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FOREST FIRES ARE A GRIM ENVIRONMENTAL REALITY

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SUNAK'S PARTY HIT WITH ELECTION DATE BETTING ALLEGATIONS

MONEY 10

SENSEX, NIFTY SCALE FRESH RECORD HIGH

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KULDEEP WILL COME INTO PLAY IN THE CARIBBEAN: DRAVID
12 SPORTS

After NEET comes NET row

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■
NEW DELHI/PATNA

Still grappling with NEET controversy, the cancellation of UGC-NET exams on Wednesday has brought serious troubles for the Narendra Modi Government which has just started its third tenure and a Special Session of the Parliament scheduled next week.

With the ruling NDA on shaky numbers, Opposition leaders on Thursday launched an attack on the National Testing Agency (NTA) and accused the agency as well as the Union Government of destroying the future of students who appeared for these exams. They said the matter will be raised in Special Session of the Parliament next week.

Both the exams are conducted by Union Education Ministry's National Testing Agency (NTA) and the paper leaks and cancellations have led to protest by aspirants, students, parents with simultaneous attack by the Opposition parties and judicial interference to streamline the issues.

A day after the UGC-NET was cancelled, Education Ministry officials on Thursday said no complaints were received about the exam but a suo motu action was taken on the basis of inputs



Students stage a protest over the NEET-UG and UGC-NET examinations issue (L) and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi at a Press conference at AICC Headquarters on Thursday



Photos: Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

available with them to protect students' interest and a fresh exams will be announced.

Education Ministry Joint Secretary Govind Jaiswal said the details of the inputs cannot be shared as the matter has been referred to the CBI and is currently under investigation.

"No complaints were received but the inputs we received from agencies indicated that the integrity of the exam has been compromised. The action was taken suo motu to safeguard interests of the students," he said.

While the Congress-led Opposition continues to

Panel to review NTA functioning

NEW DELHI: Amid demand by the Opposition to re-conduct the medical entrance exam NEET, Education Minister D h a r m e n d r a Pradhan on Thursday said isolated incidents of malpractices should not affect lakhs of students who cleared the examination rightfully. He announced a high-level panel to look into the functioning of the testing

agency NTA. Addressing a Press conference late evening, Pradhan also appealed to t h e



Opposition parties not to politicise the issue and said strict action would be taken against those found guilty, including officials from the National Testing Agency (NTA).

PNS

mount attack on the BJP-led NDA Government, the partners of the NDA, JD(U), alleged a direct link of the RJD in the NEET paper leaks as the probe begins in the case by Nitish Kumar the Government. Bihar police have arrested 13 people in connection with the case. They are currently lodged in a Patna Jail.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi launched a scathing attack on the Government over the alleged irregularities in both entrances and said Modi has "psychologically collapsed" post-elections and will struggle to run a Government like this.

Setback to parties as Patna HC scraps Bihar Govt's quota hike

RAJESH KUMAR ■
PATNA/NEW DELHI

In a major setback to ipolitical parties in Bihar, the Patna High Court on Thursday set aside the amendments passed by the Bihar legislature in 2023 when quotas for Dalits, backward classes and tribals in Government jobs and educational institutions were raised from 50 to 65 per cent. The court declared null and void the Bihar Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes) Amendment Act, 2023 and the Bihar Reservation (in Admission to Educational Institutions) Amendment Act, 2023 as ultra vires the Constitution and violative of equality clause under Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the statute.

Meanwhile, the coalition Government-led by Nitish Kumar has decided to challenge the Patna High Court order in the Supreme Court. A division bench of Chief Justice K Vinod Chandran and Justice Harish Kumar passed the ruling on a batch of petitions that had challenged the enactments as violative of the right to equal opportunity for citizens in matters of employment and



education.

"We, hence, set aside the Bihar Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes) Amendment Act, 2023 and the Bihar Reservation (in Admission to Educational Institutions) Amendment Act, 2023 as ultra vires the Constitution and violative of the equality clause under Articles 14, 15 and 16. The writ petitions are allowed leaving the parties to suffer their respective costs," the bench said in its 87-page verdict.

Reacting to the development, Bihar Deputy Chief Minister and BJP leader Samrat Choudhary said the State Government will move the Supreme Court and ensure justice for the people of Bihar.



Big relief for Kejriwal

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In a major relief to AAP convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, a Rouse Avenue Court on Thursday granted him bail in the money-laundering case linked to the Delhi excise policy case. Vacation Judge Niyay Bindu passed the order after hearing from Kejriwal and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) over two days. Kejriwal is likely to walk out of jail on Friday.

The special judge ordered Kejriwal's release on a personal bond of ₹1 lakh. "Accused is admitted to bail in the sum of ₹1 lakh," the judge said while passing the order. The bail bond will be produced before the duty judge on Friday.

The court, however, imposed certain conditions on the AAP leader before granting him the relief, including that he will not try to hamper the investigation or influence the witnesses.

Dance of death in heat-hit Delhi

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■
NEW DELHI

With a severe heatwave sweeping vast swathes of the country, the National Capital has seen a huge upsurge in mortalities caused by sunstrokes and other heat-related ailments. As many as more than 210 people have so far succumbed to the heat fury not seen in decades in Delhi or elsewhere in the country.

Of the 210 dead in Delhi, 192 were homeless people who have been bearing the brunt of the extreme heat in the city. A total of 22 fatalities caused by suspected heat-related illnesses have been recorded at the Ram Manohar Lohia and Safdarjung hospitals in the last 24 hours.

The Centre for Holistic Development (CHD), an NGO working for the homeless, claimed that deaths of 192 homeless people due to extreme heat were recorded in Delhi



Residents beat the heat with dupatta and umbrella in Delhi File photo

between June 11 and June 19, marking a sharp increase of 156 per cent over the last year's figure when 75 people sleeping rough were found to be dead.

Though Delhiites have got some relief from the searing heat thanks to a mild dust storm and light rainfall causing a slight fall in the

maximum temperature, the heatwave conditions may intensify in the coming days as the minimum temperature showing a rising trend. The maximum temperature in the city was recorded at 40 degrees Celsius, one notch above the normal, while the minimum temperature settled at 29.6 degrees Celsius.

However, the feel like temperature or heat index is 48.5 degrees celsius. According to officials at the Safdarjung Hospital, 33 patients suffering from heat-related illnesses were admitted there. Of them, 13 died in the last 24 hours. The RML Hospital received 22 patients, victims of suspected heatstroke, in the last 24 hours, four of them have died, a hospital source said. Meanwhile, at Nigambodh Ghat, the city's main crematorium, there has been a spike in the number of cremations. Officials, however, could not confirm if the deaths were related to heatstrokes.

39 killed in Tamil Nadu hooch tragedy

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■
CHENNAI

The death toll in Kallakurichi liquor tragedy reached 39 by Thursday evening and more than 100 persons who consumed the spurious liquor have been admitted to hospitals in the district. According to doctors in these hospitals, the death toll is likely to go up as the condition of many is reportedly serious.

It all started on Tuesday night at Karunapuram village in the district, 250 km south of Chennai, when people started consuming hooch (spurious liquor) and started vomiting. Some of the tipplers who were rushed to hospitals breathed their last before they reached the hospitals. Death caused by consumption of spurious liquor is nothing new in Tamil Nadu.

Indian Coast Guard



Indian Coast Guard (ICG) personnel perform yoga aboard ICG's ship Samarth during preparations on the eve of the International Day Of Yoga

PTI Photo

Religare bid to block open offer draws fire from Sebi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets watchdog Sebi has ordered non-banking financial company Religare Enterprises (REL) to seek statutory approvals from regulatory authorities for blocking an open offer by Dabur India promoter Burman family before July 12. The Burman group accused Religare's board and its Chairperson Rashmi Saluja of obstructing the open offer. Meanwhile, Religare argued that the Burman family was not 'fit and proper' to undertake the acquisition.

Sebi said that the NBFC did not show any evidence that the Burman group suffers from such alleged infirmities. Expressing dissatisfaction over the Religare board's attempt to block the open offer, Sebi in its interim order said that Religare has "acted in an apparently hostile manner".

Sebi has ordered Religare to apply for approval to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), besides Sebi. In response to the latest

development, Religare spokesperson said, "As per Sebi's advisory the company will apply for the fit and proper status of the acquirers (Burman Group) for the open offer to the concerned regulators including the RBI."

In its order, Sebi noted that Burman Group (MB Finmart, Pura Associates, VIC Enterprises and Milky Investment & Trading Company) were public shareholders of Religare Enterprises with 21.54 per cent shares in the company before September 25, 2023.

