forward till the last moment to ensure the BJP's landslide victory in Haryana assembly polls for a third consecutive term," she said in her message to her supporters who had gathered in large numbers to witness the joining ceremony. "From today, our work begins. Take the name of Choudhary

Bansi Lal and start working on the BJP's policies, hail the BJP's top leadership, visit every nook and corner of Haryana. This will be our true tribute to Choudhary Bansi Lal and Choudhary Surendra Singh," she added. Choudhry said she joined the BJP as she was inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's work and noted that people of the country have given him mandate for the third consecutive term after seeing his work. "People have once again given him this responsibility to fulfil his resolve to make India a

developed country by 2047," she said. She assured the BJP leaders that she and her daughter Shruti will work like "grassroot workers" to strengthen the party in Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi. "We are ready," she added. Choudhry also praised Khattar for his "honesty" and his work during his term as Haryana chief minister. Referring to him as her "big brother", she said Khattar was a "source of inspiration" to her. Shruti said she joined the BJP inspired by the party's policy and "historic decisions" taken by Prime Minister Modi in his last ten years of government.

Welcoming them to the party fold, Chugh said the Bansi Lal family contributed to strengthening the "foundation of the Congress in North India". "It's a very big family and a very big vote bank. They will be given due respect in the party," he told reporters. Khattar also assured Kiran Choudhry and her daughter that they will get due respect in the party "as per their ability and seniority" and hoped that they will also fulfil the expectations of the party. Saini said the BJP will be strengthened further with them joining the party. "We will work together as BJP family to make Haryana stronger," he added.

Murder case: Darshan confessed to have given ₹30 lakh to accused to dispose of body, say police

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Kannada actor Darshan Thoogudeepa, who has been arrested in the Renukaswamy murder case, has confessed to have given Rs 30 lakh to another accused Pradosh for the disposal of the body and to ensure that "his name does not come out anywhere," police have claimed. The amount has been recovered from Pradosh's residence, police sources said. "Darshan, who is accused number 2 (A2) in the case, has in his voluntary statement to police said that he had given Rs

30 lakh to Pradosh (A14) to dispose of the body, and for the expenditure that would cost...For persons to carry out this task, and to ensure that his name doesn't come out anywhere," a police official said.

A total 17 people, including Darshan and his friend Pavithra Gowda, are accused in the murder case. According to police sources, Renukaswamy, a fan of the actor, had sent obscene messages to Gowda, which enraged Darshan, allegedly leading to his murder. His body was found near a storm-water drain next to an apartment in

Sumanahalli here on June 9. "From the spot of the crime, things such as lathi and wooden logs used for the alleged assault have been recovered along with water bottle, blood stains and material evidence, and DVR containing the CCTV footage," the official said, adding, "blood stains were also found on the vehicle allegedly used for disposing of the body." According to the autopsy report, Renukaswamy's death was caused due to shock and haemorrhage as a result of multiple blunt injuries he sustained. "Viscera samples have been sent to the Forensic

Science Laboratory for further analysis," he said. According to sources, one of the accused, Raghavendra, who is part of Darshan's fan club in Chitradurga, had brought Renukaswamy to a shed in R R Nagar here, on the pretext that Darshan wanted to meet him. It was in this shed that he was allegedly tortured and killed. The investigation team is believed to have gathered enough evidence, including CCTV footage, which could establish that Darshan was present during the alleged assault on Renukaswamy, leading to his death, sources said.

OBC activists' fast over quota enters seventh day

PTI ■ JALNA

The fast by two activists, seeking an assurance that the OBC quota will not be disturbed amid the Maratha reservation demand, entered the seventh day on Wednesday, with doctors saying that their health has started deteriorating. After requests by OBC (Other Backward Classes) members, the activists - Laxman Hake and Navnath Waghmare - took a few sips of water, but maintained that they would continue their protest.

Hake and Waghmare have been sitting on their hunger strike at Wadigodri village in Jalna district since June 13. Government medical officer Anil Waghmare said the activist's blood pressure has risen and their blood sugar levels are low. Doctors have stressed that both need to be hospitalised to prevent further health complications. The OBC activists have been demanding the scrapping of the Maharashtra



government's draft notification that recognises Kunbis as 'sage soyare' (blood relatives) of Maratha community members. Kunbi, an agrarian group, enjoys quota benefits under the OBC category. Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, Hake said no government representative has visited them, rejecting Maratha activist Manoj Jarange's allegations that their protest was government-sponsored. "Officials would have shown concern and visited us had our protest been backed by

the government," Hake said. He criticised Jarange for his "ignorance" regarding the complexities of the reservation system. "Jarange does not understand the law and reservation system," he said. Hake also extended an invitation for an open debate with Jarange's team to discuss the intricacies of the reservation issue. Meanwhile, OBC members have called for a bandh at Ambad. On Tuesday, they blocked the Dhule-Solapur national highway for some time over their demands.

Murder victim whose body parts were found on two trains identified

PTI ■ INDORE

A murder victim whose body parts were found on two trains has been identified as a 35-year-old married woman who had gone missing from Madhya Pradesh's Ratlam district a fortnight ago, police said on Wednesday. The body was found on a passenger train at Indore on June 9, while the severed hands and legs were found on another train at Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, 1,100 km away, on June 10, said a senior official of the Government Railway Police (GRP) here. "The victim of the brutal murder has been identified as Meera (35), resident of Bilpank police station limits in Ratlam district," said Santosh Kori, Superintendent of Police, GRP Indore.

The woman, who has two daughters, left home on June 6 after a quarrel with the husband, and the family lodged a missing person complaint at Bilpank police station six days later, the SP said.

Wild elephants in Udupi leave trail of destruction

PTI ■ UDUPI (KARNATAKA)

Wild elephants have been roaming freely in deeply wooded plantations allegedly causing a trail of destruction in several pockets of Udupi district, officials said on Wednesday. The pachyderms damaged areca, plantain and spice plantations in Nellikatte in the Nadpalu Grama Panchayat area in Hebri taluk of the district in the early hours of June 18 and 19, they said.

Forest Department officials have estimated that there could be two individual jumbos behind the incidents and said they are in hot pursuit of the animals. According to the forest officials, the wild elephants have ravaged the plantations and have even uprooted the sprinkler and drip irrigation systems laid out in the estate owned by one Meena Poojarti in the village. The villagers have expressed fear of carrying on with their daily routine; children are being prevented from going to school, and farm workers

are staying put indoors. The villagers demanded that the animals be tranquillised and translocated into their natural habitats. This is reportedly the first time that wild elephants have entered the human habitations in the taluk, although Hebri taluk is known for its forest cover. According to officials, earlier it was leopard sightings in these villages that disturbed the people. Historically, elephants have followed a predictable path from Sullia to Naravi, passing through Maala Ghat, Valikunja, Kabbinala, Thingalamakki, Thengumar, Kigga, Barkana, Mallandur, Agumbé, and Hosanagara. However, this year's deviation into Nadpalu village on the foothills of the western ghats has baffled the forest officials and the people alike. Range Forest official Gaurav has confirmed the presence of elephants and said the officials are tracking their movements, and that they will soon be restored to the wildlife sanctuary.

Security forces recover firearms, explosives after encounter with Naxalites in Sukma

Sukma: Three firearms, explosives and Maoist-related materials were recovered by security personnel following an encounter with Naxalites in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district on Wednesday, a police official said.

The gunfight took place at around 6 am on a forested hill near Kanparraju Metta village

under Bheji police station limits when a joint team of security personnel were out an anti-Naxalite operation, the official said here. This was the second gun-battle between security forces and Naxalites in Sukma district in as many days. The exchange of fires lasted for about 20 minutes after which Naxalites escaped. PTI

Women at higher risk of heart diseases as early symptoms difficult to detect: Physicians body

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Women in India are at a higher risk of having cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) as early symptoms like angina are difficult to detect due to uncommon symptoms, which can pose a challenge in diagnosis, said an association of physicians on Wednesday.

Indians experience cardiovascular diseases a decade earlier than those in Western countries, which makes it necessary to address the early age of onset and rapid disease progression in a timely manner, noted Association of Physicians of India (API) president Dr Milind Y Nadkar here. "Women are more likely than men to display uncommon symptoms like jaw or neck

pain, exhaustion and non-chest discomfort, which can pose a challenge in diagnosis. This may result in doctors offering symptomatic relief solutions without addressing underlying angina causes, which is further heightened when patients deny the existence of their symptoms," Nadkar said at a press conference. CVDs are a group of disorders of the heart and blood vessels and the leading cause of death globally. India ranks second worldwide when it comes to cardiovascular disease-related mortality, and CVDs account for 20.3 per cent and 16.9 per cent of annual mortality across men and women in the country, respectively, according to data. "Obesity is also a strong angina risk factor, especially in women.



People living with diabetes also tend to report more extensive coronary disease, if unaddressed," said Nadkar. While incidence of angina (a type of chest pain caused by reduced blood flow to the heart) in women is lesser than in men, it is on the rise due to lifestyles and demographic

patterns, he pointed out. Indians have a 20-50 per cent higher coronary artery disease (CAD) mortality rate than any other population. Also, CAD-related mortality and disability rates have doubled over the last 30 years in India, according to API, the apex professional body of

consultant physicians in the country. "People frequently display atypical angina symptoms, which may lead to missed diagnoses, like shortness of breath, excessive sweating, heartburn, nausea or stable angina, a kind of chest pain that can be triggered by emotional or physical stress or exercise. Women are more likely than men to display uncommon symptoms like jaw or neck pain, exhaustion and non-chest discomfort, which can pose a challenge in diagnosis," emphasised Nadkar. This may result in doctors offering symptomatic relief solutions without addressing underlying angina causes, which is further heightened when patients deny the existence of their symptoms, said the API president.

"Indians experience CVDs a decade earlier than those in Western countries, which makes it vital to address the early age of onset and rapid disease progression in a timely manner. With India also recording the highest rate of coronary artery disease worldwide, it is essential to bring more awareness about symptoms like angina," he stated. Abbott India Medical Director Dr Ashwini Pawar, who also addressed the press conference, said, "angina remains an under-diagnosed condition in India. As a result, many do not receive optimal treatment. It's important to address this challenge given the growing burden of CVDs as well as its associated cost to the country at roughly USD 2.17 trillion between 2012 and 2030."

Not so neat

The Supreme Court demands a comprehensive investigation into administrative negligence surrounding the NEET fiasco

The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), serving as a critical gateway for students aspiring to enter undergraduate medical and dental programs in India, is at the centre of controversy. The Supreme Court of India has raised concerns about potential negligence in the administration of the exam, calling for an exhaustive investigation. Since the results were announced on June 4, the NEET exam has faced intense scrutiny due to various issues, including errors in the question paper, improper allocation of grace marks and allegations of paper leaks and fraud. In response, students and parents have called for a re-test, leading to numerous petitions being filed in courts. Despite National Testing Agency (NTA) officials denying any paper leaks, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan acknowledged that “some irregularities” had been detected at certain exam centers. NEET was introduced to standardize medical admissions across India, aiming to create a uniform criterion for entry into medical courses. However, since its



inception, the exam has faced a multitude of challenges, including allegations of fraud, question paper leaks and complaints of unequal access, which have sparked widespread debate and protests. In a pivotal decision, the Supreme Court of India has brought attention to serious concerns regarding the administration of the NEET exam, highlighting potential negligence and calling for a thorough investigation. Over the years, NEET has been marred by several instances of question paper leaks and cheating, which not only undermine the fairness of the examination but also cast a shadow over the credibility of the authorities responsible for conducting it. Such issues have been a recurrent problem, eroding trust in the system and fueling public discontent.

Additionally, there have been persistent concerns about accessibility and equity. It has been alleged that NEET inherently favors well-to-do students from urban areas who have better access to high-quality coaching and educational resources, thereby disadvantaging those from rural or economically weaker backgrounds. This perceived inequity has led to protests from various States and communities who feel marginalized by the current system. The Supreme Court’s call for an investigation into possible negligence underscores the gravity of administrative lapses within the NEET examination process. There are allegations of corruption involving insiders within examination boards or associated entities who might be leaking papers or enabling cheating in exchange for bribes. Such internal corruption severely compromises the examination’s integrity. Some States have expressed opposition to NEET, citing disadvantages for their students due to regional and linguistic differences. This opposition could reflect broader political dynamics, where certain political interests align against the centralization of medical entrance examinations. Indeed, a probe is crucial for restoring faith in the NEET process and ensuring that all aspiring medical students have a fair opportunity.

PICTALK



Devotees gather to take a holy dip in the Ganga river on the occasion of Ganga Dussehra, in Haridwar

PTI

Attain happiness by living in the moment

Embracing small moments and choosing to smile can transform not just our day, but the lives of those around us, making the world a happier place

I have often wondered if happiness is a choice or an effort. As I have aged, I realise that it is a choice for which one needs to make an effort. I understand that happiness derived out of immersing oneself in the moment is also meditative. A few years back, I was standing in the airport security queue with a grumpy face. It was an early morning flight for which I had to wake up in the dead of the night. I was also stressed as I had to make a presentation to my Board of Directors in a few hours. In short I had no reasons to be happy. In this self-made gloom surrounding me, my eyes fell on an old gentleman, standing patiently in front of me. His cheerful disposition even at that early hour, despite the struggle to navigate the slow moving long queue and the broad smile on his face as he walked jauntily for the mandatory check, was enough to light up the faces of everyone around him. He smiled at the security personnel, asked his name, introduced himself and still laughing, picked up his cabin baggage and moved on with



a spring in his steps. The usually taciturn security staff kept looking at the retreating back — with a smile on his face! We had a laughter club in my condominium complex. These sexagenarians to octogenarians burst into laughter at the drop of a hat, oblivious to the smirks of the other walkers. The laughter is forced, but the young at heart are immersed in the act. They have chosen to work for happiness, unmindful of the worry of the moment. Children do not need a reason to be happy — they do not even have to fake it. Each moment is a miracle for them. It would not be wrong to say that they live in the moment. The purity and

the sheer joy of their happiness is a sight to behold. I was a young boy of 9. My brother was 8. We were having annual sports in our school. The winter days were gloriously sunny. It was a pleasure to sit on the boundary wall to watch the young athletes. It was an equally satisfying act to clap for the winning heroes. We lost sense of time, so absorbed were we in the pleasure of the moment. This led my worried and irate father to march to the school and drag us back home. The lasting memory is that of our sitting on the boundary wall lost in the joy that it afforded us and not the subsequent thrashing. As we grew into adulthood, with accompanying respon-

sibilities of the daily grind, lines of frown started appearing on our foreheads. We forgot to even smile. We also forgot to make friends. We thought that the professionals that we spent time with could at best be acquaintances. We could not have been farther from truth. Friends are forever a source of joy.

Now that we are in the winter of our lives, we realise that there is so much to be happy about. The act of waking up in the morning, or going about our routine with our hands and feet and many other such acts that we considered mundane in our younger days, are now sources of happiness. Everyone loves to spend time with a smiling person, avoiding a grumpy face. The world would be happier if all of us chose to be the lighted candle of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “When a happy person comes into the room, it is as if another candle has been lit.”