On September 25, 2023, they placed orders through JM Financial Services Limited to purchase up to 5.27 per cent more shares, which would have increased their total shareholding to over 25 per cent.

This triggered the requirement to make an open offer to all shareholders under Sebi rules. The public announcement of this offer was made on September 25, 2023, stating that they intended to buy up to 26 per cent of the company's expanded voting share capital at Rs 235 per share, totalling Rs 2,115.99 crore.

Modi reaches out to Kashmiris

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ SRINAGAR

Reaching out to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, yearning for their popular Government since June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who arrived here in Srinagar to attend the 10th International Yoga Day celebrations, on Thursday announced that preparations for Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir have begun.

Addressing a gathering at the 'Empowering Youth, Transforming J&K' event in Srinagar, Modi said the Union Government has taken the recent terror attacks very seriously. "I assure you that we will not hesitate to teach a lesson to the enemies of Jammu & Kashmir." Referring to the much-awaited Assembly polls the Prime Minister said, "The people of Jammu and Kashmir elect their representatives at the local level, through them you find ways to solve problems, what can be better than this? Therefore, now the preparations for the Assembly elections have also started. The time is not far when you will elect the new Government of Jammu and Kashmir with your votes. That day will also come soon



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being felicitated by Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha during "Empowering Youth, Transforming J&K" event, in Srinagar, on Thursday PTI

when Jammu and Kashmir will once again make its future better as a state.

The Prime Minister had made a similar announcement during an election campaign rally in Udhampur on April 12. Mentioning record voter turnout in the recent elections, the Prime Minister praised the trust of the people of Jammu & Kashmir in democracy. "I have come to

express my thanks for your efforts for keeping the flag of democracy high", he added.

"The transformation in Jammu & Kashmir is a result of the work done by the government in the last 10 years", Prime Minister Modi said. Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister expressed excitement about his visit to Jammu & Kashmir and mentioned

two specific reasons for it. He said, "Firstly, today's event is related to the inauguration and foundation stone laying of developmental projects in Jammu & Kashmir and secondly, this is the first meeting with the people of Jammu & Kashmir after the Lok Sabha elections."

"The whole world is witnessing the changes in Kashmir Valley...Humara Kashmir kitna aage badh gaya hai...You will see that the International Yoga Day celebration will also become an attraction for tourists." Modi said after the wall of 370 has been broken down the constitution of India has been implemented in a true sense. PM Modi also lamented the non-acceptance of the Constitution of India and the neglect shown towards Jammu & Kashmir since independence. "I am delighted that today, we are living the Constitution of India. Through the Constitution, we are finding new ways to change the face of Kashmir for good", the Prime Minister said with pride. "The Constitution of India has

finally been adopted by Jammu & Kashmir in the true sense", PM Modi exclaimed, "The walls of Article 370 have been brought down."

Modi said I am making efforts to bridge distances between Delhi and Jammu and Kashmir, ensuring the connection of hearts. "Duri Dil ki rahe ho ya Delhi ki, we are trying our best to erase them." He further added, "Our government shows its performance by following the expectations of people and brings results. Recalling his recent visit to Italy for the G7 Summit, the Prime Minister highlighted the impact of continuity of the government for three terms as it has changed the outlook of the world towards India. He also said that all time high aspirations of Indians are the nation's biggest strength. He said that this high aspiration leads to high expectations from the government and in this backdrop, the third continuous term of the government is special as the only parameter of an aspirational society is performance. "People have faith in the intentions and policies of the government", he added.

BJP attacks AAP Government for plunging city into severe water crisis

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP attacked the ruling AAP government on Thursday accusing it of 'corruption, inaction and appalling apathy' which has forced the city into an unprecedented water crisis despite the release of adequate water in Yamuna by neighbouring Haryana. Sharing data by the Haryana government, Delhi BJP leaders claimed that Haryana has been releasing 17.34 percent more water to Delhi than its usual share of 1050 cusec water.

In a joint press conference, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva accused Water Minister Atishi of dishing out lies on the issue and challenging her to verify the documents related to water released by Haryana. If there is shortage of water in Delhi, how is it possible that water tankers and bottled water is freely available, he asked.

"Earlier, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal used to blame Punjab and Haryana for the water crisis in Delhi. But, now AAP leaders do not say anything about Punjab or Himchal Pradesh ruled by their ally Congress which has refused to provide water to Delhi," he said. "Sachdeva alleged leakages in pipelines and tanker mafia as the main reasons behind the water crisis. "There are dozens of ruling party MLAs who are in collusion with tanker mafia," he charged.

The Delhi BJP president also accused Atishi of lying that Haryana was not providing water to Delhi. "Even yesterday Haryana released 17.34 per



cent more water to Delhi than its usual share of 1050 cusecs of water in Yamuna which can be verified through documents," he said.

"AAP has lost all shame. Which government conspires to leave its own people thirsty? They have cheated Delhi people in the name of free water", he charged. Union Minister Harsh Malhotra said that the water crisis in Delhi is a serious issue, and it is the responsibility of the Kejriwal government to provide water to the people of Delhi. "If the supply resource is sufficient, then why is Ms. Atishi making political accusations against others? Arvind Kejriwal and his ministers are not mature enough to fulfil their responsibilities. They have always acted negligently when given responsibility, whether in the Delhi government or the municipal corpo-

ration," he said, adding if STP plants had been installed at the outlets of 18 drains, Delhi would not be thirsty today. "The pipelines in Delhi are over 50 years old. Instead of making accusations, Atishi should ensure that the people of Delhi receive adequate water in an organised manner," he said. North East Delhi MP Manoj Tiwari slammed the AAP asking why it was not calling a special session to discuss the issue of water crisis in Delhi. "It's because they will be exposed by the BJP in the assembly. They start talking about a problem only when it worsens," he said. He also slammed the AAP saying it has failed to provide water to Delhi people while MGD government has ensured piped gas connections to 80 per cent of houses so far in the city. Water minister Atishi should apologise the Delhi people for

lying over the water issue, said South Delhi MP Ramvir Singh Bidhuri.

North West Delhi MP Yogendra Chandolia said that Atishi used to blame Haryana for not releasing water for Delhi in Yamuna but when her lies were exposed she changed her stand and started pleading for it on humanitarian ground. Meanwhile, Bansuri Swaraj, New Delhi MP, said that Delhi is in a dire state and the "apathy" of AAP is appalling.

"The Water minister is indulging in theatrics and not action to solve the problem," she blamed Atishi. Atishi has warned to sit on an indefinite hunger strike from Friday if Haryana does not release 100 MGD of water for Delhi. She said that around 28 lakh people in Delhi were not getting water due to Haryana not releasing water in Yamuna.

BJP-ruled Haryana reduced city's water supply, claims AAP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the national capital facing an unprecedented heatwave on Thursday, the AAP has accused the BJP ruled Haryana government of reducing the city's water supply drastically while claiming that the city grappling with sweltering heat has seen a rise in its demand for water.

Quoting data, Delhi Water Minister Atishi highlighted that while Haryana is supposed to give Delhi 613 MGD of water, out of which 548 MGD comes from Munak canal and 65 comes through Wazirabad. However, on June 1, 488 MGD and 30 MGD came from Munak and Wazirabad respectively.

"One MGD of water caters to the daily requirement of 28,500 people. By reducing 100 MGD of Delhi's rightful share of water supply, the Haryana government is taking away the water from the homes of 28 lakhs people of Delhi. They are directly responsible for playing with the lives of the people of Delhi," the senior AAP leader stated. She also said that Delhi's share of water has been constant at 1005 MGD since 1994, when its population was 1.1 crore. "However, Delhi's population has increased three times, the

water supply is still the same," she added.

Atishi said that while in 2019, Delhi government signed a MoU with the Himachal Pradesh government to procure an additional 50 MGD of water, but the Haryana Govt is not letting water from Himachal reach Delhi. "The proposal is pending with the Upper Yamuna River Board, where Haryana has raised unnecessary and false concerns like Himachal Pradesh does not have sufficient water," she said.

On the accusations of water crisis being caused because of the leakage, she said, "To reduce the leakage of water while transmission of water from Haryana to Delhi, DJB has spent about Rs 500 Crores in constructing Carried Lined Channel (CLC), reducing water losses from 30 per cent to 5 per cent." "To utilise the water that reaches Delhi effectively, 3,500 km of old pipelines have been replaced (437 km annually) in the last eight years. To reduce illegal tapplings and water theft, over 7,300 km of new pipelines have been laid in Delhi the last 10 years i.e. 730 km annually. Approximately 5,200 km of these new pipelines have been laid in unauthorised colonies and 2100 km in rural areas and urban villages," Atishi claimed.

Haryana supplying Delhi its full share of water, says Minister

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI



Haryana's Irrigation and Water Resources Minister Dr Abhay Singh Yadav on Thursday has rejected the allegations of the AAP led Delhi Government and clarified that Haryana is giving Delhi its full share of water amid Delhi grappling with water scarcity. He blamed the water shortage in Delhi on the city's internal poor management. "Haryana does not do politics on water because we consider water as a necessity. It is everyone's responsibility to provide water to the national capital and we are not lacking in providing water to Delhi. He said that Haryana is giving 1050 cusecs of water more than the stipulated 719 cusecs," he stated.

In the press conference at Haryana Bhawan, the Minister said that the Delhi government is doing political drama regarding water. "There has been repeated verification from time to time by different agencies. The data given by Haryana has been found to be correct. Not a single agency can say that Haryana has given less water," he said and accused the AAP of not correcting its mismanagement and repeatedly blaming Haryana.

He informed that while replying to the petition filed by Delhi before the Supreme Court on June 13, the Haryana

government has submitted the data of water supplied at Delhi Contact Point, Bawana for the period from May 23 to June 12.

"In which it was told that Haryana is continuously releasing 1050 cusecs of water for Delhi at Munak Head and more than 924 cusecs of water fixed by Upper Yamuna River Board is being given at Delhi Contact Point Bawana Point," Singh asserted.

While the Delhi government admits in official meetings that they are getting full supply of water, it presents misleading and imaginary figures in the media on political platforms, he claimed. "Delhi Government has been continuously making baseless allegations about getting less water from Haryana for the last several years and Haryana has proved every time that the allegations made by Delhi were not based on facts," the minister claimed, adding that Haryana is giving 1050 cusecs of water more than the prescribed 719 cusecs

Amid spike in heat-related deaths, AAP Government orders rescue of homeless

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As heatwave continues to aggrapple the national capital resulting in a spike of heat related deaths, the Delhi government has directed officials to rescue the homeless from footpaths, parks and send them to shelter homes.

An order on it was issued to Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) by Delhi Urban Development Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj on Wednesday. With the summer season at its peak in Delhi and various advisories issued by concerned government departments, it has been directed to carry out rescue

drives in Delhi. Delhi's Health Minister also inspected Madan Mohan Malviya Hospital to assess the patients' conditions and the hospital's treatment facilities. While interacting with doctors, he stressed the importance of preventive measures against heat-related illnesses and directed them to ensure the availability of all necessary amenities. Additionally, he evaluated the hospital's provisions for medicines, water, electricity, and air cooling systems and urged the public to take precautions to mitigate the effects of the severe heat.

"All the medicines, injections,

ice packs etc. are available in sufficient quantities for heat stroke patients in the hospital. Along with this, adequate arrangements have also been made in the hospital to keep the heat stroke patients cool," the Delhi Health Minister added.

According to the order, the rescue drive will be carried out in order to tackle the ongoing extreme summer situation as a part of a heatwave action plan and rescue homeless people sleeping on footpaths, open spaces, parks, etc. by providing suitable accommodation in the shelter homes of DUSIB.

"We have written a letter to the



Delhi Police Commissioner in this regard yesterday and appealed to him that if the Delhi Police personnel who patrol at night see any such sick person on the road, then the Delhi Police personnel should take that person to the hospital or inform our ambulance service by calling so that that person can be taken to the hospital and treated immediately," he said.

According to the order, the rescue drive will be carried out in order to tackle the ongoing extreme summer situation as a part of heatwave action plan and rescue homeless people sleeping on footpaths, open spaces, parks, etc. By provid-

ing suitable accommodation in the shelter homes of DUSIB. "Therefore, all shelter management agencies (SMAs) are hereby directed to form the rescue teams and start the rescue drive in their jurisdiction/cluster from today itself. The rescue drive will be carried out from 12 pm to 12 am every day during this summer season and subsequently, the report of the previous day's rescue drive shall be submitted by 11 am next day positively," the order read.

Appropriate medical assistance to people in distress due to the heat should be prioritised and Centralised Accident and Trauma Services

(CATS) ambulances can also be used to send sick persons to hospital, it said, adding that a report on the drive should be sent daily and any laxity on it will be viewed seriously.

"To help such patients, the Delhi Health Ministry has issued instructions to CATS Ambulance Services that five ambulances each should be arranged in 11 different districts of Delhi, which will immediately take such patients suffering from heat stroke to the hospitals. Special care should be taken around night shelters and if any such patient is seen, then immediately take him to the hospital," he added.

Rohini celebrates Modi's historic election victory

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP workers of Rohini Assembly constituency led by BJP MLA Vijender Gupta held a grand event at JMD Tents, Sector 10, Rohini, to celebrate Prime Minister Narendra Modi's hat-trick in the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections.

The newly appointed Minister of State Harsh Malhotra and the newly elected MP from North West Delhi Lok Sabha seat Yogender Chandolia were warmly received by a large gathering in Rohini.

At a 'Dhanyawad Samaroh' organised on the occasion, booth-level party workers were honoured for their dedication and efforts in securing the BJP candidates' victory. Forty office-bearers from the top three booths with the highest margins of votes cast in favour of the BJP candidate, were felicitated for their commendable work. In his address, Minister



Malhotra hailed the BJP victory in all Delhi parliamentary seats "despite the unholy alliance of Congress and AAP". He pointed out that Kejriwal's call of 'jail ka jawab vote se' failed to evoke much response from the voters, demonstrating that the people have zero tolerance for corruption.

MP Yogender Chandolia expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the voters for his win with the highest margin in Delhi. He specifically thanked the Rohini Assembly voters for their over-

whelming support and pledged to work tirelessly to meet their expectations.

MLA Vijender Gupta highlighted the ongoing development projects in the Rohini Assembly area, asserting that Rohini consistently excels in all areas of development. He also asserted that the Kejriwal government was nearing its collapse and was almost non-functional, with complete absence of coordination among ministers and their departments.

LG inaugurates NDMC's cycle track around Nehru Park

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Thursday here inaugurated a 2.7 km long cycle track developed by New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), along the periphery of Nehru Park in Chanakyapuri. Member of Parliament from New Delhi Bansuri Swaraj, Chairman, NDMC Naresh Kumar and Vice - Chairman, NDMC Satish Upadhyay, Council Members Girish Sachdeva and Vishakha Sailani and other Senior Officers were present on the occasion.

Saxena congratulated the NDMC for constructing this one of its kind cycle track in New Delhi area that would not only encourage cycling among the people of all age-groups but also provide them with a safe cycling route. Considering the needs of the area residents that also include a large number of diplomats and top government officials, the NDMC had envisaged a



dedicated cycle track along the periphery of Nehru Park. The planning of this cycle track was entrusted to the School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi, and a detailed report was prepared in accordance with the guidelines of UTTIPEC. The cycle track has been developed at a cost of Rs. 4.56 crore.

Total Length of the Cycle Track is 2.7 km and the width varies from 2 to 4 metres. The track has a 150 mm concrete layer and a Cold Plastic Paint overlay of 2 mm thick. Cycle Track is illuminated with 176 nos. of Cast Iron decorative poles fitted with warm LED lights that enhance the aesthetic of the area.

Warm LED Lights have been provided to gel with the surrounding environment. This track has also Road signage and cycle track markings for the convenience of the cyclists. As many as 90 Red Sandstone Bollards, 228 Hazard Markers, 227 Solar Studs, 191 Speed Breakers and 115 Cycle track signages have been placed

along the cycle track.

Nehru Park, spread over an area of 75 Acres in Chanakyapuri, is surrounded by foreign Embassies, High Commissions, apart from State Bhawans, Ashoka Hotel, PSOI and CSOI Clubs. The area serves has the residences of several diplomats, dignitaries and scores of Central Government employees who frequently visit the Nehru Park during the morning and evening hours. The park also falls on the arterial Vinay Marg and Africa Avenue that connects New Delhi to South Delhi, and is adjacent to the Shanti Path-Rao Tularam stretch.

Several individuals and groups of cyclists can be seen cycling around the Nehru Park and therefore NDMC felt that this newly developed Cycle Track for cycling enthusiasts, will further foster eco-friendly and healthy cycling. Now, the dedicated cycle track would provide safety to cyclists and also encourage them to pursue cycling as a leisure activity.

MCD announces launch of Awas portal

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) on Thursday announced the launch of the civic body's Awas portal, a digital platform designed to streamline the allotment of MCD housing in a clear and transparent manner, in a bid to embrace digitalisation and enhance the efficiency of its services.