(The writer conducts workshops on creative writing for young adults and corporate executives. Views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

sibilities of the daily grind, lines of frown started appearing on our foreheads. We forgot to even smile. We also forgot to make friends. We thought that the professionals that we spent time with could at best be acquaintances. We could not have been farther from truth. Friends are forever a source of joy.

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India’s foreign policy under Modi 3.0

Amid geopolitical tensions, Modi’s engagements at the G7 reflect India’s commitment to democratic principles and its positioning on the world stage



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

In less than a week of assuming office as the Prime Minister for the largest democracy in the world, Mr Modi, is back where he excels. He was in Italy this week, meeting the leaders from the powerful group of nations also known as the G7. On the sidelines were several bilateral meetings with leaders of African, Arab nations, besides several clear messages to the primarily American and European groups leaders. This was PM Modi’s first trip abroad, after assuming office for a third time (a remarkable feat in itself), where nearly 670 million voters, patiently waited in queues, under an extremely harsh summer sun, over a period of nearly two months, to choose the leader of the largest democracy. PM Modi and his party, despite, setting really ambitious expectations, could not manage a majority by itself and is now dependent on a bunch of pre poll alliance political parties, to lead the National Democratic Alliance Government. This assumes significance at a time when several parts of Europe, not to mention US are going their own set of democratic churns. The US goes to poll end of the year and voices on either side of the aisle

, are getting harsher and louder. Similarly the elections to the European Parliament, has thrown a resurgence of far right parties, which is likely to have an impact on the geopolitical dynamics for a long time. What Mr Modi may be comforted by, is the fact that he may not need to look around for carefully worded diplomatic Statements, while explaining the State of Indian democracy to the western nations. In the past few years, several questions have been raised across the western nations and in US regarding the health of the Indian democracy, its report card on minority rights, religious freedom, existence of press etc. The near majority verdict, by the Indian electorate, with ample scope of checks and balances to keep the party with highest seats under leash, a robust opposition presence in the parliament would be clear talk point for PM and his set of diplomats to set out a gold standard for democracy, when engaging with several nations. This becomes even more robust, given India’s unblemished record of being a largely



IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, SEVERAL QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN RAISED ACROSS WESTERN NATIONS AND IN THE US REGARDING THE HEALTH OF THE INDIAN DEMOCRACY, ITS REPORT CARD ON MINORITY RIGHTS, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THE EXISTENCE OF THE PRESS, ETC

democratic nation, with a huge diverse population, in a neighbourhood, where there are several non democratic regimes, not to forget the second largest economy in the world China. Mr Modi, with his nearly three decades of experience as head of the State and nation, is not new to diplomacy and in several interviews, leading up to the general elections, has articulated his target of enhancing India’s global image. The grand spectacle around G20 (not to forget back room diplomatic negotiations to arrive at a joint Statement), several high level State visits, a bunch of rescue operations carried out for citizens and neighbours from war torn areas, supply of emergency medicines during Covid, are all pointers towards the focus the Prime Minister’s Office attaches on global reputational management. PM’s first visit in his third term to meet the G7 leaders, is a reassurance of continuity, as well as scoping out newer engagement roadmaps with existing and potential new allies. Mr Modis’ visit to Italy

comes at a time when the Ukraine war is unrelenting and despite severe reluctance, there seems to be chinks in the united European approach towards the aggressor Russia. Many of them, would have, similar concerns regarding Israel’s war on terror, which has refused to die down in months. It may be recalled that both Israel and Russia are close allies of India and India has so far walked a tightrope when commenting both of these volatile situations. The dynamics of the past relationship, while building deeper relations with recent allies such as US are likely to be a sensitive diplomatic trope. It is no wonder, that PM Modi has picked up S Jaishankar, a seasoned diplomat as the External Affairs minister for a second term, to retain the continuity and foreign policy focus achieved during his last term. The evolving geo political landscape and India’s role in global affairs would continue to be tested and chiselled in days to come. (The writer is a special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BATTLING THE HEAT

Madam — Apropos the news story “Battling the heat with tribal ammunition,” published on June 19, this is my response. As a daily newspaper reader, I am struck by the diverse range of topics covered in these articles. From the historical significance of May Day to the ongoing challenges of terrorism and global security, each piece provides valuable insights into the complexities of modern society. The essay on the Kutia-Kondh tribes of Odisha, highlighting their traditional methods for coping with heat waves, is particularly noteworthy. It showcases the resilience and resourcefulness of indigenous communities in adapting to harsh environmental conditions. The article on China’s two-front problem, discussing its growing confidence in its defence capabilities, is also thought-provoking. Overall, these articles demonstrate the breadth and depth of the newspaper’s coverage, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the world around us.

Preeti Arya | Jind

INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Madam — Apropos the news story “Child Development and National Progress,” published on June 19, this is my response. The article rightly highlights the critical importance of investing in early childhood care and education (ECCE) to achieve the vision of a “Viksit Bharat” (Developed India). With over 50 per cent of India’s population below 25 years old, nurturing this demographic dividend through quality ECCE is paramount. The benefits of ECCE are multifaceted — it enhances learning outcomes, positively impacts personality development and bridges social equity gaps. Yet, India’s current ECCE spending is a mere 0.1 per cent of GDP, far below the recommended 1.5-2.2 per cent. To make ECCE universally accessible, the article rightly suggests incorporat-

Nurturing India’s Startup Potential



Apropos the news story “Startups must innovate and execute for commercial success,” published on June 19, this is my response. The article highlights the significant progress made by India’s startup ecosystem in the past decade while acknowledging the challenges that young entrepreneurs face. The author rightly points out that the growth potential is vast, bolstered by supportive Government initiatives and the commitment of funders to nurture India’s youth. The primary challenge lies in the dearth

of operational and financial management skills among young entrepreneurs, who often struggle with executing their innovative ideas. The author’s emphasis on the need for comprehensive mentoring alongside financial support is well-founded. Funders like YEA play a crucial role in guiding startups in enhancing operational efficiency, managing finances and leveraging Governmental incentives. The author’s emphasis on the importance of genuine innovation, meticulous planning, resilience and patience in entrepreneurship is commendable. Startups often aim for rapid multi-million-dollar or billion-dollar success, but true success hinges on sustained commitment, focus and perseverance. The article serves as a valuable reminder that building a thriving enterprise demands continual effort to benefit entrepreneurs, investors, clients and stakeholders alike. Overall, the article provides a balanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing India’s startup ecosystem and the critical role of funders and mentors in nurturing the entrepreneurial potential of the country’s youth.

Kularani Kapoor | Ranchik

ELDER ABUSE AWARENESS

Madam — Apropos the news story “Elder abuse remains an underreported crisis,” published on June 19, this is my response. As a daily reader of the newspaper, I am deeply disturbed by the alarming statistics on elder abuse. The fact that 1 in 6 older adults experiences abuse in community settings is a stark reminder of the urgent need for concerted

action. World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD) is a crucial step in raising awareness about this issue and empowering communities to identify and address it effectively. I believe that a multifaceted approach involving awareness, education, legal measures and societal change is necessary to address elder abuse. It is essential to educate both the elderly and the younger generations about the importance of respecting and caring for the elderly. The Government, NGOs and the private sector must collaborate to bridge the gap between policy and implementation, ensuring proper care for India’s elderly population.

Pradeep Kumar | Noida

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

THE INFALLIBLE LAW OF KARMA



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

It is said that 'Honesty is the best policy'. But sometimes people get appalled when they see a dishonest corrupt person rising to the heights of success, power and fame while a sincere and kind person toiling it out without much success. As a result, often life seems unfair and the seeming injustice turns people bitter and revengeful. However one fails to understand an important fact that the law of karma is an eternal law that works on the simple principle of cause and effect- 'as you sow so shall you reap'.

We all know that the issue of corruption has stirred up numerous debates and agitations and attracted extensive coverage in the Indian media over the past few years. It is also a well known fact that in many countries taking and giving bribes, financial scams and misuse of public money have become a norm. Many times those involved in these activities go scot free and they lead a luxurious life and enjoy many privileges without being accountable for their nefarious deeds. But we forget that the law of karma is infallible and immutable.

As per this law every act or expression by a human being will be experienced by him/her in the same degree and nobody can escape the effects of this law. What we cannot see most of the time is how and when an action is punished or rewarded, as a result of which we get disillusioned. However, as per karmic law, sometimes the result of an action may be carried over to the next life and hence it says that there is always perfect justice in whatever happens.

This can be seen when we see someone who is born with physical, economic and social challenges. Why? Simply because past karma is carried over and experienced in the next birth. Thus, understanding the law of karma will help us to perceive life in a deeper and holistic way. Firstly, we must realise that the doer of karma is not the body but the being or the soul which is immortal and the eternal Law of karma facilitates and shapes the continuous journey or evolution of the human soul. We are here to express our true nature and experience the reward of that. Our expressions may be a subtle feeling or thought or they may be a visible action.



It is unfortunate that most people today are blind to their spiritual identity and law of karma, as a result of which they believe that they are here for one lifetime and so they can eat, drink, make merry and indulge in all pleasures through right or wrong means. But the fact is that such people may have wealth but they lack peace of mind, health and true joy. This narrow-minded limited view of human life has spawned vices such as lust, greed, ego and attachment. In the effort to have more, enjoy more and possess more, people have become totally callous about values like honesty, compassion, sharing and cooperation. Even when people suffer the result of their bad karma they do not realise that they have to improve themselves instead they blame others and become even more corrupt and vicious. If people could see in advance that each corrupt deed they commit would boomerang into a painful suffering or loss for them either in this life or in the future lifetime, they would never commit a wrong again. But they neither have the wisdom nor have the strength to live a life of total moral integrity. We must realise that richness of character is the most essential and real wealth that raises the value of human life, for, without this, a rich person may have temptations to commit more crime. But, it seems that there is little attention to these things. Today people have lost faith in God and good karma. But the law of karma is the most foolproof law that guarantees good return to those who do good. The time and place and the source from where it will come will vary. But the wheel of divine justice never fails. So, instead of seeking short-term pleasures and rewards through corrupt deeds let us live a righteous life and reap the fruit of abundant joy and wellbeing.

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

NAM faces challenges of neo-colonialism



GYAN BHADRA

The Non-Aligned Movement must rejuvenate its commitment to safeguarding national sovereignty and resist the subtle encroachments of neo-colonialism

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was quoted as saying : “Those who forget history and do not learn from it are condemned to repeat it”. Churchill’s remark coming as it did from excerpts of his 1948 speech delivered in House of Commons was purportedly made against his predecessor whose failure to re-equip the country with requisite arms and ammunition made second world war ineluctable. On one hand, he cast aspersions on the dark side of colonialism. Paradoxically on the other, he, the great liberator of Europe, opined that colonialism should have continued in Asia and Africa in the wake of winning second world war.. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which India manned as a founding member in 1955, was established in the aftermath of the Second World War, ostensibly with a view to safeguard the country’s sovereignty, integrity from the evil designs of colonialists. As is well known, during ‘50s and later a sizeable number of countries were unshackled from the chain of colonialism. They joined NAM en bloc ; and soon the organisation became a force to be reckoned with and played a pivotal role as a mouth-piece for freedom of its members in the world besieged by the Cold War. With diplomatic sleight of hand, its most vocal member-countries introduced in its organisational charter the “neutralist policy” to be followed by other member-countries. Under the diplomatic scheme of things, member-countries would resist temptations and allurements offered either by capitalist West or the communist East to make them their allies. Instead in the quagmire unleashed by two superpowers, the organisation opted the middle path and stood tall as “third formidable forum”. As a matter of fact, nothing illustrates the fact of NAM being a power broker more explicitly than the “swing votes” at the UN courted and shared by the east and west bloc. It provided succour to erstwhile have-not countries. Proof of pudding is in eating. The fact that most of the countries in the world refused to kowtow to either bloc spoke volumes about its sustenance as an independent entity. All this notwithstanding, Churchill was seemingly opinionated in his views about countries including India that they might have failed to learn from history. Without a powerful deterrent force against colonialism, possibilities for it to resurface again could not be ruled out. It might metamorphose into different forms in sync with different age. Undeniably, after the collapse of Cold War, NAM’s relevance was on decline. Many factors which constituted early and undisputed principles of the Movement were blown to smithereens. A case in point: Economic Self-reliance. In the charter of Movement, Self-reliance acquired an ideological role as bulwark against economic aggression perpetrated by multinationals and monopolistic commercial, financial and industrial companies. Conflicting nature of Statements emanating from member-countries and incidents of trading charges amongst them on diplomatically impertinent issues led to strengthen the belief that the organisation had digressed from its chosen path and its future seemed bleak. . Today it goes without saying that the war of attrition against colonialism was far from over during the post-war period. What could not be pre-empted by NAM to happen was the rising graph of neo-colonialism presence in the countries ; and its pres-



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AFTER ASSUMING THE OFFICE OF CHAIRPERSON, AZERBAIJAN VOWED TO WIN BACK A QUARTER OF THE TERRITORY OF ITS COUNTRY KNOWN AS NAGORNO-KARABAKH, WHICH HAD BEEN ILLEGALLY OCCUPIED BY ARMENIAN NEO-COLONIALISTS FOR THREE DECADES

ence manifested itself by controlling countries through money, debt and media. Colonialism was replaced by neo colonialism - the control of countries though independent in name through many means, but namely through the media, money and debt. Herein, NAM’s purpose remained unfulfilled. In the context of Britain, King Charles III, while on a visit to Kenya, rendered his profound apologies for unleashing reigns of dictatorial oppression by his many predecessors within the colonised countries is a significant historical Statement. Now the United Kingdom’s diplomatic intentions are clear. It seeks to enter into partnerships with countries based on motto of mutual respect. A free trade deal between the United Kingdom and India likely to be implemented in New Year may be cited as a case in point. That is slated to pave the way for bringing together the two countries as equals. But France, once regarded as Britain’s close competitor with respect to setting up colonial hegemony in countries has not expressed such feelings of remorse over its past deeds. On the contrary, they have the audacity to run their fiefdom of neo-colonialism with alacrity. As a matter of fact, France is running its writ in so-called independent countries of West and central Africa by controlling two currencies, the west and central African francs. Notably the two currencies are used by 14 African countries. France’s diktat is : these countries must deposit 50 percent of their foreign assets in the French Treasury. Obviously France’s intention to maintain economic hegemony over them is loud and clear. These countries have been bearing the brunt of France’s disdainful economic activities for decades after colonialism was considered to have ended. France behaved obsequiously with these countries for its own advantages. Desperation of these nations—who are only independent in name and not in reality—could be gauged by the fact that in the past twelve months almost all countries in French-speaking Africa have asked French military, diplomats and businessmen to leave their lands for good. More or less France is engaged in the same agonising activities against the countries in other parts of the world where France has daringly disallowed any further independence. For instance, in 2021 the French territory of New Caledonia in the South Pacific faced the diabolical designs of France as the last of three independence referenda was deliberately thwarted by security pressure. The island of Corsica in the Mediterranean witnessed the murder of a freedom fighter which eventually culminated into island-wide riots leaving 76 policemen injured in its wake. Paradoxically France has even furthered its neo-colonial interests in countries which were never part of its erstwhile empire. In the last two years France has thwarted plans for a peace process in the south Caucasus, ostensibly to please Armenia with whom it has entered into deal of arms sales. French diplomats have publicly reprimanded Azerbaijan, Armenia’s neighbour. Not only this, but also those diplomats instigated the million-strong Armenian diasporas in France to pressurise lawmakers in the French National Assembly to pass laws against Azerbaijan ; also they left no stone unturned in maligning the country in French media. Whether to say unlikely coincidence or no coincidence at all, Azerbaijan is now at the helm of NAM as its chairperson. After assuming office of chairperson, Azerbaijan had vowed to win back a quarter of the territory of its country known as Nagorno-Karabakh which was illegally occupied by Armenian neo-colonialists for three decades. In a 44-day war against Armenia in 2020 and later a 24-hour military operation against it in 2023, Azerbaijan finally got back its occupied territories. The fact of Azerbaijan winning back its occupied territories from Armenia did not go down well with France. It reflected in France’s action of using its power initially and unabashedly to undermine European Union-

led peace negotiations from within; it sent senior French politicians - including the Mayor of Paris - to Nagorno-Karabakh before its liberation to praise Armenian separatist leaders. In sheer violation of international law related to war, France did not think twice before allowing its own citizens of Armenian descent to fight in the 2020 conflict without penalty. There are no two opinions about the fact that in order to impede such attempts of geopolitical manipulation, NAM was set up. Azerbaijan’s leadership has resuscitated the group which is evident from international media in far off Australia confirming and writing to vouch for it: “There is life in the Non-Aligned Movement Yet”. In January 2024, Uganda will take the Chairmanship baton from Azerbaijan. To Uganda’s utter discomfiture; it is also shackled with tentacles of neo-colonialist powers who have asked this traditionalist country to abrogate a law on child protection. The inherent motive of neo-colonialist powers is to widely spread and teach modern western social mores in Ugandan schools. The Ugandans have out rightly renounced this socially and culturally demeaning directive. It is also for India to stand with Uganda—independent and fellow NAM’s member—and repudiate the unwarranted interference in the Ugandan education system. With NAM rejuvenating in a new avatar(incarnation), it is high time for all its members alongwith its co-founder India to get their acts together and set up a cohesive group with a view to fight against the act of usurping the sovereignty and wherewithal’s of countries by neo-colonialists belonging to both western and eastern bloc. If not intervened by NAM members now and left unchecked, the ever-burgeoning presence would get the world poorer, unsafe and susceptible to conflicts. Therefore Churchill’s advice to learn from history has not lost relevance in these modern times.