The Awas portal has been developed by the IT department of MCD and was officially inaugurated by the MCD Commissioner Ashwini Kumar. "This new platform represents a significant milestone in MCD's ongoing efforts to adopt digital technologies and provide superior estate services to its



employees," Kumar said. The key features of the digital portal includes a single

online platform, which serves as a centralised system for booking and allotting resi-

dential MCD accommodations and managing various estate services for eligible officials. It enhances transparency and accountability as the digital portal ensures that all transactions are conducted in a transparent and accountable manner, thus building trust among employees.

Further, the application process has been simplified as employees can apply for residential accommodation online, choosing up to ten options based on their preferences. "This user-friendly interface replaces the previously manual and tedious process," Kumar stated. Notably, it ensures fair and uniform allotment as accommodation is given based on

vacancy and seniority rules. "Post-allotment, details of allotment will also be available on the MCD portal, ensuring fairness and transparency," he said.

Commenting on the launch, Kumar said, "The MCD Awas Portal is a testament to our dedication to leveraging digital technologies to enhance our services. This portal will not only simplify the housing allotment process for our employees but also ensure that it is conducted in a fair and transparent manner." He added that the launch of the MCD Awas Portal marks a significant shift from the cumbersome manual system to a streamlined digital process.

City gets respite from heat

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With light rainfall and gusty winds, the national capital after a long time enjoyed respite on Thursday as the maximum temperature hovered around 40 degrees celsius. However, the heat index or feel like temperature for the city was recorded at 48.5 degrees celsius.

The highest temperature recorded in Delhi stood at 40.6 degrees celsius at par with the normal while the minimum settled at 29 degrees celsius, one notch above the normal, recorded at the Aya nagar weather station. After a longer and harsh spell of heatwave, Delhi witnessed a pleasant morning on

Thursday. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) had predicted a generally cloudy sky, with the possibility of very light rain and gusty winds during the day along with dust storms and thunderstorms accompanied by lightning.

Temperatures dropped across different parts of the city as most of the weather stations recorded temperatures below 40 degrees. Najafgarh recorded 38 degrees celsius, Aya nagar at 40.6 degrees, Lodi road at 39.4 degrees, Palam at 39.6 degrees, Ridge at 38.6 degrees, Safdarjung 40 degrees, Pitampura at 39.7 degrees, Pragati maidan at 37.7 degrees, Pusa at 38.1 degrees, Rajghat at 37.7 degrees, Salwan Public school at 38 degrees and

Jafarpur at 40 degrees. Gusty winds with speed of 30-50 km/ph swept over Delhi-NCR and adjoining areas in the pre-noon period on Thursday. The department has also predicted a partly cloudy sky with the possibility of rain, thunderstorm or dust storm on Friday and Saturday.

Humidity on Thursday was 67 per cent at 8.30 am and 41 per cent at 5:30 pm. The minimum temperature was 29.6 degrees celsius and the maximum is likely to settle around 42 degrees celsius. Meanwhile, the Air Quality Index (AQI) of the national capital at 9 am was recorded in the 'poor' category with a reading of 214, according to the Central Pollution Control Board.

Chhattisgarh all set for Int'l Yoga Day today



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh will observe the International Yoga Day on Friday.

Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai will be the chief guest at the main function to be held at the Science College ground in Raipur.

A government official said Deputy Chief Minister Arun Sao will be the chief guest at an event in Korba. Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma will grace a function in Durg.

Others Ministers will

The Chief Minister urged people to participate in the Day in large numbers.

attend different events in district headquarters.

The day will also be marked in all government schools, aided-schools and non-aided schools, government hostels and ashram schools.

The Chief Minister urged people to participate in the Day in large numbers.

June 21 was declared the International Yoga Day by the UN in 2015.

June 21 is seen as the ideal date for the celebration because it holds significance in many cultures and is the summer solstice in the Northern Hemisphere.

Fire erupts at C'garh Lok Ayog office



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

A fire broke out at the office of Chhattisgarh Lok Ayog in Raipur city.

The incident took place around 3 pm at the office near Kalibadi Chowk, Station House Officer Sudhanshu Baghel said.

The flames were doused within an hour. An electrical

short circuit may have caused the incident.

Meanwhile, some officials and employees of the Commission misbehaved with journalists who reached the site.

Later, Chief Lokayukta TP Sharma apologized to the journalists and promised to take appropriate action against the guilty employees.

Two CAF men killed in accident

STAFF REPORTER ■
BALRAMPUR

Two Chhattisgarh Armed Force (CAF) personnel were killed and two others were injured when a goods vehicle in which they were plunged into a gorge in Balrampur district, police said on Thursday.

The CAF personnel were engaged in shifting their camp when the incident occurred on Wednesday night between Pundag and Bhutahi villages bordering Jharkhand state, Balrampur Superintendent of Police Lal Umed Singh said.

The 'D' company of the CAF's 10th battalion was transferred from Ramchandrapur to Pundag within the district.

As part of the redeployment exercise, security personnel, goods and other



materials were being shifted in buses and trucks.

The accident occurred when the vehicle's driver failed to negotiate a sharp turn on a hill.

Head Constable Fateh

Bahadur of Uttar Pradesh and Constable Narayan Prasad from Surguja district were killed. Constable Rampratap Singh and the civilian driver suffered injuries.

Congrees stages protest over 'deteriorating law and order'



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The youth, women and student wings of the Congress on Thursday staged protests in Raipur against the rise in crime and arrest of innocents in Chhattisgarh.

They sought the resignation of Home Minister Vijay

Sharma.

The protesters gathered at the office of the Raipur District Congress Committee here and walked towards the Minister's official residence.

They were stopped at the OCM Chowk near the Raipur Municipal Corporation office where the Congress workers staged a

sit-in protest.

At the protest, Rajya Sabha member Phulo Devi Netam said: "Criminal cases are increasing in the state, women are not safe and arson occurred in Balodabazar. This had never happened in Chhattisgarh. The Home Minister should resign."

Centre's MSP hike to encourage farmers to go for cash crop: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The BJP in Chhattisgarh on Thursday said the hike in support price of Kharif crop by the Central government will encourage farmers to for cash crops.

In a statement, BJP spokesperson and farmer leader Sandeep Sharma said a major hike has been done for pulses and oil seeds. This will encourage the farmers to take to these cash crops, he said.

Sharma said the government had taken a policy decision in the 2018 Union Budget that Minimum Support Price (MSP) should be at least 1.5 times the cost of production, and this was followed in the latest MSP hike.



"The cost was scientifically calculated by CACP," he said.

The Congress on the other hand flayed the Central government charging that the MSP hike for paddy crop was meager.

PCC chief Deepak Baij said it was a mere 5.35 percent hike which raised the paddy support price to Rs 2,300 per quintal and this will not benefit the Chhattisgarh farmers.

Bhupesh seeks NTA chief Joshi's removal from CGPSC reform panel

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel on Thursday sought the removal of Dr Pradeep Kumar Joshi, head of the National Testing Agency (NTA), as chairman of a panel formed by the Chhattisgarh government to reform the Chhattisgarh Public Service Commission (CGPSC).

Baghel's demand followed the cancellation of the UGC-NET examination and allegations of irregularities in the NEET exam. The new BJP government in Chhattisgarh in March constituted a commission headed by Joshi to give recommendations for conducting the examinations held by the CGPSC in a transparent manner on the lines of Union Public Service Commission.

Taking on X, Baghel said: "The controversy over the NEET scam is not over yet and it has been confirmed that the UGC-NET paper was leaked. The exam is to be held again. Questions have been raised over the NTA, the agency that conducts the exams."

"The Chhattisgarh government has



appointed Pradeep Kumar Joshi, the head of the governing body of the same NTA, as chairman of the CGPSC reforms commission. Will Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai still not

The Chhattisgarh government has appointed Pradeep Kumar Joshi, the head of the governing body of the same NTA, as chairman of the CGPSC reforms commission.

remove Joshi? Remove him, it is a question of the future of lakhs of children," he wrote.

Cabinet panel reviews paddy procurement preparations

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

A meeting of a Chhattisgarh cabinet sub-committee was held on Thursday to review preliminary work of paddy procurement for the Kharif Year 2024-25.

The meeting at Mahanadi Bhawan Mantralaya was headed by Food Minister Dayaldas Baghel, an official communiqué said.

The meeting was attended by the cabinet minister's panel, senior officials from the departments of Agriculture, Finance, Revenue and Food, along with officials from Chhattisgarh State Civil Supplies Corp, the Chhattisgarh State Cooperative Bank and the Marketing Federation besides others.

The meeting discussed availability of gunny bags, registration of farmers for procurement systems, and arrangements at the procurement centers.

The state witnessed a remarkable



increase in paddy production during the Kharif season last year and a

record paddy was procured, crossing the set target of 125 tonnes.

Doctors may soon be able to detect, diagnose cancer using AI: Study

AGENCIES ■

Doctors may soon be able to detect and diagnose cancer in patients using artificial intelligence (AI) that will allow for earlier treatment, a new study said today.

According to the study published in the journal Biology Methods and Protocols, the researchers from Cambridge University and Imperial College London trained an AI model, using a combination of machine and deep learning, to look at the "DNA methylation" patterns and identify 13 different types of cancer, including breast, liver, lung, and prostate cancers -- from non-cancerous tissue with 98.2 per cent accuracy.

"Genetic information is encoded in DNA by patterns of the four based -- denoted by A, T, G and C -- that



make up its structure. Environmental changes outside the cell can cause some DNA bases to be modified by adding a methyl group. This process

is called 'DNA methylation,' the researchers explained.

Each cell possesses millions of these DNA methylation marks.

Researchers have observed changes to these marks in early cancer development; they could aid in early cancer diagnosis.

"Computational methods such as this model, through better training on more varied data and rigorous testing in the clinic, will eventually provide AI models that can help doctors with early detection and screening of cancers," said the paper's lead author, Shamith Samarajiva.

"This will provide better patient outcomes," he added.

In addition, the researchers mentioned that identifying these unusual methylation patterns (potentially from biopsies) would allow healthcare providers to detect cancer early.

This could potentially improve patient outcomes dramatically, as most cancers are treatable or curable if detected early enough, they added.

Pelosi to McCaul, Modi meets bipartisan US Congressional delegations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday here reiterated commitment to further strengthen bilateral relations with the US for global good. He made this assertion when a bipartisan US Congressional delegation including former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called on him.

Modi also highlighted the significant role played by the consistent and bipartisan support of the US Congress in advancing India-US ties, which are based on shared democratic values, respect for rule of law and strong people-to-people ties. Prime Minister Modi recalled his State Visit to the US in June last year during which he had an opportunity to address a Joint Session of the US Congress for a historic second time.

A seven-member US Congressional delegation led by Rep. Michael McCaul, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, called on Modi.

The other members of the delegation included Rep. Nancy Pelosi, Rep. Gregory Meeks, Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, Rep. Amerish Babulal "Ami Bera" and Rep. Jim McGovern. The delegation members congratulated Prime Minister on his election for the historic third consecutive term. They expressed deep appreciation for the scale, fairness and transparency of the recently concluded world's largest democratic electoral exercise in India. The delegation described India-US relations as the most consequential one and expressed their strong support for further deepening Comprehensive Strategic Global Partnership in all areas,



including trade, new and emerging technology, defence, people to people exchanges. The visiting US delegation on Wednesday met with Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama at his residence in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh. After the meeting Pelosi took

in a social media post said "Today, it was my honor to join a bipartisan Congressional delegation to meet with His Holiness, the 14th @DalaiLama, in Dharamshala, India. In our meeting, we strongly reaffirmed Congressional support for the

people of Tibet." The bipartisan delegation also met with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar along with Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra on Wednesday night. Jaishankar appreciated their "strong and continued" support

for the strategic partnership between India and the US. In a social media post, Jaishankar said "Pleasure to meet with the bipartisan US Congressional delegation led by @RepMcCaul. Thank @SpeakerPelosi, @RepGregoryMeeks,

@RepMMM, @NMalliotakis, @RepBera and @RepMcGovern for joining. Appreciate their strong and continued support for the strategic partnership." The US Congressional delegation had arrived in India on Tuesday and was received by officials of the Central Tibetan Administration at Himachal Pradesh's Kangra Airport. Upon arrival, the US lawmakers headed to Dharamshala to meet Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama. The delegation stated their commitment to ensuring China does not influence the choice of his successor, remarks expected to provoke Beijing, which views the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader as a separatist. These remarks coincide with efforts by Washington and Beijing to stabilize their relations, while India urges China to ensure lasting peace on their disputed Himalayan frontier,

following a military clash four years ago. The lawmakers also indicated that Washington would pressure Beijing to resume talks with Tibetan leaders, which have been stalled since 2010, to address the Tibet issue, with a bill expected to be signed by President Joe Biden soon. "It is still my hope that one day the Dalai Lama and his people will return to Tibet in peace," McCaul told a public reception after the meeting. Pelosi said Congress approval of the legislation, titled "Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act", or the Resolve Tibet Act, sent a message to China that Washington was clear in its thinking on the issue of Tibet. "This bill says to the Chinese government: things have changed now, get ready for that," she said to cheers from hundreds of Tibetans at Wednesday's event.

Birthday greetings pour in for President Murmu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Thursday wished President Droupadi Murmu a long and healthy life on her 66th birthday. She started her day by visiting the Lord Jagannath temple in Delhi and prayed for the welfare of all citizens.

"Jai Jagannath! Today I visited the Jagannath temple in Delhi and prayed for the welfare of all countrymen and also (wished) that our country continues to set new standards of progress," the President's office said in a social media post in Hindi, along with pictures of the visit.

She was born on June 20, 1958 at Uparbeda village in Odisha's Mayurbhanj. She was sworn-in as the 15th President of India on July 25, 2022.

"Vice President of India, Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar along with his wife Dr Sudesh Dhankhar called on President Droupadi Murmu and conveyed birthday greetings to the President at Rashtrapati Bhavan," the President's office said.



In his birthday greetings to President Murmu, Prime Minister Modi said the President's "wisdom and emphasis on serving the poor and marginalised are a strong guiding force".

"Warm birthday wishes to Rashtrapati Ji. Her exemplary service and dedication to our nation inspire us all. Her wisdom and emphasis on serving the poor and marginalised are a strong guiding force. "Her life journey gives hope to cores of people. India will always be grateful to her for her tireless efforts and visionary leadership. May she be blessed with a long and healthy life," Modi said in a social media

post. The Congress extended birthday greetings to President Droupadi Murmu and said her innate wisdom and steadfast commitment to India's progress, continues to guide all Indians.

In a social media post, Congress president Kharge said, "On behalf of the Congress party, we extend our warm birthday greetings to the President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu ji. We wish you a long and healthy life." "May your innate wisdom and steadfast commitment to India's progress, welfare and justice, continue to guide all Indians," he said.

SC stays HC proceedings in NEET case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday decided to examine pleas questioning the Centre's appointment of National Testing Agency (NTA) chairman Professor Pradeep Kumar Joshi to the high-powered committee which recommended a re-test for 1,563 undergraduate National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET-UG) candidates who were given grace marks.

The Supreme Court has issued notices to the Centre, the National Testing Agency (NTA) and others on petitions, including those seeking the scrapping of NEET-UG 2024 exam and a court-monitored probe into the alleged irregularities in the medical entrance test. The top court also stayed further proceedings on some pleas on NEET (Undergraduate)-2024 examination pending before different high courts in the country.

A vacation bench of Justices Vikram Nath and SVN Bhatti issued notices to the parties seeking their responses on four separate pleas filed by the NTA seeking transfer of some pending petitions, including those concerning alleged paper leak, from the high courts to the



apex court. As the bench issued notices on NTA's petitions, the counsel appearing for the agency urged that proceedings in these matters before the high court be stayed. "Issue notice, returnable on July 8," the bench said, adding, "In the meantime, further proceedings before the high courts shall remain stayed".

The Supreme Court heard a total of 14 petitions during the hearing. Of these, 10 were filed by 49 students and a student organisation called 'Student Federation of India'. Meanwhile, the remaining four were submitted by the NTA. They have also sought a direction to the NTA and others to conduct the test afresh.

The bench, which issued notices to the Centre, NTA and others seeking their responses on these petitions, said the pleas would be heard on July 8 along with other pending matters concerning the NEET-UG 2024. During the hearing, the bench made clear that it was not staying the counselling process.

"All this has been argued from day one and they (some petitioners) have been wanting stay of counselling. We have denied that," the bench observed. "Ultimately, if all of you succeed, everything will go. The examination goes and the counselling will also go."

An advocate, appearing for one of the petitioners, said the

counselling can be deferred until after July 8. The bench asked the NTA's counsel about the counselling. "The counselling will start on July 6, but it will not finish on July 6. It will take time," the NTA's counsel said. Another counsel informed the bench that a person has been arrested in Bihar in connection with the probe into alleged irregularities in the exam. The lawyer said FIRs have been lodged in Bihar and Gujarat regarding the alleged irregularities and the police should be asked to give status report of their investigation in these matter.