(The author is a columnist, views are personal)

Navigating farmer discontent amid unfulfilled promises

As the Govt embarks on its third tenure, winning back the trust of the farming community will require genuine and substantial reforms that prioritise farmers’ welfare

Agriculture has always been a cornerstone of India’s economy and social structure. Despite its critical role, the sector has witnessed a turbulent relationship with the central Government in recent years. The Union Government’s ambitious promises and subsequent policies aimed at revolutionizing agriculture have often been met with skepticism and anger from the farming community. This discontent was vividly reflected in the recent general election results in States like Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. The deep-seated issues that plagued the sector, including the contentious farming laws and the unmet demand for legal guarantee to Minimum Support Price (MSP), continues to fuel



B K JHA

farmers’ agony and anger. Around 65 per cent of India’s population lives in rural areas, with 47 per cent reliant on agriculture. Despite India’s rapid economic growth, agricultural income has stagnated, averaging about Rs 10,000 rupees monthly in 2019, with half of the families in debt and lacking traditional financing. Public spending on farming has declined over the past decade and needed reforms

have not been implemented. Consequently, the agriculture sector, which employs nearly half of India’s workforce, contributes less than a fifth to the GDP. Modi’s promise to double farmers’ income by 2022 remains unfulfilled. The Modi Government’s first tenure starting in 2014 saw a significant focus on agriculture, with promises to double farmers’ income. However, these promises were overshadowed by controversies and policies perceived as anti-farmer. Agony and anger of farmers reached its tipping point in 2020-21 and nationwide protests begun against controversial farm laws aimed at easing rules for crop sales, pricing and storage. The protests ended after Modi promised to repeal the laws. Farmers demanded legally guaranteed MSP for 23 crops, set at 50 per cent above production costs, as recommended by scientist MS Swaminathan. While the Government sets MSPs for 22 crops, it primarily buys only wheat and rice for welfare programs and private buyers aren’t legally required to pay MSP. The controversial farming laws were aimed at liberalizing the agricultural sector but were seen by many farmers as a threat to their livelihoods. The prolonged protests that followed led to the eventual withdrawal of these laws, yet the underlying discontent persisted. The recent Lok Sabha elections reflected this ongoing anger, with significant losses for the ruling party in agricultural strongholds. What future awaits Indian Agriculture Ministers? Newly appointed Agriculture Minister Shivrang Singh Chouhan will have to bring in all his expertise and experience of transforming Madhya Pradesh agricultural landscape at national level to address the challenges. He must be curious and cautious about the fate of his predecessors. Initiator of the Soil Health Card scheme, under then Union Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh was never inducted in the Cabinet again. The scheme, intended to boost soil productivity, ended up mired in inefficacy and controversy. The subsequent minister, including Narendra Singh Tomar shifted to Madhya Pradesh State politics and now he is speaker in Assembly. Recently, Arjun Munda, faced electoral defeat. Defeat of Junior Ministers Kailash Choudhary and Sanjeev Balyan also indicate farmers’ dissatisfaction with the Government’s agricultural policies. A critical demand from the farming community has been the legal guarantee of MSP. The Government’s failure to address this demand has been a significant source of anger. Farmers argue that a legally guaranteed MSP would provide a safety net against market fluctuations and exploitation by middlemen. Despite multiple assurances, the Modi administration has not enacted legislation to this effect, fueling the perception that their interests are being ignored. Experts argue that legally guaranteeing MSP could create a fiscal burden and potential inflationary effects. However, opinions differ on this impact. Some believe that containing cultivation costs could mitigate inflation concerns. The cost of MSP implementation for all crops is also uncertain, varying with market prices, Government procurement quantities and duration. Estimates range widely, from CRISIL Market Intelligence & Analytics’ 210 billion rupees to other analysts’ 10 trillion rupees annually. A more effective approach might be direct income support linked to farmland investment. Additionally, revamping the current procurement process. Farmers could also benefit from a price stabilization fund to cover the difference when market prices fall below MSP levels. This combination of strategies could better support farmers without causing significant fiscal or inflationary issues. In response to the ongoing challenges in the agricultural sector, the Modi 3.0 Government is poised to introduce several initiatives aimed at placating the agrarian community. Among these, the Krishi Sakhi Convergence Program (KSCP) stands out as a significant and ambitious effort. Modi 3.0 Government’s focus on agriculture, marked by programs like the KSCP, reflects a recognition of the critical role farming plays in India.

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

Russia, N Korea sign strongest deal since Cold War

AP ■ SEOUL

Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed a new partnership that includes a vow of mutual aid if either country is attacked, during a Wednesday summit that came as both face escalating standoffs with the West.

The deal, which the leaders said covered areas including security, trade, investment, and cultural and humanitarian ties, could mark the strongest connection between Moscow and Pyongyang since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Both leaders described it as a major upgrade of their ties.

The two met as Putin visited North Korea for the first time in 24 years. The summit came as the US and its allies express growing concerns over an arms arrangement in which the country provides Moscow with badly needed munitions for its war in Ukraine in exchange for econom-



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un exchange documents during a signing ceremony of the new partnership in Pyongyang, North Korea, on Wednesday. Putin and Kim signed a new partnership that includes a vow of mutual aid if either country is attacked, during a Wednesday summit that came as both face escalating standoffs with the West.

ic assistance and technology transfers that could enhance the threat posed by Kim's nuclear weapons and missile programme.

Kim said that the deal was the "strongest ever treaty" between the two nations, putting the relationship at the level of an alliance,

and vowed full support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Putin said that it was a "breakthrough document" reflecting shared desire to move relations to a higher level. The North Korean leader gave Putin a lavish welcome, meeting him at the airport Tuesday night, where the two shook hands, hugged twice and then rode together in a limousine in a huge motorcade that rolled through the capital's brightly illuminated streets, where buildings were decorated with giant Russian flags and portraits of Putin.

After spending the rest of the night at a state guest house, Putin attended a welcoming ceremony at the city's main square, filled with what appeared to be tens of thousands of spectators, including children holding balloons and people wearing coordinated t-shirts in the red, white and blue of the Russian and North Korean flags. Huge crowds lined up on the streets to greet Putin's motorcade, chanting

"Welcome Putin" and waving flowers and North Korean and Russian flags. Putin and Kim saluted an honour guard and walked across a red carpet. Kim then introduced key members of his leadership including Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui; top aide and ruling party secretary Jo Yong Won; and the leader's powerful sister, Kim Yo Jong.

As the talks began, Putin thanked Kim for North Korea's support for his war in Ukraine, part of what he said was a "fight against the imperialist hegemonistic policies of the US and its satellites against the Russian Federation". Putin hailed ties that he traced back to the Soviet army fighting the Japanese military on the Korean Peninsula in the closing moments of World War II, and Moscow's support for Pyongyang during the Korean War. Kim said Moscow and Pyongyang's "fiery friendship" is now even closer than during Soviet times, and promised "full support and sol-

idarity to the Russian government, army and people in carrying out the special military operation in Ukraine to protect sovereignty, security interests and territorial integrity".

It wasn't immediately clear what that support might look like. Kim has used similar language in the past, consistently saying North Korea supports what he describes as a just action to protect Russia's interests and blaming the crisis on the US-led West's "hegemonic policy". North Korea is under heavy UN Security Council sanctions over its weapons program, while Russia also faces sanctions by the United States and its Western partners over its aggression in Ukraine. US and South Korean officials accuse the North of providing Russia with artillery, missiles and other military equipment for use in Ukraine, possibly in return for key military technologies and aid. Both Pyongyang and Moscow deny accusations about North Korean weapons transfers, which would

violate multiple UN Security Council sanctions that Russia previously endorsed. Along with China, Russia has provided political cover for Kim's continuing efforts to advance his nuclear arsenal, repeatedly blocking US-led efforts to impose fresh UN sanctions on the North over its weapons tests.

In March, a Russian veto at the United Nations ended monitoring of UN sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear programme, prompting Western accusations that Moscow is seeking to avoid scrutiny as it buys weapons from Pyongyang for use in Ukraine. Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters in Pyongyang that the two leaders exchanged gifts after the talks.

Putin presented Kim with a Russian-made Aurus limo and other gifts, including a tea set and a naval officer's dagger. Ushakov said that Kim's presents to Putin included artworks depicting the Russian leader.

French police shoot dead an attacker with screwdriver in Paris suburbs

Paris (AP): A French police officer in the northern suburbs of Paris opened fire and killed an attacker on Wednesday who assaulted a cleaning worker with a screwdriver and also injured another police officer, police said. The cleaning worker suffered "several blows" with the screwdriver, but the extent of the injuries wasn't immediately clear, police said. A police officer who sought to intervene also suffered an arm injury, police said. Another officer then opened fire, killing the attacker, police said. Police said they had no other immediate information about the attack in the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers, including about the attacker's gender or possible motives.

Explosions in Chad's capital kill 9 people, 46 hurt

AP ■ N'DJAMENA (CHAD)

Nine people were killed and more than 40 injured when a fire set off explosions at a military ammunition depot in Chad's capital, an official said Wednesday. Government spokesperson Abderaman Koulamallah said 46 people were being treated for various injuries after the explosions jolted residents from their sleep late Tuesday in the Goudji district of the capital, N'Djamena. The situation was being brought under control, Koulamallah said. The explosions lit up the sky as thick smoke covered the clouds in the West African nation, setting off frantic efforts to extinguish the fire as residents fled their homes for safety.

The cause of the fire was not immediately clear, and President Mahamat Deby Itno said an investigation would be conducted.

"Peace to the souls of the victims, sincere condolences to the bereaved families and quick recovery to the injured," Deby said on Facebook. He later visited the scene of the accident as well as hospitals where the injured were being treated. People living in the area panicked, thinking the explosion was an armed attack, resident Oumar Mahamat said. Local media reported the blasts started just before midnight as nearby buildings shook and ammunition was thrown from the depot with explosive force. Authorities called on residents to stay out of the area, which was taken over by security forces gathering the scattered artillery shells.

Allamine Moussa, a resident, called on the government to "come to our aid urgently" after he and other residents fled their homes. "Many families have recorded

deaths and it's sad," Moussa said. Chad, a country of nearly 18 million people, has been reeling from political turmoil before and after a controversial presidential election that resulted in Deby Itno's victory. He had led the country as interim president during the period of military rule that followed the death of his father in 2021. Cameron Hudson, an Africa expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the explosions might not be entirely coincidental and "feels more like a message" to the government, which has been embroiled in internal political tensions and as well as regional tensions over the war in neighboring Sudan. Recent claims about Chad's alleged involvement in the war in Sudan create an untenable position at home for Deby Itno, said Hudson, a former U.S. official. "A house divided cannot stand,"

Police detain 8 after revolt against French rule

Paris (AP): Police in the restive French Pacific territory of New Caledonia rounded up eight people on Wednesday, including an independence leader, who are suspected of having a role in the deadly violence that wracked the archipelago where Indigenous Kanak people have long sought to break free from France. The early morning round-up was part of an ongoing police investigation launched May 17, just days after unrest first erupted, into a wave of armed clashes, looting, blazes and other violence that turned parts of the capital, Noumea, and its suburbs into no-go zones. New Caledonia's prosecutor, Yves Dupas, said in a statement that eight people were detained from 6 a.m. in Noumea and its Mont-Dore suburbs. He said those taken in custody include Christian Tein, a leader of a pro-independence group that French officials alleged played a leading role in weeks of violence over contested voting reforms for New Caledonia.

Yemen's Houthi rebels sink ship in Red Sea in second attack

AP ■ DUBAI

A bulk carrier sank days after an attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels believed to have killed one mariner on board, authorities said early Wednesday, the second ship sunk in the rebels' campaign. The sinking of the Tutor in the Red Sea marks what appears to be a new escalation by the Iranian-backed Houthis in their campaign targeting shipping through the vital maritime corridor over the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. The attack comes despite a monthslong US-led campaign in the region that has seen the Navy face its most-intense maritime fighting since World War II, with near-daily attacks targeting commercial vessels and warship.

Liberian-flagged, Greek-owned-and-operated Tutor sank in the Red Sea, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations centre said in a warning to sailors in the

region. "Military authorities report maritime debris and oil sighted in the last reported location," the UKMTO said. "The vessel is believed to have sunk."

The Houthis, quoting foreign reports in media outlets they control, acknowledged the sinking. The US military did not acknowledge the sinking, nor did it respond to requests for comment. The Tutor came under attack about a week ago by a bomb-carrying Houthi drone boat in the Red Sea. John Kirby, a White House national security spokesman, said on Monday that the attack killed "a crew member who hailed from the Philippines". The Philippines has yet to acknowledge the death, but the man who had been aboard the Tutor has been missing for over a week in the Red Sea, which faces intense summertime heat. The use of a boat loaded with explosives raised the spectre of the attack in 2000 on the USS Cole, a sui-

cide assault by al-Qaida when the warship was at port in the Yemeni city of Aden, killing 17 on board. The Cole is now part of a US Navy operation in the Red Sea led by the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower to try and halt the Houthi attacks, though the rebels continue their assaults. The Houthis have launched more than 60 attacks targeting specific vessels and fired off other missiles and drones in their campaign that has killed a total of four sailors. They've seized one vessel and sunk two since November. A US-led airstrike campaign has targeted the Houthis since January, with a series of strikes May 30 killing at least 16 people and wounding 42 others, the rebels say. In March, the Belize-flagged Rubymar carried a load of fertilizer sank in the Red Sea after taking on water for days following a rebel attack. The Houthis have maintained their attacks target ships linked to Israel, the US or the UK.