During the hearing, the bench observed that petitioners in the matter were making similar

arguments. The counsel appearing for the Centre said many a times, coaching institutes have also come as petitioners. "They have a right to come. Because their business is ... these students only and if you play with them and you meddle with their rights, then these coaching centres will come," the bench observed. While hearing separate pleas concerning the NEET (Undergraduate)-2024 examination, the apex court had on June 18 said even if there was "0.001 per cent negligence" on the part of anyone in the conduct of the examination, it should be thoroughly dealt with.

The NTA conducts the all India pre-medical entrance test. While hearing separate petitions raising grievances over the NEET-UG 2024, the apex court had last week sought responses from the Centre and the NTA on a plea for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into allegations of question paper leak and other irregularities in the exam.

The examination was held on May 5 across 4,750 centres and around 24 lakh candidates took it. The results were expected to be declared on June 14 but were announced on June 4, apparently because the evaluation of the answer sheets got completed earlier.

India, Oz, France pledge joint efforts for free Indo-Pacific as China flexes muscles



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

India, Australia and France have vowed to jointly work towards a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific amid China's growing muscle-flexing in the region.

The overall situation in the Indo-Pacific came up for detailed deliberations at the third 'India-France-Australia trilateral focal points' meeting that took place in Delhi on Wednesday.

"The three sides reviewed the progress made under the three pillars of trilateral cooperation: maritime safety and security, marine and environmental cooperation, and multilateral engagement," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said here on Thursday.

It said the meeting identified new proposals for furthering the trilateral cooperation, including under the framework of the Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) mechanisms.

"India, Australia and France reaffirmed their commitment

to advancing their shared values and working together towards a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific," the MEA said in a statement.

The IPOI is an open, inclusive, non-treaty based, global initiative that was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 14th East Asia Summit in November 2019 to promote collaborative efforts among like-minded nations to better manage, conserve and secure the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is an inter-governmental organisation aimed at strengthening regional cooperation.

The Indian side at the trilateral was led by Piyush Srivastava, joint secretary (Europe West) and Paramita Tripathi, joint secretary (Oceania and Indo-Pacific) at the MEA.

The French side was headed by Benoît Guidé, Director (Asia and Oceania) in French foreign ministry. The Australian delegation was led by Sarah Storey, a first assistant secretary at Australian foreign ministry's South and Central Asia Division.

EC flooded with applications alleging EVM tampering

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Following the June 4 Lok Sabha election results, the Election Commission has been flooded with applications from high-profile candidates, including from the BJP and Congress, alleging tampering with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). The move reignites the contentious debate over the reliability of EVMs, despite the Supreme Court's recent dismissal of such claims as "unfounded".

However, since the Apex Court had allowed candidates who finished second or third to request verification of EVMs for a fee, candidates across eight parliamentary seats in six States, covering 92 polling stations, are now demanding a thorough investigation into the micro-controller chips embedded in the



machines. Notable applicants include Sujay Vikhe-Patil (BJP) from Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, and candidates from YSRCP and DMDK.

As per the rule, candidates must pay Rs 47,200 per EVM set for verification, which includes costs set by manufacturers (BEL and ECIL) and administrative expenses. The EC is responsible for communicating requests to manufacturers and has outlined a

process for verifying the EVMs, with a technical Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to be issued later. Similar requests have been made for EVM verification following assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. This process aims to maintain transparency and integrity in the electoral system, addressing candidates' concerns about the election results.

Vikhe-Patil had lost to Nileshe Lanke of NCP (Sharad Pawar) faction. A YSRCP and a DMDK candidate too have applied for the verification, according to data shared by the poll panel. Candidates who come second or third and seek verification of the EVMs will have to pay Rs 47,200 per EVM set, according to the SOP issued by the EC on June 1.

As per the SOP, the cost submitted by manufacturers BEL and ECIL to carry out EVM "check and verification" is Rs 40,000 (plus 18 per cent GST) per set of EVM.

"In addition to the cost incurred by the manufacturers, there are also administrative costs like cost of labour to shift the units, CCTV coverage, electricity charges, videography costs and various other operational costs at the district election officer level," the document said.

Job fair for former servicemen

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Directorate General Resettlement (DGR), Ministry of Defence, is organising an Ex-Servicemen Job Fair at Station Auditorium, Air Force Station, Hindon (Ghaziabad), Uttar Pradesh on June 21.

The Job Fair aims to connect Veterans and Employers, offering a second opportunity for employment to the Ex-servicemen (ESM). The veterans of Tri-services from all over the country are eligible for participation in the job fair, officials said here on Thursday.

Around 40 corporates are expected to take part in the fair offering various jobs such as field job, administrative



work, desk job, institutional security, and related works to the veterans.

Registration for all Ex-Servicemen will take place at the venue from 7 am to 10.00 am.

To register, ESM should bring their ESM identity card and five copies of the latest CV or bio-data with a photograph. ESM Job seekers would gain access to multiple job opportunities and hassle-free recruitment process.

Modi to lead Yoga Day celebrations from Srinagar today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

On June 21 ie Friday, as the world joins India in celebrating the International Day of Yoga (IDY) with Prime Minister Narendra Modi taking the lead at Srinagar, over 150,000 Ayushman Arogya Mandirs set up in the nook and corner of the country too will hold yoga sessions.

This year's theme, "Yoga for Self and Society," underscores yoga's role in promoting personal well-being and social harmony. These Ayushman Arogya Mandirs, designed to extend healthcare services beyond traditional boundaries, encompass comprehensive care for non-communicable diseases, palliative and rehabilitative care, oral, eye, ENT, and mental

health services, alongside emergency and trauma care, including essential drugs and diagnostics.

In a recent communication, Union Health Secretary Apurva Chandra emphasised the integral role of yoga in these centers' primary healthcare strategies suggesting them to invite prominent public figures as yoga ambassadors to motivate the participants.

The planning of IDY 2024 at AAM should involve coordination with block/district administration with active participation from ASHA/ANM, voluntary organizations, schools, colleges, and youth groups, said the Secretary.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres, in his message on the eve of the IDY,



said, "With roots in India but now embraced worldwide by people of all faiths and cultures, yoga unites people with its values of balance, mindfulness and peace with people and planet alike." At the same time, Hwang Il Yong, Director of Korean Cultural Centre

India said, "In Korea, yoga is embraced not just as a fitness routine but as a holistic lifestyle that nurtures the body, mind and spirit. The practice reduces stress and enhances flexibility and balance, contributing to its global adoption. This day cele-

brates yoga as India's cultural contribution, now deeply rooted in Korean culture. "Celebrating the day, the Seoul Metropolitan Government will host "Gwanghwamun Moonlight Yoga" event at Gwanghwamun Square from June 25 to August 8, providing a special experience on a summer night. The opening is on June 21 and will include cultural and artistic performances," he shared.

Dr. Jyoti Kapoor, Founder and Director, Manasthali Wellness too elaborated benefits of the yoga saying that it imbibes the feeling of 'accepting yourself and your body just as you are today. This is the mindfulness aspect of yoga - simply appreciating your body for the things that it can do right now in the pre-

sent moment. This is crucial for all of us. By regular yoga practice of yoga, one can strike a balance and bring peace back into your hectic life."

Dr. Rajnish Kumar, Director and Unit Head- Neurology, Max Super Speciality Hospital, Dwarka echoed similar views stating that "emerging research shows that yoga can significantly benefit women dealing with neurological issues. By reducing stress, enhancing mood, and improving physical well-being, yoga helps manage conditions like anxiety, depression, and chronic pain. Regular yoga practice increases levels of neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, which can help alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety."

Yogi reviews One Family, One Identity scheme

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday, reviewed the current status of the 'Family ID' process being issued to each family unit in the state and directed for its speedy execution.

As per a press statement released, the chief minister reiterated that the Family IDs are being issued to provide government benefits to every family and employment opportunity to at least one member.

Currently, about 15.07 crore people from approximately 3.60 crore families living in Uttar Pradesh are benefiting from the National Food Security Scheme. The ration card number of these families serves as their Family ID.

More than 1 lakh families without ration cards have also been issued Family IDs. Families without ration cards can register on <https://familyid.Up.Gov.In> to get the ID, the statement said. Under the "One Family, One



Identity" scheme, each family gets a unique ID, which will help create a comprehensive live database of family units in the state. This database will assist in better management of beneficiary-oriented schemes, timely targeting, transparent operations, and ensuring 100 per cent delivery of schemes to eligible people by

simplifying access. "The Family ID is intended for all families in the state, aiming to benefit 25 crore people. Using the integrated database obtained through the Family ID, families lacking employment can be identified and given priority for appropriate employment opportunities," the statement read.

CPI(M) to launch massive operation to strengthen party

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The five-day long brain storming session convened by the CPI(M) to analyse the reasons behind its debacle in the recent Lok Sabha election concluded on Thursday at Thiruvananthapuram with M V Govindan, the Kerala strongman declaring that the party would stage a strong comeback soon.

Come July 2, the CPI(M) would launch a massive operation to strengthen and streamline the party by holding booth level conclaves across the State, according to Govindan.

"The Eezhava community and a section of the Christians in Kerala voted for the BJP. This is the reason for the defeat of the LDF candidate at Thrissur. We have information that the RSS has infiltrated into the SNDP Yogam of the Eezhava community and the Christians to sabotage the voting pattern," said Govindan, Kerala party secretary while briefing the media about the deliberations which were attended by party's top bosses Sitaram Yechury



and Prakash Karat. Govindan lambasted the opposition parties and the RSS for singling out Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his family members for attacking the CPI(M). "The baseless allegations of corruption and nepotism against the Chief Minister upset the traditional voters of the CPI(M). The charges that Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his daughter were receiving money shocked the voters. The five-day long conclave of the party expressed full confidence on the chief minister. It is utterly wrong to

say that the chief minister's style of functioning has cost the party dearly in the elction. He has his own style of functioning developed over a period of time and there is nothing wrong in it," said Govindan.

He said the delay in the disbursement of pension to retired government servants and the social pension meant for the poorer sections of the electorate has caused many inconveniences to the people. "But we will have a course correction and rectify the errors and failures pointed out by the party leaders and grassroot level workers. No attack on the chief minister's style of functioning will be allowed by us," asserted the party secretary.

According to Govindan, the CPI(M) in its bid to strengthen the party infrastructure and the inspire the party activists would hold people's collective across the State starting from 2nd July.

"These people's collectives would be held from the local level to the State level and the party's top leaders would have

serious exchanges of ideas with the grassroot level workers," said Govindan.

The CPI(M) functions in a military like precision with the party structure divided as branch committee, local committees, area committee, district committees, State Committee and State Secretariat.

A membership in the State Secretariat is considered as the holy grail by ordinary workers and commands big respect from the society. A member of the branch committee is widely respected by the local police station.

He said a recharged and renewed CPI(M) would take on its rivals in the upcoming elections. The State is about to witness election to the local bodies within months and the assembly election in 2026. Govindan said the party machinery would be strengthened to meet the two elections to ensure the return of LDF and install Vijayan 3.0. The CPI(M) is the first political party in the State to hold post-poll analyses after the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

Bhupender takes stock of forest fire situation in Uttarakhand

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav arrived in Dehradun on a two-day visit to take stock of the forest fire situation in the state.

After being received at the Jolly Grant Airport by State Forest Minister Subodh Uniyal, Yadav left for a visit to the affected areas of Tehri district and interacted with locals.

He went to Hindolakhali, Bermuda and Badshahithol and spoke to locals about the measures that can be taken to control forest fires.

This year, there has been a surge in forest fires in Uttarakhand with 1,265 such incidents reported this "fire season" compared to 760 in 2023, the forest department said.

The fire season in Uttarakhand begins each year usually in mid-February and comes to an end with the onset of monsoon in June.

Konkan Railway deploys over 670 personnel for patrolling along route during monsoon

PTI ■ THANE

With the onset of monsoon, the Konkan Railway on Thursday said it is undertaking several safety measures, like round-the-clock patrolling on the tracks, use of advanced communication systems and installation of flood warning systems, to effectively tackle rain-related challenges on the route.

It said it is deploying 672 personnel for round-the-clock patrolling along the tracks during the monsoon season.

In a statement, the Konkan Railway said it remains steadfast in its commitment to ensuring a secure and smooth travel experience,

supported by its participation in national disaster management protocols and regular weather updates from the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Incidents of landslides, boulder collapse occur every year during the monsoon season on the Konkan Railway route.

It said the railway's monsoon timetable, effective from June 10 to October 31, adjusts sectional speeds to accommodate weather conditions, prioritising passenger safety.

It said it is intensifying its preparations during the monsoon season, focusing on bolstering safety measures and operational readiness. Some of the significant steps



being taken include the intensive cleaning of catch water drains and meticulous inspections of railway cuttings to fortify the network against adverse weather conditions. Over recent years, targeted geo-safety projects have notably reduced incidents like boulder falls and soil slips, enhancing overall safety standards, it said.

It will deploy 672 personnel for round-the-clock patrolling during monsoon, focusing on vulnerable sections where speed restrictions will be imposed as a precautionary measure. Strategic placement of BRN-mounted excavators and Rail Maintenance Vehicles at key locations ensures swift

emergency response capabilities, the Konkan Railway added. Operational adjustments include directives for loco pilots to reduce speeds during heavy rainfall and provisions for Self-propelled Accident Relief Medical Vans (ARMVs) equipped with emergency medical facilities. Advanced communication systems, including mobile phones and walkie-talkies for safety personnel, along with upgraded VHF base stations at all stations, will facilitate seamless coordination during emergencies.

Technological upgrades such as LED signals, self-recording rain gauges, and flood warning systems installed at critical bridges enhance

monitoring and response capabilities. Round-the-clock control rooms in key locations ensure continuous oversight and immediate response to operational challenges.

Passengers are advised to stay informed about their travel plans by checking train statuses online at www.Konkanrailway.Com or contacting the helpline at 139. Konkan Railway's proactive approach underscores its dedication to passenger safety and operational excellence during the monsoon season, the release added.

The Konkan Railway operates services in the coastal regions of Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka.



Telangana urges Centre to allocate coal blocks to Singareni Collieries

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

The Telangana government on Thursday urged the Centre to allocate all the coal blocks located near Singareni Collieries to the state-run mining company without going through the auction process.

Telangana Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka said the state government would meet Union Coal and Mines Minister G Kishan Reddy, who is also the BJP state chief, with the request.

There are also plans to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi with an all-party delegation, he added. Coal production is now going on in about 40 mines, and about 22 coal mines will have to be closed down by 2032-33 as coal would be exhausted there, he said.

There are estimates that the coal production would fall to 17.28 million tons by 2060 from the 70 million tons at present, he added. Singareni has to acquire new coal mines in the interest of its future, he said.

Vikramarka's comments urging allotment to Singareni came a day ahead of the launch of auction of the coal mines to be held by the Centre here on June 21 for commercial mining. The Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL) is jointly owned by the Government of Telangana

and Government of India on a 51:49 equity basis. Vikramarka, who spoke to reporters at Khammam, said that soon after the Congress government assumed office in December last year, he met then Union Coal Minister Pralhad Joshi with the request that all the coal blocks neighbouring Singareni be allotted to the state-run mining firm without auction. The SCCL, a major PSU firm in Telangana, employs 42,000 people directly, another 26,000 through outsourcing and also provides livelihood opportunities to 50,000 people, he said.

The SCCL is also a major source of revenue, he pointed out. The BJP says "it has got lot of love for Telangana" and Kishan Reddy, who belongs to the state, has now become the Coal and Mines Minister, he said.

"We will meet Kishan Reddy ji on behalf of Singareni. We will appeal to him not to include all the coal blocks in Godavari catchment area in Singareni area in the auction, and as per MMDR Act, to give exemption and allot (to Singareni) because it is a public sector entity," he said. The government would also urge Kishan Reddy to take PM Modi's appointment and meet him along with representatives of all parties in the state, he said. "We appeal to him to protect Telangana's assets and protect Singareni," Vikramarka said.

74 lakh tourists visit Himachal till May

PTI ■ SHIMLA

With over 74 lakh tourists visiting Himachal Pradesh till May this year, the tourist footfall has increased marginally by 3.5 per cent as compared to the corresponding period last year. A total of 74,64,184 tourists including 32,415 foreign tourists visited the state till May end as compared to 72,02,956 tourists including 23,174 foreign tourists in the same period last year, an increase of 3.5 per cent, said Tourism and Civil Aviation Director Manasi Sahay Thakur.