However, many of the ships they've attacked have little or no connection to the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. The war in Gaza has killed more than 37,000 Palestinians there, while hundreds of others have been killed in Israeli operations in the West Bank. It began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on October 7, killing about 1,200 people and taking around 250 hostage. A recent report by the US Defence Intelligence Agency acknowledged container shipping through Red Sea has declined by 90 per cent since December over the attacks. As much as 15 per cent of the world's maritime traffic flows through that corridor. Meanwhile on Wednesday, the Houthis said US-led airstrikes targeted Raymah, a province in Yemen under rebel control. The Houthi-controlled SABA news agency described a local radio station's building as being "totally destroyed" in the strikes.

Climate protesters arrested in UK

London (AP): Two climate protesters were arrested Wednesday for spraying orange paint on the ancient Stonehenge monument in southern England, police said. The latest act by Just Stop Oil was quickly condemned by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak as a "disgraceful act of vandalism." The incident came just a day before thousands are expected to gather at the 4,500-year-old stone circle to celebrate the summer solstice — the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. English Heritage, which manages the site, said it was "extremely upsetting" and said curators were investigating the damage. Just Stop Oil said on the social media platform X that the paint was made of cornstarch and would dissolve in the rain. Wiltshire Police said the pair were arrested on suspicion of damaging one of the world's most famous prehistoric monuments and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Stonehenge was built on the flat lands of Salisbury Plain in stages starting 5,000 years ago, with the unique stone circle erected in the late Neolithic period about 2,500 B.C.

Far-right leader backpedals on taking France out of NATO strategic military command

AP ■ VILLEPINTE



The far-right leader angling to become prime minister after France's upcoming parliamentary election backtracked Wednesday on his party's previous promise to pull out of NATO's strategic military command. National Rally president Jordan Bardella said at the Eurosatory arms trade show outside Paris in Villepinte that he "doesn't plan to question the commitments France has made on the international stage" if voters give his far-right party a majority that enables him to lead a new government, in what would be an awkward power-sharing arrangement with President Emmanuel Macron.

Referring to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Bardella said that "France mustn't leave NATO's military command while we are at war, because it would considerably weaken France's responsibility on the European scene and, obviously, its credibility with regard to

its allies." The comments pulled back from a campaign promise made by his party in its manifesto for the 2022 French presidential election. "The priority will be to leave the integrated NATO command," the 2022 manifesto read, a move that would have taken French military staff out of the NATO body that plans operations, and weakened France's role and influence within NATO. This latest about-face comes as the National Rally is toning down previously announced positions in an attempt to win voters outside of its tradition-

al base before the June 30 and July 7 two-round parliamentary election — the party's first real chance of forming a government.

In spite of his comments regarding NATO, Bardella maintained that he's firmly against sending troops to Ukraine.

"I am opposed, unlike the president of the republic, to sending troops and sending French soldiers to Ukraine, because I believe that first of all, a majority of French people is opposed to this decision," he said. Macron said in March that sending Western troops into Ukraine shouldn't be ruled out.

Bardella said that he supported sending continued French supplies of weaponry, ammunition and other military equipment and support to Ukraine "to enable Ukraine to protect itself," but that he was also wary of the risk of any direct escalation with Russia, noting that it is nuclear-armed like France. "My position has

not changed. It is ... to hold the front and at the same time to avoid any risk of escalation with Russia, because Russia is a nuclear power," he said. Bardella's eurosceptic anti-immigration party, and particularly its former presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, is known for its close ties to Russia. Le Pen has expressed reservations about supplying Ukraine with additional arms. Earlier this month, Macron dissolved the lower house of France's parliament in a surprise announcement, sending voters back to the polls, after his party was handed a humiliating defeat by the far right in the European Parliament election. In France, legislative elections decide the makeup of the parliament, not the occupant of the presidential Elysee Palace. Macron has a presidential mandate until 2027, and says that he won't not step down before the end of his term, although he might have to share power with a far-right-led government.

EU criticises France for excessive debt

Brussels (AP): The European Union's executive arm on Wednesday criticised France for running up excessive debt, a stinging rebuke at the height of an election campaign where President Emmanuel Macron is facing a strong challenge from the extreme right and the left.

The EU Commission recommended to seven nations, including France, that they start a so-called "excessive deficit procedure", the first step in a long process before any member state can be hemmed in and moved to take corrective action. "Deficit criteria is not fulfilled in seven of our member states," said EU Commission Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis, pointing the finger at Belgium, France, Italy, Hungary, Malta, Slovakia and Poland, in addition to France. For decades, the EU has set out targets for member states to keep their annual deficit within 3 per cent of Gross Domestic Product and overall debt within 60 per cent of output. Those targets have been disregarded when it was conve-

nient, sometimes even by countries like Germany and France, the biggest economies in the bloc.

This time, however, Dombrovskis said that a decision "needs to be done based on, say, facts and whether the country respects the treaty, reference values for a deficit and debt and not based on the size of the country". The French annual deficit stood at 5.5 per cent last year. Over the past years, exceptional circumstances like the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine allowed for leniency, but that has now come to an end. Still, Wednesday's announcement touched a nerve in France, after Macron called snap elections in the wake of his defeat to the hard right of Marine Le Pen in the EU parliamentary polls on June 9.

Le Pen's National Rally and a new united left front are polling ahead of Macron's party in the elections, and both challengers have put forward plans where deficit spending to get out of the economic rut is essential.

Sudan accuses UAE of fuelling war with weapons to paramilitary rivals

United Nation (AP): The Sudanese government has accused the United Arab Emirates of fuelling the 14-month war in the African country by providing weapons to a rival paramilitary force. The UAE dismissed the allegation as "ludicrous," calling "a shameful abuse by one of the warring parties".

The clash came during a UN Security Council meeting at which Assistant Secretary-General Martha Pooe warned that atrocities are being committed along ethnic lines in Sudan's western Darfur region. She urged an immediate ceasefire in the North Darfur capital, El Fasher, which is besieged by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, "to prevent further atrocities, protect critical infrastructure, and alleviate civilian suffering".

Sudanese Ambassador Al-Harith Mohamed accused the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces of "destructively launching" its war with the Sudanese military and attacking civilians, aided by weapons from the UAE.

He said that Sudan has evidence of the UAE supplying weapons and that the government will submit a file on UAE actions to the International Criminal Court. The UAE's ambassador, Mohamed Abushahab, said those were "false allegations" and demanded to know why Sudan's government refuses to return to peace talks.

Turning to Sudan's ambassador seated beside him at the Security Council's horseshoe-shaped table, Abushahab said: "You should stop grandstanding in international fora such as this and instead take responsibility for ending the conflict you started." UN experts monitoring an arms embargo in Darfur reported "credible" evidence in January that the UAE sent weapons to the Rapid Support Forces several times a week from northern Chad. U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Tuesday reiterated a U.S. appeal to all "external actors to stop fueling and prolonging this conflict, and enabling these atrocities, by sending weapons to Sudan."

Early blast of heat and humidity leaves millions sweltering across US

AP ■ TOLEDO



People and even zoo animals were forced to find ways to thwart the muggy weather. An organization that provides produce to areas with limited access to fresh food in Columbus, Ohio, prepared frozen towels and packed cold water for their workers. "Hydration is the key," said Monique McCoy, market manager for the Local Matters Veggie Van. In Toledo, Ohio, the city can-

celed a weekly fitness event and a neighboring suburb called off a street fair as temperatures reached the mid-90s (about 35 C). A food bank in upstate New York canceled deliveries for Wednesday out of concern for staff and volunteers. Schools in New York canceled field trips Tuesday to the Rosamond Gifford Zoo in Syracuse, where workers turned on water misters for visitors and the animals.

Elephants and other animals were getting chunks of ice in their pools, said Ted Fox, the zoo's executive director. "Even the tigers love to lick the ice and put their heads on them when it's this warm," Fox said.

The blast of extreme temperatures came a little too early for many.

"This is hot for just moving in to summer, so I'm hoping that we're going to see the downward trend in the temperature here soon because this is a warm one," said Krista Voltolini, who was selling produce at a farmer's market in Columbus. A recent study found that climate change is making heat waves move more slowly and affect more people for a longer time. Last year, the U.S. saw the most heat waves — abnormally hot weather lasting more than two days — since 1936.

Kuwait to give \$15K compensation to kin of Mangaf fire victims: Report

PTI ■ DUBAI/ KUWAIT

The Kuwaiti government will give USD 15,000 each as compensation to the families of the victims of the devastating fire that killed 50 people, including 46 Indians, in the southern Ahmadi Governorate, according to a media report.

The massive fire which occurred at a seven-storey building in the city of Mangaf on July 12 was caused by an electrical short circuit in the guard's room on the structure's ground floor, according to Kuwaiti authorities. The building was home to 196 migrant workers, mostly Indians.

On the orders of the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the victims' families will receive compensation amounting to USD 15,000

each (Rs 12.5 lakh), the Arab Times newspaper reported on Tuesday.

Citing government sources, the newspaper said the compensation payments will be processed and delivered to the victims' embassies.

Three other deceased were Filipinos, and the identity of one of the victims has not been established.

The concerned embassies will ensure that the funds are distributed to the families of those affected by the fire, expediting the process and ensuring that the assistance reaches the victims' families promptly and efficiently, the report said.

"This financial aid aims to support the bereaved families during this difficult time," the newspaper said.

The Indian government had announced compensation of Rs 2 lakh each to the families

of Indian nationals who lost their lives in the massive fire.

The Kerala government last week said it will provide Rs 5 lakh financial assistance to the families of the people from the state who died in the fire tragedy.

The Indians who died in the tragedy included 24 Malayalis.

Kuwait's public prosecutor has launched an investigation into the incident. The probe aims to uncover the circumstances behind the incident, and what might have triggered the deadly fire, the public prosecutor said on X. A Kuwaiti citizen and several foreigners have been arrested in connection with charges of manslaughter and causing injuries due to negligence in security and safety measures following the fire incident.

Ramaphosa sworn in for second term as South Africa President

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

Cyril Ramaphosa was sworn in for a second term as South Africa's President to head a coalition government on Wednesday, despite his failure to secure a majority in parliament for the African National Congress (ANC) in last month's election. Ramaphosa's ANC lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in 30 years in last month's elections. However, the ANC and the Democratic Alliance struck a historic deal to form a coalition government by setting aside their rivalry. While the ANC got 40 per cent of the vote in the election, the Democratic Alliance (DA) came second with 22 per cent. "I swear I will be faithful to the Republic of South Africa... I will obey, observe and uphold the constitution and all other laws of the republic," said Ramaphosa, 71, who was sworn in at the Union Buildings in Pretoria by Chief Justice Raymond Zondo. Ramaphosa said that South Africans should not be distracted by attempts to turn citizens against each other as the country enters a Government of National Unity.



"We must reject every attempt to divide or distract us, to sow doubt or cynicism, or to turn us against one another. Those who seek to stand in our way, those who seek to inflame tensions, will not succeed, because South Africans are resolute," Ramaphosa said at the seat of government, the Union Buildings, as thousands of guests, including heads of state and representatives from several countries looked on. The new government of national unity combines Ramaphosa's ANC, the centre-right DA and smaller parties. "Those who seek to undermine our institutions will fail because democracy lives in the hearts of

our people and will never be dislodged," he said, in what analysts believed was a clear reference, without naming them, to the Economic Freedom Fighters and Mkhonto weSizwe (MK), the new party formed by ousted former president Jacob Zuma. These two parties, which came third and fourth in the general elections last month, refused to join the Government of National Unity (GNU), because the African National Congress, which lost its majority since Nelson Mandela led it to victory in 1994, has teamed up with the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) for the GNU.

The DA was born out of former whites-only parties and is still led largely by whites, although they have committed to following the Constitution and its principles of non-racism. Zuma has also challenged the validity of the elections, alleging irregularities, although his party has not provided any public proof of these claims yet despite going to court on the matter. "Nothing will distract us from serving the people and advancing their interests. We declare for all to know that neither discord nor dissent shall cause us to cast aside that which calls for to build a united, free, just, equal and prosperous nation. "In our brilliant diversity, we gather to affirm our solemn conviction that this country belongs to all who live in it, as articulated in the Freedom Charter almost seventy years ago," Ramaphosa asserted. "We gather here, as people born of the same soil across our nine provinces that make up a unitary South Africa, determined that by our deeds we shall heal the divisions of our past, and overcome the ongoing inequalities and hardships of the present," he added.

Lanka needs to benefit from India's industrial success: Prez

Colombo (PTI): President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Wednesday said Sri Lanka needs to connect with neighbouring India to reap the benefits of its massive industrial development. "Our neighbour India is going through a phase of massive industrial development. Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are experiencing it. We must also join in," said Wickremesinghe in his address at the Industry 2024 event here. The president said he was hopeful of discussing with External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, who is due to arrive here on Thursday, about the follow-up on his interaction with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to India. "Usage of solar and wind powers and to obtain liquid hydrogen are areas where we hope to work in collaboration with India," Wickremesinghe, also the finance minister, said, adding that Adani projects in Sri Lanka have pioneered these efforts. Sri Lanka in the second quarter of 2022 had declared bankruptcy announcing the island's first ever sovereign default. Negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a bailout began almost immediately and the first tranche of the USD 2.9 billion facility was released in March 2023. The cash-strapped country has introduced a set of hard reforms to address its economic woes. Despite the outstanding issue of debt restructuring, three tranches worth USD 1 billion of the USD 2.9 billion bail-out have been materialised subject to reforms. Wickremesinghe said that by ongoing debt restructuring negotiations, the government was hoping to get time until 2042 to repay. He said it was important for Sri Lanka to convert into becoming an export-oriented economy from the current import-oriented one. "Since we are an import-oriented economy, we have to find money to import. To become an export-oriented economy, we have to be competitive with our industries to become a production economy," the president said.

Pak for campaign to recover arms from terrorist groups

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan has urged the United Nations for a "concerted campaign" to recover all weapons from dreaded terrorist groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Speaking at the UN's Fourth Review Conference of the Programme of Action (PoA) on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) on Tuesday, Ambassador Munir Akram expressed Pakistan's "grave concern over the acquisition and use of modern and sophisticated small arms by terrorist groups such as [the] TTP". According to a statement issued by the Pakistani mission to the UN, Akram highlighted the "need for a concerted campaign to recover all weapons from terrorist groups like the TTP" and also called for an investigation into how these groups acquired such sophisticated weapons. The TTP is a banned terrorist outfit which has been fighting to establish the rule of Sharia across Pakistan. The Pakistani envoy asserted that it was the responsibility of

the UN member states and that of the UN to take measures to prevent the illicit trade, transfer, and diversion of these arms, Dawn News reported. "Terrorists and criminals do not manufacture these arms. They acquire them from illicit arms markets or receive them from entities that want to destabilise a particular region or country," Akram said. The envoy highlighted how the "illicit proliferation, excessive accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons" was exacerbating conflicts, fuelling terrorism, threatening peace and security, and undermining sustainable development globally. Akram said the advent of new technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and drones was "deepening challenges in combating the proliferation of increasingly lethal small arms". Describing the UN PoA and the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) as a structured framework to address the challenges pertaining to the illicit trade and trafficking of small

arms and light weapons, Akram reiterated Pakistan's commitment to both tools. "We have strengthened our legislative frameworks, enhanced transfer controls and implemented robust measures to prevent the diversion of SALW to unauthorised users," the envoy asserted. Pakistan has long held that the banned TTP uses safe havens in Afghanistan to launch deadly cross-border attacks. In March, Pakistan called on the UN Security Council (UNSC) to urge the Taliban rulers in Afghanistan to terminate their relationship with the TTP. Last month, Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan Asif Ali Durrani stated that TTP attacks in the country increased by 60 per cent in two years, showing a significant rise since the Afghan Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021. Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan after the banned militant TTP ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022.

US soldier convicted of theft in Russia, sentenced to nearly 4 years in prison

AP ■ MOSCOW

A court in Russia's far eastern city of Vladivostok on Wednesday convicted a visiting American soldier of stealing and making threats of murder, and it sentenced him to three years and nine months in prison. Staff Sgt Gordon Black, 34, flew to the Pacific port city to see his girlfriend and was arrested last month after she accused him of stealing from her, according to US officials and Russian authorities. Russia's state news agencies Tass and RIA Novosti reported that the judge in Pervomaisky District Court

in Vladivostok also ordered Black to pay 10,000 rubles (USD 115) in damages. Prosecutors had asked for a sentence of four years and eight months in prison. Black's case occurs amid tensions over Russia's arrests of American journalists and other US nationals as the fighting in Ukraine continues. Russia has jailed a number of Americans, including corporate security executive Paul Whelan and Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich. The US government has designated both men as wrongfully detained and has been trying to negotiate their release.

Others detained include Travis Leake, a musician who has been living in Russia for years and was arrested last year on drug-related charges; Marc Fogel, a teacher in Moscow who was sentenced to 14 years in prison, also on drug charges; and dual nationals Alsu Kurmasheva and Ksenia Khavana. The US State Department strongly advises American citizens not to go to Russia. Black was on leave and in the process of returning to his home base at Fort Cavazos, Texas, from South Korea, where he had been stationed at Camp Humphreys with the Eighth Army. Cynthia Smith, an Army spokesperson,

said Black signed out for his move back home and, "instead of returning to the continental United States, Black flew from Incheon, Republic of Korea, through China to Vladivostok, Russia, for personal reasons." Under Pentagon policy, service members must get clearance for any international travel from a security manager or commander. The US Army said last month that Black hadn't sought such travel clearance and it was not authorised by the Defence Department. Given the hostilities in Ukraine and threats to the US and its military, it is extremely unlikely he would have been granted approval.

Iran's Nobel Peace Prize laureate sentenced to another year in prison

AP ■ DUBAI

Iran's imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Narges Mohammadi, has been sentenced to another year in prison over her activism, her lawyer said on Wednesday. Mostafa Nili, Mohammadi's lawyer, told The Associated Press that his client was convicted on a charge of making propaganda against the system. Nili said the sentence came after Mohammadi urged voters to boycott Iran's recent parliamentary election, sent letters to lawmakers in Europe and made comments regarding torture and sexual assault suffered by another Iranian journalist and political activist. Mohammadi is being held at Iran's notorious Evin Prison, which houses political prisoners and those with Western ties. She already had been serving a 30-month sentence, to which 15 more months were added in January. Iran's government has not acknowledged her additional sentencing. The latest verdict reflects the Iranian theocracy's anger that she was awarded the Nobel prize last October for years of

activism despite a decadeslong government campaign targeting her. Mohammadi is the 19th woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize and the second Iranian woman after human rights activist Shirin Ebadi in 2003. Mohammadi, 52, has kept up her activism despite numerous arrests by Iranian authorities and years behind bars. In November, Mohammadi went on a hunger strike over being blocked along with other inmates from getting medical care and to protest the country's mandatory headscarves for women. Mohammadi was a leading light for nationwide, women-led protests sparked by the death last year of a 22-year-old woman in police custody that have grown into one of the most intense challenges to Iran's theocratic government. That woman, Mahsa Amini, had been detained for allegedly not wearing her headscarf to the liking of authorities. For observant Muslim women, the head covering is a sign of piety before God and modesty in front of men outside their families.

US approves new \$360 mn arms sale to Taiwan for drones, related equipment

Washington (AP): The Biden administration on Tuesday approved a new USD 360 million weapons sale to Taiwan, sending the island hundreds of armed drones, missile equipment and related support material, the State Department said in a statement that is sure to draw condemnation from China. The announcement was not unexpected but it comes at a time of high tension between Washington and Beijing, which regards Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to consolidate by force if necessary. The sale includes 291 Altius-600M systems, which are unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, with warheads. It also includes 720 Switchblade drones known as "extended-range loitering munitions," the State Department said. It said the sale "serves US national, economic, and security interests by supporting the recipient's continuing efforts to modernize its armed forces and to maintain a credible defensive capability." It will "help improve the security of the recipient and assist in maintaining political stability, military balance, and economic progress in the region," it said.

China, Malaysia to ink economic pacts as visiting Li meets Anwar

AP ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Chinese Premier Li Qiang is set to talk Wednesday with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, with their countries due to ink cooperation pacts on digital economy and green development as they celebrate a half-century of diplomatic relations. Li, the first Chinese premier to visit Malaysia since 2015, flew in late Tuesday from Australia to a red carpet welcome. Upon his arrival, Li said the two nations' 50-year anniversary was a new starting point to deepen links and increase exchanges. "China is advancing Chinese modernization on all fronts through high-quality development. Malaysia, on its part, is promoting national development under the vision of Malaysia MADANI. China is ready to work with Malaysia," Li said in a statement published by the national Bernama news agency. Li, China's No. 2 leader after President Xi Jinping, last week also became the first Chinese premier to visit New Zealand and then Australia in seven years. Li was given an official welcoming ceremony at Malaysia's government capital of Putrajaya before private talks

with Anwar. While trade is expected to dominate, Malaysia's Foreign Minister Mohamad Hassan has said the prickly issue of territorial claims in South China Sea was also likely to be raised. Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan all dispute Beijing's claims to almost the entire South China Sea. But unlike the publicized clashes between the Philippines and China, Malaysia's government prefers the diplomatic channel and rarely criticizes Beijing even though Chinese coast guard ships have sailed near Malaysia's waters. This is partly to protect economic ties, as China is Malaysia's top trading partner. "That is why we need to further build on this good cooperation we have established since 1974. The good ties we have enjoyed since will allow us to manage and resolve any issue amicably," Mohamad Hassan was quoted as saying by The Star newspaper ahead of Li's visit. Li and Anwar will also witness the signing of a new five-year deal for economic and trade cooperation. Trade Minister Zafrul Aziz has said it would strengthen links between industries in priority sectors like high-level manufacturing and digital economy. Zafrul said

government-to-government pacts were expected to be signed including investment cooperation in the digital economy and green development. Trade with China — Malaysia's No. 1 trading partner since 2009 — made up 17% of Malaysia's global trade, valued at \$98.8 billion last year, Zafrul was quoted as saying by Bernama last week. Anwar, who visited China twice last year, has sought to move closer to Beijing even while engaging the U.S. as a key ally. While speaking at a forum in Tokyo in May, Anwar stressed that Beijing is too close, too important and too strategic to ignore. Ahead of Li's visit, Anwar told Chinese media that Malaysia planned to join the BRICS bloc of developing economies but didn't give details. The plan was confirmed by Zafrul and Mohamad Hassan on Monday. The bloc's core members are Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, who to seek a fairer world order currently dominated by Western nations. It expanded with Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates invited to become members this year. Some 40 countries have also expressed interest.

Hundreds die during Haj pilgrimage in S Arabia amid intense heat

AP ■ MECCA

Hundreds of people died during this year's Haj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia as the faithful faced intense high temperatures at Islamic holy sites in the desert kingdom, officials said on Wednesday as people tried to claim their loved ones' bodies. Saudi Arabia has not commented on the death toll amid the heat during the pilgrimage, required of every able Muslim once in their life, nor offered any causes for those who died. However, hundreds of people had lined up at the Emergency Complex in Al-Muaiseem neighbourhood in Mecca, trying to get information about their missing family members.

One list circulating online suggested at least 550 people died during the five-day Haj. A medic who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss information not released publicly by the government said that the names listed appeared genuine. That medic and another official who also spoke on condition of anonymity said they believed at least 600 bodies were at the facility. The list offered no cause of death. Each year, the Haj draws hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from low-income nations, "many of whom have had little, if any, pre-Haj health care," an article in the April edition of the Journal of Infection and Public Health said. Communicable

illnesses can spread among the gathered masses, many of whom saved their entire lives for their trips and can be elderly with preexisting health conditions, the paper added. However, the number of dead this year suggests something caused the number of deaths to swell. Already, several countries have said some of their pilgrims died because of the heat that swept across the holy sites at Mecca, including Jordan and Tunisia. Temperatures on Tuesday reached 47 degrees Celsius (117 degrees Fahrenheit) in Mecca and the sacred sites in and around the city, according to the Saudi National Center for Meteorology. Onlookers saw some people faint while trying

to perform the symbolic stoning of the devil. Others, including many Egyptians, lost track of their loved ones in the heat and the crowds. More than 1.83 million Muslims performed the Haj in 2024, including more than 1.6 million pilgrims from 22 countries, and around 222,000 Saudi citizens and residents, according to the Saudi Haj authorities. On Wednesday at the medical complex in Mecca, an Egyptian man collapsed to the ground when he heard the name of mother among the dead. He cried for some time before grabbing his cellphone and calling a travel agent, shouting: "He left her to die!" The crowd tried to calm the man. Security appeared tight at the complex,

with an official reading out names of the dead and the nationalities, which included people from Algeria, Egypt and India. Those who said they were kin of the dead were allowed inside to identify the deceased. The AP could not independently confirm the cause of death at the complex. Saudi officials did not respond to questions seeking more information. The kingdom's ruling Al Saud family maintains a major influence in the Muslim world through its oil wealth and management of Islam's holiest sites. Like Saudi monarchs before him, King Salman has taken the title of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, referring to the Grand Mosque in Mecca home

to the cube-shaped Kaaba that Muslims pray towards five times a day, and the Prophet's Mosque in the nearby city of Medina. Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars on crowd control and safety measures for those attending the annual five-day pilgrimage, but the sheer number of participants makes ensuring their safety difficult. Climate change could make the risk even greater. A 2019 study by experts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that even if the world succeeds in mitigating the worst effects of climate change, the Haj would be held in temperatures exceeding an "extreme danger threshold" from 2047 to 2052, and from 2079 to 2086.

Atiqur Rahman alias Tipu Gul Marwat was wanted in several cases of bomb blasts in Bannu, DI Khan and local police, and attacks on police and security forces. On April 27, TTP Malakand chapter commander Talha Swati was killed in the Asadabad area of Afghanistan's Kunar province, the paper reported, citing sources. According to reports, the slain terrorist was reporting on Jammatul Ahra's activities to the South District Taliban, Islamic State Khorasan Province and his close aide Noor Wali Mehsud. There were conflicting reports surrounding the commander's death. Some reports suggested he was killed by ISKP, while others stated he was killed by a rival faction due to some internal rifts. The TTP, also known as the Pakistan Taliban, was set up as an umbrella group of several militant outfits in 2007.

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY
HARBOUR WORKS DIVISION No.1
e-TENDER CALL NOTICE
e-TCN No.CE/HWD/ACCTS-01/24/195,
dtd.12.06.2024.

Name of the Work: "Upgradation of existing Plot (siding Plot RRS-5) inside Harbour area of PPA". Put to tender value: Rs.1,48,11,908.80 plus GST as applicable. Last date & time of submission of tender through online bidding is 04.07.2024 up to 17:15 Hrs. For details, please log on to the Website: <https://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app>.

Sd/-Executive Engineer,
Harbour Works Division No.-1
Paradip Port Authority
PPA/PR/18-2024-25 dtd.18.06.2024

PPGCL
PARAGRAY POWER GENERATION COMPANY LTD.

Regd Office: Shalabdi Bhawan, B12 & 13, Sector 4, Gautam Budh Nagar, Noida, Uttar Pradesh-201301
Plant Address: PG-Lohgara, Tensi-Bara, Prayagraj (Allahabad), Uttar Pradesh-212107
Phone : +91-420-610200/610209 FAX : 0431010102/0207PLC032635

NOTICE INVITING EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

Prayagraj Power Generation Company Limited invites expression of interest (EOI) from eligible vendors for "1000 mm ACW inlet pipe (Raw Water) hot tapping (Line Stoppage) along with spares and consumables without disturbing flow to other units" for 3x600 MW Thermal Power Plant at Prayagraj Power Generation Company Limited, Bara, Dist. Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India. Details of pre-qualification requirements, bid security, purchasing of tender document etc. may be downloaded using the URL- <https://www.ppgcl.co.in/tenders.php> Eligible vendors willing to participate may submit their expression of interest along with the tender fee for issue of bid document latest by 25th June 2024.

GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY, AMRITSAR

Tender Notice Reference No. GNDU/GEN/52/2024

The Department of G.N.D.U. Amritsar invites online bids for the following:-

Sr. No.	Item	Quantity
1	Imaging of Part-C & Part-D of OMR front cover. Scanning of OMR front cover having part-C and Part-D with Scan no. and processing of Data in the form of marks list.	10 Lac for Two Semester (5 Lacs per Semester)

Closing Date & Time: **10-07-2024 at 5:00 p.m.**
For details log onto www.eproc.punjab.gov.in
Note: Any Corrigendum(s) to the Tender Notice shall be published on the above website only.

Assistant Registrar (General)
Guru Nanak Dev University,
Amritsar

NA/12/23486/2023/34714 Dated CHD :- 6/19/2024

verka
Har Din Da, Har Din Da

THE PUNJAB STATE COOPERATIVE MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION LTD.
SCO 153-155, SECTOR 34-A, CHANDIGARH-160022. EPABX No. 0172-5041812,66

Notice Inviting e Tender

www.verka.coop

e-tenders are hereby Invited for the purchase and supply of following item :-

Name of Work/Item	Period/Tentative Qty
i. For Verka Head Office Chandigarh	
E. C.BOXES for :-	Half yearly/
• Export Ghee Tins and Defence WMP Tins	40K
• Aseptic Packaging	16 Lac
• Different Milk Products	1 crore
ii. Bulk Milk Cooler	Annual/
i. 500 Ltr	10 No's
ii. 1000 Ltr	80 No's
iii. 2000 Ltr	50 No's
iv. 3000 Ltr	10 No's
v. 5000 Ltr	10 No's
iii. AMCU's	Annual/ 669 No's

NOTE:

- For complete details regarding above tender (NIT), please visit our website i.e. www.verka.coop & e Tendering portal i.e. eproc.punjab.gov.in.
- Corrigendum, if any, will be uploaded on website only.

NA/12/23489/2023/34719 Dated CHD :- 6/18/2024 **Dy. General Manager (Purchase)**

SBI Chairman pitches for tax relief on interest income in Budget

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State Bank of India Chairman Dinesh Kumar Khara has pitched for tax relief on interest income, saying it would help banks to garner savings that could be used for funding long-term infra projects.

Currently, banks are required to deduct tax when interest income from deposits held in all the bank branches put together is more than Rs 40,000 in a year. With regard to savings accounts, interest earned up to Rs 10,000 is exempt from tax.

"If at all some relief could be given in the Budget regarding tax on the interest earnings, it will be an incentive to depositors. Eventually, the banking sector uses deposits mobilised for the capital formation in the country," he told PTI in an interview.

The Full Budget for 2024-25 is likely to be presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Parliament next month.

Given the current economic growth rate, the SBI chairman



is expecting 14-15 per cent loan growth during the fiscal year 2024-25.

"Normally the way we look at it is that the GDP growth rate plus inflation and 2-3 per cent over that. That gives us the number around 14 per cent or so," he said.

"Hence, 14-15 per cent credit growth depends upon the opportunities available for lending, and it meets our risk

appetite. We will be happy to grow at this pace," he said.

As far as deposits are concerned, he said, it grew by 11 per cent last year.

"And we have some elbow room available in terms of excess SLR...which ensures that we don't have any pressure on us to raise the deposit rates for supporting our loan-to-deposit ratio," he said.

The bank has an excess Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR) between Rs 3.5 lakh crore and Rs 4 lakh crore.

"Incidentally, I may add here that our loan-to-deposit ratio is around 68-69 per cent only. That leaves enough room for us to lend without having pressure on the deposit interest rates.

Nevertheless, he said, "We always give importance to deposits.

"That is the reason why we increased the interest rate for the short-term deposits recently because we felt that there's room for improvement...We should improve our deposit growth rate to some extent during this year. And our effort would be that we should at least grow around 12-13 per cent this year."

Last month, SBI hiked the fixed deposit rate on select short-term maturity up to 75 basis points.

For retail term deposits of 46-179 days, the rate increased by 75 basis points to 5.50 per cent against the earlier 4.75 per cent.

Sensex extends gain for fifth day to scale fresh peak

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity index Sensex on Wednesday ticked higher to scale yet another lifetime closing peak of 77,337, while the broader Nifty retreated from the record high level amid a lack of immediate triggers.

In a volatile trading session, the emergence of profit booking in consumer durables, capital goods and energy shares negated strong gains in banking and financial stocks.

Rallying for the fifth straight session, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 36.45 points or 0.05 per cent to settle at a new closing high of 77,337.59.

During the day, it soared 550.49 points or 0.71 per cent to hit the fresh lifetime peak of 77,851.63.

The NSE Nifty ended at 23,516, down 41.90 points or 0.18 per cent. Intra-day, it rose 106.1 points or 0.45 per cent to hit a new record of 23,664.

"Strong buying in banking stocks helped Sensex sail through in a highly volatile trading session, while Nifty ended weak as investors booked profit in auto, metals, oil & gas, telecom and realty shares after the recent upsurge.



"Ahead of the Budget, markets may see stock & sector-specific activities on hopes the government may increase the outlay for sectors to push growth," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

Among the 30 Sensex companies, Axis Bank, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Kotak Mahindra Bank, IndusInd Bank, State Bank of India, Infosys, Wipro, Tech Mahindra and HCL Technologies were the gainers.

On the other hand, Titan,

Maruti, Bharti Airtel, Larsen & Toubro, NTPC, Reliance Industries, Bajaj Finance and Power Grid were among the laggards.

As many as 2,235 stocks declined, while 1,634 advanced and 103 remained unchanged on the BSE.

"Tracking the positive global cues and robust undertone, the domestic market started on a firm note. But soon after, some hesitancy was seen in the benchmark index Nifty at the elevated zone, and a bout of profit booking was seen in the

Most of top-level executives have positive perception of GST: Survey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

An increasing number of C-suite executives have a positive perception of GST with many highlighting further reforms like rationalising tax rates and effective dispute resolution process as focus areas to usher in GST 2.0, a Deloitte survey said on Wednesday.

The Deloitte GST@7 survey, engaging C-suite and C-1 level executives across diverse industries through online platforms, highlights areas which have resulted in growing confidence in GST, specifically on the positive role of GST automation/ technology and consultative environment, in policy making.

Reflecting growing confidence in GST, the survey found that about 84 per cent of respondents reported a positive perception of GST in

2024, up from 72 per cent in 2023 and 59 per cent in 2022.

Automation of tax compliance, including e-invoicing, continues to be voted as a top performance area. Also, enhanced and continued stakeholder consultation, leading to the issuance of clarificatory circulars/instructions was considered as a positive move in policy making.

The survey highlights the areas where more reforms are required; these include rationalising tax rates, offering an effective dispute resolution process, removing credit restrictions, adopting faceless assessments, liberalising export rules and implementing a compliance rating system.

Goods and Services Tax (GST), which subsumed 17 local taxes and levies, was rolled out on July 1, 2017.

Marking the seven-year journey of GST, Deloitte India conducted the survey to capture India Inc.'s views on this transformational tax reform.

According to the survey, 88 per cent of the top C-suite leaders indicated areas of challenge, including aspects around audits and assessments, underscoring the need for continued simplification, technology integration and capacity building.

The survey respondents also suggested enabling effective dispute resolution mechanisms, with 91 per cent of leaders endorsing the extension of audit timelines to address issues and improve compliance.

Additionally, more than 70 per cent of respondents advocated for aligning pre-deposit requirements for GST appeals



with the pre-GST era norms, aiming to streamline the dispute resolution processes.

Deloitte India Partner and Leader Mahesh Jaising said, "India Inc. Has enhanced confidence in the workings and efficiency of the GST regime. Such positive sentiment is reflective of supply chain efficiencies, the benefits of tax, technology and continued stakeholder engagement on GST policy matters.

"The survey reveals that it is time to push for further reforms to make the regime more robust, dynamic and responsive to taxpayers' needs.

GST 2.0 should review the possibility of expanding the GST regime's tax base, rationalising tax rates, removing ITC restrictions, further export liberalisation for services, unlocking working capital and

addressing concerns related to operational areas of compliance," Jaising said.

To support the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) sector, the survey suggests easing GST registration by implementing streamlined processes, such as virtual verification and standard documentation across the country.

These measures can help MSMEs effectively navigate compliance challenges and contribute more robustly to India's economic growth.

Jaising said: "78 per cent of MSMEs have shared a positive sentiment towards GST implementation this year versus 66 per cent in 2023... Key initiatives sought by MSMEs are paperless invoicing and that uniform registration guidelines across India will significantly ease compliance burdens."

German auto component supplier ZF Group sells 7.5 per cent stake in its Indian subsidiary

PTI ■ MUMBAI

German auto component supplier ZF Group on Wednesday said it has sold a 7.5 per cent stake in its Indian subsidiary ZF Commercial Vehicles Control System (CVCS) India to increase liquidity and financial flexibility for growth.

The sale of shares has no effect on ZF's control over ZF CVCS India, the company said in a statement.

"ZF Group has sold 1,425,000 shares, equalling 7.5 per cent stake, in its listed Indian subsidiary ZF CVCS India to increase liquidity and financial flexibility for its growth plans. The transaction will strengthen the financial



flexibility of ZF, allowing it to invest in its further growth, and in the dynamically developing Indian market," it said.

The Friedrichshafen (Germany)-headquartered firm had commenced the commercial vehicle control system business in January 2022 following the acquisition of WABCO in 2020.

ZF CVCS India is the market leader in the Indian CV

supplier industry and remains an important pillar in ZF's global growth strategy, the company said, adding that the Indian business has shown a strong operating and financial performance on the back of a supportive market environment.

"The sale of shares has no effect on ZF's control of ZF CVCS India, as it is the long-term strategy of ZF to maintain a solid majority shareholding in the entity," it stated.

The transaction will strengthen the financial flexibility of ZF, allowing it to invest in its further growth, and in the dynamically developing Indian market, ZF Group said.

Escorts Kubota withdraws plan to set up new unit at Ghiloth in Rajasthan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Farm equipment and construction equipment firm, Escorts Kubota Ltd on Wednesday said it has withdrawn its plan to set up a new manufacturing plant at Ghiloth in Rajasthan due to failure to meet all the key requirements for a large-scale project.

The company, which has lined up an investment of up to Rs 4,500 crore over the next three to four years to set up a new manufacturing plant, said it continues to explore alternate options with other states, including Rajasthan.

Escorts Kubota had submitted an Expression of Interest



(EOI) to Rajasthan State Industrial Development and Investment Corporation (RIICO) for the proposed acquisition of land in Ghiloth, Rajasthan, subject to requisite approvals and clearances, for setting up an integrated greenfield manufacturing facility, for expanding the existing capacities, the company said in a regulatory

filing.

"...Based on the detailed assessment of the location, the company has reached a conclusion that the location does not meet all the key requirements for a large-scale project being planned and accordingly the company has withdrawn the aforesaid EOI," it added.

One of the key factors for the company withdrawing the EOI was the state government's inability to commit to providing adequate industrial water for the project. However, Escorts Kubota in its filing said it is "committed to setting up an integrated greenfield manufacturing facility in line

with its Mid Term Business Plan (MTBP) and continues to explore the alternate options with other states, including Rajasthan".

Through a new manufacturing plant, Escorts Kubota plans to double its domestic tractor production capacity to 3.4 lakh units annually, while also setting up new engine and construction equipment lines in phases.

At present, the company has a total annual tractor production capacity of 1.7 lakh units. The main plant is located at Faridabad. Its engine production capacity is 1.5 lakh units annually with Kubota engines currently being imported.

ICICI Prudential Life offers discount for women

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

ICICI Prudential Life offers 15 per cent lifetime discount for women and an additional 15 per cent discount for salaried women on its term plan — iProtect SmartOption to choose cover against 34 critical illnesses including breast, ovarian, uterine and cervical cancers.

The company endeavours to make life insurance more affordable for women.

Additionally, salaried women will be eligible for an extra 15 per cent discount on the first year's premium, empowering them to provide financial security to themselves and their loved ones.

iProtect Smart combined with the critical illness benefit, provides cover against 34 critical illnesses including ailments such as breast, ovarian, uterine and cervical cancers.

This combination offers benefits of both health and life insurance. Importantly, the critical illness cover amount is paid out on diagnosis, providing the requisite financial resources for seeking immediate medical treatment, without disrupting the family's savings.

As per The Lancet estimates, the incidence of cancer diagnosed in the under 50 years adult age group had a higher ratio of women.

A single hospitalisation can cost upwards of ₹1 lakh in an urban private hospital, hence, it is essential for women to plan availability of financial resources to treat such critical ailments.

Air India to launch premium economy class on select domestic routes from July

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Air India on Wednesday said it will launch premium economy class on select domestic routes from next month.

As of now, Vistara is the only Indian carrier, which offers premium economy-class travel on its domestic routes.

"Air India today unveiled a three-class configuration on its newly inducted narrow-body aircraft. Air India's A320neo aircraft will now offer a new business, an all-new premium economy and a new economy cabin experience on domestic and short-haul international routes," the airline said.

The Tata Group-owned airline said it has refitted two new A320neo aircraft in a three-class configuration, featuring eight seats in



business, 24 seats with extra legroom in premium economy, and 132 in the economy category, offering a wider choice to its guests.

This is the first time the airline has introduced premium economy cabins on its narrow-body aircraft.

Delhi-Bengaluru-Delhi and Delhi-Chandigarh-Delhi are the two select routes on which the airline will offer premium economy seats, as per the airline.

Air India has plans to introduce the three-class configuration to its entire full-service narrow-body fleet over the next year. Existing

aircraft are now being progressively inducted for refit, while new aircraft joining the fleet will be delivered with the new Air India experience, it said.

"The introduction of a three-class cabin to Air India's narrow-body fleet and commencement of interior refits are important steps in the journey of enhancing the flying experience," said Campbell Wilson, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director at Air India.

The latest upgrade of the narrow-body fleet, which operates on domestic and short-haul international networks, complements the upgraded wide-body experience now available on A350 fleet and new B777s, and on all other wide-body planes as they are refitted over the next two years, he said.

The new business cabins offer 40-inch ergonomic seats with deep 7-inch recline, an adjustable armrest, footrest and backrest, a tray table deployed at the push of a button that includes a PED holder and is extendable and multiple charging ports while the all-new premium economy category provides larger seats with four-way headrests, wider 32-inch seat pitch with a 4-inch recline, and other amenities such as a PED holder and USB charging port, Air India said.

Earlier this month, Wilson had said that Air India will be retrofitting more than 100 planes, including 40 wide-body planes.

Moreover, the airline had in December 2022 announced that it would be investing USD 400-million to refurbish its Boeing 777 and Boeing 787 wide-body aircraft fleet.

India's seafood exports up in volume terms in 2023-24: Commerce Ministry

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's seafood exports have recorded a growth of 3 per cent in volume terms, but a decline of about 8 per cent in value during the last financial year, according to the data of the commerce ministry.

Exports in volume terms have increased to 17,81,602 MT (tonnes) worth USD 7.38 billion during 2023-24 as against 17,35,286 MT (USD 8.0 billion) in 2022-23.

"India recorded an all-time high export in terms of volume by shipping 17,81,602 MT of seafood...Despite the several challenges in its major export markets like the USA, European Union and the UK," D V Swamy, Chairman of Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA), said.

Frozen shrimp, with exports of USD 4.88 billion, retained



its position as the top item in the seafood export basket, accounting for a share of 40.19 per cent in quantity and 66.12 per cent in dollar terms. The US was the largest market for frozen shrimp (2,97,571 MT) in the last fiscal. It was followed by China (1,48,483 MT), the European Union (89,697 MT), Southeast Asia (52,254 MT), Japan (35,906 MT), and the Middle East (28,571 MT).

The ministry said that black tiger shrimp exports too recorded healthy growth.

"Frozen fish, the second largest exported item, fetched

USD 6.71 billion, accounting for 21.42 per cent in quantity and 9.09 per cent in USD earnings," it said, adding that in dollar terms, these shipments dipped by 2.31 per cent in 2023-24.

The other key export products include frozen squid, Surimi, frozen cuttlefish, and frozen octopus. It added that the US continued to be the major importer of Indian seafood in value terms, with an import of USD 2.55 billion in 2023-24. It is followed by China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Canada, Spain, and Belgium.

REGAN SETS A WORLD RECORD IN THE 100 BACKSTROKE AT THE US OLYMPIC TRIALS

AP ■ INDIANAPOLIS

This world record was five years in the making for Regan Smith. What an up-and-down journey it's been.

Bouncing back from a close-but-no-Olympics call in her first race, Smith set a world record in the women's 100-meter backstroke at the US swimming trials on Tuesday night.

The 22-year-old Minnesota native touched in 57.13 seconds, easily beating the mark of 57.33 set a year ago by Australia's Kaylee McKeown.

Smith was just 17 when she first set a world record in the 100 at the 2019 World Championships. But, she struggled to deal with the sudden, newfound fame, ceding dominance in the event to McKeown.

"A long time coming," Smith said. "It's about time."

There was never any doubt about Smith's talent, but a lack

of confidence was almost crippling at times.

She's been working with a sports psychologist since October, which helped turn things around mentally.

Her coach, Bob Bowman, best known for his work with 23-time gold medalist Michael Phelps, took care of the physical side with a gruelling training regimen.

"This is incredibly rewarding," Smith said. "When I was a teenager, I had not done much. There was no pressure on me. I was always the youngest. No one expected much from me. I could go into it fearlessly."

Once she tasted success, it was hard to get back on top. She made the US team for the Tokyo Olympics but finished third in the backstroke as McKeown took the gold.

"I've always had it physically, but I didn't have it mentally," Smith conceded. "I just didn't have it up here," pointing toward her head.

Showing how much her

confidence has grown, Smith bounced back emphatically after getting edged for a spot on the US team in the 100 butterfly, where she finished third behind Gretchen Walsh and Torri Huske.

Flipping to her back, Smith set the second world record of the trials, following Walsh's mark in the semi-finals of the 100 fly.

Katharine Berkoff claimed the second expected Olympic spot for the US with a time of 57.91.

In the night's other final, Bobby Finke earned the right to defend the 800 freestyle gold he won in Tokyo with a time of 7 minutes, 44.22 seconds.

Finke had to work hard to get to the wall ahead of 18-year-old Indiana phenom Luke Whitlock, who set a national age-group record at 7:45.19 and will likely head to his first Olympics with the second US spot.

No one else was within 4 seconds of the top two.

"I find I need pressure to do



well, at least in my eyes," Finke said. "So I feel like the more pressure I feel, then the more likely I am to do well. Happy with the time we got."

Whitlock splashed the water emphatically after going virtually stroke-for-stroke with the reigning Olympic champion, who swept the 800

and 1,500 free in Tokyo. He is expected to become the youngest male swimmer to make the US team since that guy named Phelps, who was 15

when he qualified for his first Olympics in Sydney in 2000.

"It's really just over the last, especially the last two months, my training has really picked up and now just talking to my coach, we just had a really good plan," Whitlock said.

"We kind of got everything planned out like a month and a half before this and I was just really confident with the work I've been putting in, so I knew I could execute it."

Two of America's biggest swimming stars, Caeleb Dressel and Simone Manuel, had impressive debuts at the trials, though there's still work to do to return to the Olympics.

Dressel was the third-fastest qualifier in the preliminaries and semi-finals of the men's 100 freestyle, both times finishing behind Jack Alexy and Chris Guiliano.

The tattooed Floridian will have to beat at least one of them in the final on Wednesday night to earn a

chance to defend his Olympic title in that event.

Manuel was the fastest qualifier in the women's 100 free preliminaries and took the second spot behind Torri Huske in the semi-finals.

Dressel and Manuel are both coming back from long layoffs that cast doubts over whether they'd be able to qualify for Paris.

Dressel was the winner of five gold medals at the Tokyo Olympics. He mysteriously walked away amid the 2022 World Championships, later revealing he needed an extended break to rekindle his love for the sport.

Manuel, the first Black female swimmer to capture an individual gold medal, was diagnosed with overtraining syndrome ahead of the last Olympics.

She barely managed to qualify for the U.S. Team, then shut down all physical activity under a doctor's care to allow her body to recover.

Euro 2024: England faces Denmark in rematch of semifinal last time decided by Harry Kane goal

AP ■ FRANKFURT

England faces Denmark on Thursday as the leader of Group C at the European Championship after a 1-0 win over Serbia.

Denmark was denied by Slovenia's late leveler in a 1-1 draw also on Sunday.

They meet in Frankfurt at the Waldstadion where kickoff is at 6 pm local time (1600 GMT). Here's what to know about the match:

Denmark's need for a win is greater, ahead of a final Group C game against a physically imposing Serbia team.

The teams renew their rivalry from a Euro 2020 semifinal played three years ago at Wembley Stadium. England won 2-1 after extra time, sealed when Harry Kane followed up his penalty being saved by Kasper Schmeichel to score when the ball rebounded to him.

Denmark did not easily forget

how England got that decisive spot-kick, for a foul awarded against defender Joakim Mæhle - "a penalty which should not have been a penalty," coach Kasper Hjulmand said then.

There is a familiarity between the squads with teammates at Manchester United, Crystal Palace and Brentford on either side of this game.

Gareth Southgate is coaching England at his fourth tournament and will be less troubled than analysts and fans about the manner of victory over Serbia.

England eased its way through the group stage at Euro 2020 - making at least two changes between each game - did not concede a goal, then accelerated through the knockout rounds.

Southgate's main call could be if Trent Alexander-Arnold's long-range passing is retained in central midfield alongside Declan Rice.

Recent debutants Kobbie Mainoo and Adam



Wharton are options.

England's preferred left back Luke Shaw is still not involved in team training, and Kieran Trippier is set to continue on his less favored flank.

Denmark has reported no injury concerns.

A draw can be a good result for Denmark even if it ends the day third in the standings.

Slovenia plays Serbia in the earlier game Thursday. In two previous Euros with a 24-team

tournament format - which sends four of the six third-place teams to the knockout phase - a team with three draws has done enough to advance.

Another England win would set the team up to win Group C and face a third-place team in the round of 16.

The group runner-up will face the Group A winner, likely Germany, in the vibrant Dortmund stadium.

However, England has never won two straight games to start a Euros tournament.

Defender Simon Kjær was an unused substitute against Slovenia and his Denmark record of 132 national-team games is now just one ahead of Christian Eriksen, who scored in that 1-1 draw.

"We see it every day in training here, and he's such a nice guy as well. You know he has high standards that he sets and expects," said England midfielder Kobbie Mainoo, 19, on star teammate Jude Bellingham, who turns 21 next week.

"Once the tournament starts you get into a rhythm. It came and we won it. So, we're confident now, we're happy," said England winger Bukayo Saka on winning the first game.

"We have it in our power to have a fantastic game against England where nobody expects us to win," Denmark coach Kasper Hjulmand said.



Grand Slam champions Osaka, Raducanu, Wozniacki and Kerber receive wild cards for Wimbledon

AP ■ WIMBLEDON (ENGLAND)

Former Grand Slam champions Naomi Osaka, Caroline Wozniacki, Angelique Kerber and Emma Raducanu have all been awarded wild cards for Wimbledon.

The grass-court tournament starts on July 1.

Osaka - a four-time major champion and former No. 1 player - and three-time Grand Slam winner Kerber returned from maternity leave at the start of this season.

Currently ranked 113th, Osaka was the only player to take a set

from top-ranked Iga Swiatek at the French Open and followed that up with a quarterfinal spot last week in 's-Hertogenbosch, a warm-up event for Wimbledon.

Former US Open champion Raducanu made her breakthrough at Wimbledon by advancing to the fourth round in 2021.

She will be playing there for the first time in two years after undergoing wrist and ankle surgery in 2023.

Kerber won the 2018 Wimbledon title and was runner-up at the All England

Club in 2016.

She is also a former top-ranked player.

Wozniacki returned from maternity leave last August.

She's never got past the fourth round at Wimbledon, where she will be playing for the first time since 2019.

British players Francesca Jones, Heather Watson and Yuriko Miyazaki were also included in the initial list of invitations.

One main draw wild card remains to be allocated.

Seven British players have been invited to play in the men's draw, including last year's junior champion Henry Searle.



Former deputy head of Czech soccer association gets suspended sentence in match-fixing scandal

AP ■ PRAGUE

Former Czech Football Association deputy head Roman Berbr and other soccer officials were sentenced for their involvement in a match-fixing scandal on Wednesday.

According to the verdict issued by the county court in the western Czech city of Plzen, Berbr was convicted of embezzlement and received a three-year suspended sentence and a 2 million Czech crown fine (\$86,500).

Roman Rogoz, the former sports director of the Slavoj Vysehrad club, was given a four-year prison term and 400,000 Czech crown (\$17,000) fine while former player and soccer official Michal Káník got 2 1/2-years suspended sentence and a fine of 130,000 Czech crowns (\$5,600).

Another of the four key defendants in the case, former referee Tomáš Grimm, was cooperating with the law enforcement authorities and previously received a suspended sentence.

The prosecution demanded jail terms for Berbr and Káník and can appeal the decision.

Altogether, 16 people were convicted of of bribery, embezzlement and participation in an organized crime group that was involved in fixing at least 10 matches in 2019 and 2020 in the second and third-tier leagues and were mostly fined and banned from activities in soccer Wednesday.

Four others previously received sentences.

Brussels declines to host match between Belgium and Israel for security reasons amid war in Gaza

AP ■ BRUSSELS

The city of Brussels says it won't host a UEFA Nations League match between Belgium and Israel in September because of the "dramatic situation in Gaza" that creates a security headache for city officials.

Brussels' first alderman Benoit Hellings said on Wednesday the city considers it impossible to organize the match, which was scheduled to take place at the Stade Roi Baudouin on September 6.

Hundreds of pro-Palestinian demonstrators have repeatedly taken to the streets of Brussels since the start of the war between Israel and Hamas last year.

Last month, ticket sales for the Belgium-Israel match were paused because of security concerns.

Hellings said that Brussels officials discussed thoroughly the possibility of hosting the match with the federal government, police forces and the Belgian soccer federation (URBSFA).

"Today, it is clear that the



announcement of such a match being held in our capital

will undoubtedly provoke major (counter-) demonstra-

tions, compromising the safety of spectators, players, residents and our police forces alike," he said in a statement.

"The Red Devils' matches have always been moments of unity and togetherness. The humanitarian and security situation in Gaza and its repercussions force the (city) to inform the URBSFA that it is not possible to organize this match at the Stade Roi Baudouin."

Ticket sales for other Belgium home matches in the tournament against France on

October 14 and Italy on November 14 are going ahead as planned.

Belgium is currently playing at the European Championship in Germany. It lost its first group game against Slovakia.

Brussels has been on security alert even before the war in Gaza started, with Belgium being hit repeatedly by extremist attacks.

Last year, a soccer game between Belgium and Sweden was suspended at halftime following a gunman fatally shooting two Swedes in Brussels before kickoff.



FC Barcelona shuts down its football academies in India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

World-renowned football club FC Barcelona has decided to shut down all its academies in India, 14 years after starting operations with an aim to train the country's kids in their famed 'La Masia (youth academy)' style.

FC Barcelona did not provide any official reason for the closure.

All its academies in the Indian cities of Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Pune will cease to exist from July 1.

"FC Barcelona have informed the families involved in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Pune will cease to operate as Barca Academies from 1 July 2024," the club said in a statement which it uploaded on its website.

"Barcelona's presence in India began back in 2010 and since then thousands of youngsters have learned to play football in the Barca style and with the Club's values."

"Furthermore, India was the venue for two Barca Academy APAC tournament in 2019 and 2020 and the academies have been an ever present in the 11 editions of the Barca Academy World Cup held in Barcelona during Easter Week," the club added.

Football legends such as Lionel Messi, Andres Iniesta, Sergio Busquets and Gerard Pique achieved their superstardom after undergoing training at the Barca Academy.

In the statement, FC Barcelona expressed gratitude to all the families for their trust in the

project over the years, as well as to all the coaches, local staff, and Conscient Football, the club's India partner that has collaborated on the Barca academies project all these years.

Barca Academy India was the largest grassroots football training and development initiative in India.

As part of the venture, it set multiple football training centres in Delhi, Gurugram, Noida, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Pune, organising programs, camps, leagues, tournaments, and exposure trips.

Barca Academy is the flagship FC Barcelona school aimed at boys and girls between 4 to 17 years of age and its main objective is to provide a comprehensive training environment for their students.

Tour and Saudis agree on some items with work still to go to finalise any deal

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The PGA Tour and the Saudi backers of LIV Golf reached consensus on several items during its meeting its recent meeting in New York.

Commissioner Jay Monahan cautioned players "there is still work to do" before any agreement.

Monahan sent players a memo after the PGA Tour policy board and the commercial PGA Tour Enterprises board held a joint meeting during the Travelers Championship in Connecticut.

He did not share specifics, only saying the goal was to develop "a shared vision for the future of professional golf" that gives players the best global opportunities.

The meeting with Yasir Al-Rumayyan, governor of the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia, and PGA Tour Enterprises board members including Tiger Woods, Adam Scott and Rory McIlroy, was May 11.

Monahan also announced a few tweaks for the PGA Tour schedule in 2025, while saying the revamped model that caters to the top performers from the previous year are still creating roughly the same level of turnover.

One big change involves Woods. The board approved an additional sponsor exemption in the \$20 million signature events specifically for Woods "as a player who has reached an exceptional lifetime achievement" of 80-plus wins in his career.

Woods has played only four times this year - three majors and taking one of the four sponsor exemptions for his Genesis Invitational at Riviera, where he had to withdraw with the flu.

The player-hosted signature events - Riviera,



Bay Hill and Memorial - are the only small fields with a cut.

Monahan said the tour board and Player Advisory Council will study whether all the signature should have a cut.

The board took no action.

The board did approve a minimum 72 players for the signature events, creating an alternate list based on the current FedEx Cup standings for the players not already eligible.

Players complained this year when fields dipped below 70.

In the Arnold Palmer Invitational this year, the 69-man field meant one player - Nick Dunlap - had to start the tournament as a single.

The Travelers Championship this week only has 71 players after McIlroy withdrew.

The top 50 in the FedEx Cup are exempt for all the \$20 million events.

More players competed in other events, particularly early in the season, which limited starts for players who had conditional status, such as those finishing Nos. 126-150.

The board said it would not reshuffle the ranking of conditional players next year until they have had a chance to play three or four times.

Alcaraz, ranked No. 2. Improved to 17-2 on grass for his career and 13-0 against players ranked outside the top 20 on the surface.

Cerundolo is ranked No. 26.

Alcaraz fell behind 2-5 in the second set and saved three set points on serve at 4-5 before clinching the win.

He next faces Jack Draper.

Meanwhile, five-time champion Murray beat Alexei Popyrin 6-3, 3-6, 6-3 in what could be his final appearance at Queen's Club.

It was his 1,000th tour-level match. "Really special to get the win today. Hopefully I can add a few more before I'm finished," said the 37-year-old Murray, who has signaled his intention to retire later this year.

Dan Evans retired from his match against Brandon Nakashima after slipping on the grass behind the baseline at the start of the third set.

On Sunday, the 34-year-old Evans was named to Britain's team for the Paris Olympics to compete in the men's singles tournament.

He said Tuesday he's "heartbroken" that a potential knee injury might keep him out of Wimbledon and the Olympics.



Alcaraz starts grass-court campaign with win over Cerundolo at Queen's Club

AP ■ LONDON

Carlos Alcaraz began his grass-court season by beating Francisco Cerundolo 6-1, 7-5 in his opener at Queen's Club, and Andy Murray was victorious in his 1,000th tour-level match.

The 21-year-old Spaniard returned to action following his French Open title and extended his grass-court winning streak to 13 matches.

The streak dates back to last year, when Alcaraz won the Queen's Club title before defeating Novak Djokovic in the Wimbledon final.

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Kohli expected to shine on big stage as India ponder over Kuldeep question

PTI ■ BRIDGETOWN (BARBADOS)

Virat Kohli will be expected to hit his straps after a lean run while left-arm spinner Kuldeep Yadav will anxiously wait for his chance when title-favourites India face a sprightly Afghanistan in their opening Super 8 fixture of the T20 World Cup here on Thursday. The big talking point ahead of the game is the Indian team combination. Will India go in with the same line-up that worked for them in the group league stage or bring in their best spinner over the last 12 months, Kuldeep, at the expense of a specialist pacer now? At the start of the tournament, skipper Rohit Sharma had expressed his keenness to include all four all-rounders -- Hardik Pandya, Shivam Dube, Axar Patel, and Ravindra Jadeja -- in the playing eleven. That strategy suited the Indian team in the bowler-friendly conditions in New York and the captain is expected to retain the winning combination that stretches their batting till number 8. The only way to fit Kuldeep into the

team is to either drop Mohammed Siraj or Arshdeep Singh for the wily spinner. If that does happen, Siraj is most likely to be benched. If the two practice sessions of the Indian team are an indication, the pitch could offer plenty to the spinners making Kuldeep's case stronger. With the gentle breeze blowing across the Kensington Oval, the pacers should get the ball to swing in the powerplay. As is often the case, all eyes will be on Kohli, who is yet to log a double digit score in the tournament. His strategy to go for his strokes did not yield the desired results in New York but he is expected to be at his imperious best on the better wickets in the Caribbean. The 35-year-old is always operating at 100 per cent and the intensity he showed during the training sessions was a testament to his exemplary work ethic. Shivam Dube, who was brought into the side to hammer sixes in the middle and death overs, has sent the ball out of the park only once in this competition. The pitches in USA did not allow him to go after the spinners. He would be expected to change that in



the Super 8s and beyond. India's premier T20 batter Suryakumar Yadav too was back among runs against USA, albeit not in his usual swashbuckling style. But the effort was enough to boost his confidence. Besides Kohli, runs are pending from the bat of Hardik Pandya, who has been exceptional with the ball. On the bowling front, Arshdeep Singh has grown in confidence with

each passing game, playing perfect wingman to Jasprit Bumrah in both the powerplay and death overs. With the surface likely to aid the slower bowlers, Axar and Jadeja would be backing themselves to make a decisive impact in the game. Afghanistan, on the other hand, head into the Super 8 fixtures after a humbling loss to the West Indies in St Lucia. Their bowling attack, which allowed them to boss their first three games, was put to sword by the hard-hitting West Indies batters. Captain Rashid Khan saw the defeat as a blip in an otherwise impressive campaign, insisting that his team remains a worthy contender for a semifinal berth. "As a bowler, you need to come up with plans to keep the scoring to under 10. The morale is still pretty high and this loss does not affect us. We have achieved our first goal of reaching the Super 8s and now it is about taking the next step," Rashid had said. He will be heavily banking on left-arm pacer Fazalhaq Farooqi, who provided them with wickets in the powerplay and is currently the leading wicket-taker in the

tournament with 12 scalps. If he can the swing the ball back in like he has thus far, Rohit and Kohli will need to be on high alert. Rashid himself will be looking for wickets at a frugal economy rate in the middle overs. On the batting front, in-form openers Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran would be once again be crucial to the team's chances.

SQUADS:
India: Rohit Sharma (captain), Hardik Pandya, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Rishabh Pant, Sanju Samson, Shivam Dube, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Arshdeep Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj.
Afghanistan: Rahmanullah Gurbaz (wicketkeeper), Ibrahim Zadran, Gulbadin Naib, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Najibullah Zadran, Karim Janat, Rashid Khan (c), Noor Ahmad, Naveen-ul-Haq, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Hazratullah Zazai, Fareed Ahmad Malik, Mohammad Ishaq, Nangeyalia Kharote.



Kettleborough, Illingworth to officiate blockbuster India, Australia Super 8 match

PTI ■ DUBAI

English duo of Richard Kettleborough and Richard Illingworth will officiate the blockbuster Group 1 Super Eight clash between India and Australia in the ongoing T20 World Cup in Gros Islet, Saint Lucia on June 24. India's opening Super Eight match against Afghanistan on Thursday will be officiated by the Australian pair of Rodney Tucker and Paul Reiffel, while David Boon will be the match referee. England's Michael Gough and South African Adrian Holdstock will officiate India's match against Bangladesh in Antigua on June 22. In other matches, Chris Gaffaney and Kettleborough, both members of the Emirates Elite Panel of ICC Umpires, will be the on-field umpires for USA's historic first-ever knockout match at the T20 World Cup, against South Africa on Wednesday. The co-hosts qualified in second place from Group A, in part thanks to a magnificent Super Over victory against Pakistan and will now take on the Proteas as well as England and fellow co-hosts West Indies in Group 2 of the Super

8s. Joel Wilson will be the TV Umpire for USA versus South Africa match, while he will also stand as on-field umpire alongside Gaffaney when the American team takes on England in Barbados on June 23. Allahudien Paleker, who is making his senior men's tournament debut in this competition, will be the fourth umpire. Illingworth and Michael Gough will oversee Australia's Super 8s opener against Bangladesh, while Nitin Menon and Ahsan Raza are the on-field umpires for England's meeting with the West Indies. Sharfuddoula Ibne Shahid, making history in this competition as the first Bangladeshi official at the T20 World Cup, is the TV Umpire for the England versus West Indies match, and will be the on-field umpire alongside Chris Brown for England's second Group 2 game against South Africa. Jeff Crowe, who has overseen more T20Is than anyone else, will be in the match referee for England's clashes against the West Indies and South Africa as well as Australia against India.

PTI ■ GROS ISLET (ST LUCIA)

An in-form West Indies will be keen to carry the winning momentum but won't underestimate familiar foes England in their opening Super Eight clash of the T20 World Cup which promises to be a run fest here. Both England and West Indies are each competing for an unprecedented third T20 World Cup title. While the hosts are undefeated in the tournament so far, England had a rather anxious group stage and needed arch-rivals Australia's help to keep alive their title defence. Having played catch up after a loss against Australia in the league stage, Jos Buttler and his men now have the opportunity to start afresh. On the other hand, West

Indies, who head to the fixture on the back of an eight-match winning streak, put up a sensational display against Afghanistan, notching a huge 104-run win at the Darren Sammy National Cricket Stadium. They once again head to the stadium that holds the name of their head coach and two-time T20 World Cup-winning captain in search of a similar result. "It's not necessarily to send them (England) a message (the huge win against Afghanistan). It's just to show them that as much as they are playing good cricket, we're playing good cricket - so come Wednesday night it should be a very good game," skipper Rovman Powell said at the pre-match press conference. West Indies are performing as



a cohesive unit. Their batters have taken responsibility and stood up every time the team needed someone -- be it Shane Rutherford or Nicholas Pooran. Their bowlers too have done their job. The flat pitches and relatively short square boundaries here

are a paradise for batters with all matches played here so far being a high-scoring affairs. But the batters will have to be carefully negotiate the cross winds that sends some balls flying unexpectedly for six and others swirling. Pooran targeted them ruthlessly against Afghanistan. West Indies will bank on their left-arm spin duo of Akeal Hosein and Gudakesh Moti against England's predominantly right-handed batting lineup. While the pitch favours batters, the extra bounce still offers incentive for the quicks and left-arm medium pacer Obed McCoy's role will also become important. England pacers Jofra Archer and Mark Wood would also be keen to make most of the conditions. The two teams have clashed rather regularly in the past and are well aware of each other's strength and weaknesses. "When we play the English guys so often, we play them actually every year, so they know a lot about us, we know a lot about them," Powell said.

"It's just that when you're playing the game on the day, whoever gets on top has to stay on top for as long as possible."

TEAMS (FROM)
West Indies Squad: Rovman Powell (c), Brandon King, Johnson Charles, Nicholas Pooran (wk), Sherfane Rutherford, Andre Russell, Romario Shepherd, Roston Chase, Akeal Hosein, Alzarri Joseph, Gudakesh Motie, Obed McCoy, Shamar Joseph, Shimron Hetmyer and Shai Hope.
England: Jos Buttler (c), Moeen Ali, Jofra Archer, Jonathan Bairstow, Harry Brook, Sam Curran, Ben Duckett, Tom Hartley, Will Jacks, Chris Jordan, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Phil Salt, Reece Topley and Mark Wood.

PTI ■ NORTH SOUND (ANTIGUA)

Mitchell Marsh is not just a captain but a true leader, Marcus Stoinis said eulogising his teammate but added that the current Australia group is easy to lead with everyone aware of their roles in specific situations. Marsh has been tasked with leading Australia to their second T20 World Cup title. "Mitchie is not a captain but a leader. The way he gets the groups together inspires it," fellow all-rounder Stoinis said on the 'Unplayable' podcast. "He's been a leader for a longtime in this group. He has captained in the past at a younger age as well." It is not just Stoinis that has lavished praise on the all-rounder, the rest of the team also speaks highly of the 'Bison'. Marsh has had a love hate relationship with the fans, who booed him when his performance dropped leading the all-rounder to claim 'most of Australia hates me'. But Marsh witnessed a resurgence last year and has now become a fan favourite. He made his way back into the Test team and starred in Australia's stunning World Cup win in India. He also performed well in



T20s. He was awarded with the prestigious Allan Border medal earlier this year. But Marsh was perhaps destined for big things given his father, Geoff Marsh was a former Australian ODI captain and World Cup winning coach. Growing up, he was surrounded by the likes of legendary captains Allan Border, Mark Taylor and Steve Waugh and that seems to have rubbed off on him. The 32-year-old had captained the Australian Under-19 team to the World Cup trophy, back in 2010. He also led Perth Scorchers in 31 matches in the Big

Bash League and was captain of the 2017-18 Marsh Cup-winning Western Australian team before graduating to become Australian T20 captain. Under his captaincy, Australia have entered the Super Eight stage at the ongoing T20 World Cup on the back of an unbeaten run in the group stage. Stoinis feels Marsh has it easy with the group in the West Indies with everyone knowing their roles and functioning like clockwork but the all-rounder is more then capable of being "creative" when required. "Not taking anything away (from Marsh), I think this group particularly is quite an easy group to lead. We have four best quicks, best spinner in the world and all-rounders. It's pretty much like clock work, most of us know when to bowl, where to field," Stoinis said. Australia have played all their group games in the Caribbean where the pitches can play slow and low, and may turn more as the World Cup wears on.



Mandhana, Harmanpreet hundreds carry India to imposing 325/3 against SA

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Smriti Mandhana's stylish Seventh one-day hundred, her second in as many matches, and skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's belligerent century lifted India to a formidable 325 for three against South Africa in the second women's ODI here on Wednesday. Mandhana 136 (120b, 18x4, 2x6) and Harmanpreet 103 not out (88b, 9x4, 3x6), her sixth ODI ton, milked 171 runs for the third wicket, and ran roughshod over the Proteas bowlers after being asked to bat first. South African skipper Laura Wolvaardt's decision to have a bowl seemed vindicated as new-ball bowlers, Ayabonga Khaka and Masabata Klaas, found appreciable bounce and movement under overcast skies. In fact, Khaka started with two maidens in a row as Mandhana, whom she later dropped on 69 off left-arm spinner Nondumiso Shangase, and Shafali Verma struggled for a move-on. India's first boundary came only in the sixth over, a pull by Shafali off Klaas, but the opener departed soon after being ousted by left-arm spinner Noku Mlaba. A period of consolidation followed as Mandhana and Dayalan Hemalatha added 62 runs for the second wicket in which the latter was the more

dominant presence. Hemalatha (24), who clubbed Shangase for two sixes, looked good for more but her attempt to slog-sweep Klaas ended in the hands of Anneke Bosch. However, the arrival of skipper Harmanpreet changed the complexion of the innings as run-rate of India, which was hovering around 4 till then, first soared past five and then six runs an over. Mandhana hammered Shangase for three fours in a row, a period which included a total of five fours across six balls, took her to the 90s. Harmanpreet, who was grassed on 41 by Klaas off her own bowling, straightaway slipped into rhythm and pulled Sune Luus to start her scoring. The right-hander's aggressive intentions only grew with the innings as she punished Klaas for a four and six in successive balls. The SA bowlers tried to curtail the free-flowing Smriti, bowling wide off her off-stump. While the strategy was worth giving a go, they erred in line so much as the India vice-captain garnered a clutch of boundaries without much effort. She reached her hundred off 103 balls with a single off Luus, and later Harmanpreet joined her deputy with a boundary off Klaas in the final over. India plundered 118 runs in the last 10 overs, feeding on some shoddy bowling and fielding by the visitors.

Williamson steps down as NZ's white ball captain, declines national contract

PTI ■ CHRISTCHURCH

New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson on Wednesday decided to forego his national contract for the 2024-25 season and also stepped down from white-ball captaincy to extend his international career, following the Black Caps' shock early exit from the T20 World Cup. "Helping push the team forward across the formats is something I'm very passionate about and something I want to keep contributing towards," the 33-year-old said in a New Zealand Cricket (NZC) release on Wednesday. "However, pursuing an overseas opportunity during the New Zealand summer means I'm unable to accept a central contract offer." The Black Caps have very little international cricket scheduled during the January window and Williamson, who had stepped down from Test captaincy in December 2022, will be available to play all three formats outside that month. "Playing for New Zealand is

something I treasure, and my desire to give back to the team remains undiminished," he said. "My life outside cricket has changed, however. Spending more time with my family and enjoying experiences with them at home or abroad is something that's even more important to me." The Black Caps are scheduled to compete in eight Tests, including a tour of India and then a three-match home series against England in November-December, before Christmas. There are a number of T20 leagues such as UAE's ILT20, South Africa's SA20, Australia's BBL and Bangladesh's BPL which are set to clash in January. New Zealand's Super Smash could also be scheduled during the same time period. The leagues will be followed by the ICC Champions Trophy in Pakistan in February-March. Players accepting the NZC central contracts must be available for both international and the domestic Super Smash competition.



NZC CEO Scott Weenink said Williamson has earned the right to take some time off to pursue other goals, including family-oriented priorities.

"This is a good way to help keep Kane in the international game so that he continues to play a major role for the BLACKCAPS - both now and in the years to come," said

Weenink. "We have very little international cricket in New Zealand through January and outside that period he's still available for the

BLACKCAPS. "NZC has a strong preference to select centrally contracted players for the BLACKCAPS, however we're happy to make an exception for our greatest ever batter - especially as he remains so committed to the team. I know it sounds a bit counterintuitive, but I'm very encouraged by this development." An all-format player who is considered one of the greats of modern day cricket, Williamson has been the Black Caps batting mainstay for over a decade, having played over 350 internationals. Williamson has played 100 Tests, 165 ODI caps and 93 T20I caps. He also led New Zealand in 40 Tests, 91 ODIs and 75 T20Is. New Zealand reached three finals with Williamson in the side -- the 2015 and 2019 ODI World Cups, the 2021 T20 World Cup and the inaugural World Test Championship final, which they won. Williamson led the Black Caps in three of those four tournaments. Pacer Lockie Ferguson, who has played a Test, 65 ODIs and 42 T20Is, has also indicated that he won't accept a central contract offer. He had become only the second bowler and first in T20 World Cups to bowl four maidens in a men's T20I when he returned with figures of 4-4-0-3 against Papua New Guinea.