"Efforts are afoot to improve

inter and intra state connectivity through construction of heliports. Major focus is on infrastructure development like creating wayside amenities besides opening wellness centres, construction of ice skating rinks, promoting eco and adventure tourism with the funding of Asian development Bank (ADB)," she told the PTI. Private players are also engaged in advance to ensure sustainability of tourism projects and the results will be visible in the next three years, she added. Surprisingly, tourist inflow in



Solan district has surpassed Shimla. According to the data, maximum tourists visited Kullu (14,97,920)

followed by Solan (10,41,074) and Shimla (9,99,065).

"Kasauli and Chail are most sought after destinations in

Solan district and the tourism department has put new destinations on tourism maps like Reva water fall in Solan. People are preferring approachable destinations at short distance," Thakur said. Options of home stays have increased near the main tourist destinations.

The Kandaghat-Sadhupul area has also emerged as a tourist hotspot, say tourism officials, adding that Solan, being close to Haryana, Chandigarh and Punjab, has witnessed decent tourist inflow so far this year.

Tourists visit Himachal round the year as tribal Lahaul and Spiti and Kinnaur

attract people for its scenic beauty, snow-clad mountains and unexplored tracks. Dharamsala is the abode of Tibetan Guru Dalai Lama. Shimla is famous for being "queen of hills", reminiscent of British architecture, and Kullu-Manali for snow and adventure sports.

Moreover, there is perennial flow of tourists to "Shakti Peeths" in Kangra, Bilaspur, Una, Simaur and Mandi, known as "Chhoti Kashi" for ancient Shiv temples. The foreign tourists and adventure lovers are attracted to the virgin areas of Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti and Chamba.

Andhra Pradesh CM Naidu visits Amaravati

PTI ■ AMARAVATI

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday said he is in a dilemma over Amaravati, after taking stock of the stalled projects in the greenfield capital he had championed.

He promised to soon release a White paper on the status of Amaravati and elicit suggestions from people on the way forward. Amaravati capital city project came to a standstill from 2019 to 2024 under the previous YSRCP regime.

However, the change in government breathed life into the capital city project as Naidu categorically declared that Amaravati would be the sole capital of Andhra Pradesh. This is the first time the CM is visiting Amaravati after assuming the office for the fourth term. "After going around Amaravati, I am confused as to what to do. Today, I came for the first time to see where we are and what to do in the future. We will take suggestions from various quarters in the state and all the people should deliberate on this issue," Naidu told reporters. The



Chief Minister inspected several construction projects, such as the residential quarters for officials, legislators, judges and also the stalled high court, secretariat and other construction sites. "... We will release a white paper on Amaravati with all the details," said Naidu, accompanied by Municipal Minister P Narayana and senior officials. The CM noted that up to 80 per cent work on these projects was completed. According to the CM, had the Amaravati city project gone ahead as planned, the road infrastructure would have come up by now. Naidu asserted that

Amaravati is the address of five crore people of the state and termed it as people's capital which can show direction to all.

Noting that nearly 55,000 acres of land bank is available in Amaravati from all sources, he thanked the farmers for giving up their lands for the state capital.

He praised farmers of Amaravati region who protested for 1,631 days to restore its capital status and assured that port city Visakhapatnam will be developed as the financial capital and Kurnool as a modern city.

Replying to a question from PTI Video on the Rs 500-crore palatial mansion built atop Rushikonda in Visakhapatnam during the YSRCP regime, Naidu castigated the previous regime for indulging in such extravagance when there were no financial resources in the state.

The sea-view mansion, built with ultra-luxury amenities such as Italian marble, 200 chandeliers, 12 bedrooms, and others was purportedly meant to be the residence of the former CM. Without elaborating, Naidu said he will discuss it later.



Bihar Cabinet gives nod to metro projects in four more cities

PTI ■ PATNA

The cabinet of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Thursday gave the nod to metro projects in four more cities of the state.

Patna Metro, the foundation of which was laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 17, 2019, is currently under construction.

In a cabinet meeting chaired by Kumar, approval was given to metro projects in Muzaffarpur, Gaya, Darbhanga and Bhagalpur. "The state cabinet approved the Urban Development and Housing Department's proposal pertaining to metro rail projects in Muzaffarpur, Gaya, Darbhanga and Bhagalpur. Now, the feasibility reports will be prepared after which the detailed project reports (DPR) will be finalised," S Siddharth, Additional Chief Secretary (Cabinet Secretariat), told reporters after the cabinet meeting.

While the central and state government will each bear 20 per cent cost of the project, the remaining 60 per cent will be borne by financial institutions, he said. In the first phase of Patna Metro, five stations

are expected to be operational by March next year. The first phase will have 15.36 km of elevated track and 16.30 km of underground track.

The cabinet also gave its approval to the proposal moved by the General Administration Department (GAD) authorising different commissions, including Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) and Bihar Staff Selection Commission (BSSC), to conduct preliminary examinations of different recruitment exams in two phases, if appearing students are in large number.

"It will be entirely up to the commissions to hold preliminary examinations of different recruitment exams in two stages, if the number of appearing candidates is large. However, other than preliminary exams, all further examinations will be conducted on a specific date in Patna and surrounding areas," he said. "The cabinet also gave its go-ahead to conduct these examinations in both online and offline modes," he added.

Also, the Cabinet approved a proposal of the sports department to open sports cubs in all panchayats in the state, the official added.

Pacifying farmers

Cabinet approves MSP for 14 Kharif season crops amid rising farmer unrest, but is it enough?

In one of its first major decisions, the Modi Government has decided to assuage the farmers by increasing the Minimum Support Price (MSP). The Union Cabinet has approved the MSP for 14 Kharif season crops. This decision reflects the Government's attempt to ensure that farmers receive fair and remunerative prices for their produce, thereby helping them cope with rising input costs and inflation. Whether the farmers would welcome it, is doubtful. But it would indeed be some relief for the farmers. The approved MSP rates for Kharif crops indicate a substantial increase over the previous year. For instance, the MSP for paddy, the staple Kharif crop, has been raised by Rs100 per quintal, setting the new price at Rs 2,180 for the common variety and Rs 2,200 for the Grade A variety. Similarly, the MSP for maize has been increased by Rs 75 per quintal to Rs 2,130. These adjustments are part of a broader effort to cover a range of crops including cereals like rice and maize, pulses such as moong and tur and oilseeds like soybeans and groundnuts.



The recent surge in farmer protests underscores the presence of deeper systemic issues that extend beyond mere price support. High input costs, inadequate procurement infrastructure, mounting debt and the impacts of climate change are among the key factors driving farmer dissatisfaction. Many farmers struggle to access the benefits of the MSP due to insufficient procurement mechanisms and delays in payments. Moreover, the cost of essential inputs like seeds, fertiliser and pesticides has escalated, diminishing the net gains from the increased MSP. The pervasive issue of debt, compounded by crop failures

and unpredictable market prices, further exacerbates the financial instability of farmers. These factors underscore the need for interventions that go beyond MSP hikes to address the underlying challenges faced by farmers. While the MSP increase is a positive step, it alone is unlikely to resolve the multifaceted issues confronting the agricultural sector. Comprehensive reforms are essential to ensure sustainable improvements in the livelihoods of farmers. To achieve this, the Government must consider a holistic approach that includes enhancing agricultural infrastructure, improving access to credit and providing insurance against crop failures. Encouraging crop diversification and improving market access can also help mitigate risks associated with price volatility and reduce farmers' reliance on a few staple crops. Strengthening procurement systems to ensure timely procurement and fair pricing is crucial to making the MSP more effective. The Cabinet's approval of increased MSP for 14 Kharif crops, though inadequate, is a welcome development that reflects the Government's recognition of the pressing challenges faced by the agricultural sector. A concerted effort to implement systemic reforms alongside fair pricing mechanisms is essential for the advancement of India's farmers and the agricultural sector as a whole..

PICTALK



People use umbrellas to shield themselves during rains, in Kanyakumari

PTI

Benefits of integrating offline and online channels

As offline and online channels converge, businesses must adapt to ensure a seamless customer journey across all touchpoints

Expertise in channel management-as indeed in other fields-can often be self-referential. The conversations on universal principles for the management of the offline channel typically have little or no intersection with those for the online channel. While a number of these principles-developed in their silos-are indeed extremely useful, the consumer is (still) a person. Even in B2B businesses, the key decision-maker is a person or a group of persons. It is the 'people-ness' of these people (consumers, customers) that creates a case for integrated thinking. Consistency of what a brand is saying is important essentially because of the much-cited phenomenon of short attention spans. However, consistency is not sufficient-condition to get some of the scarce attention that's essential at the very top of the funnel (attention-> interest-> decision-> action, or AIDA, the old marketing reliable). For instance, the individual seeking a new smartphone is probably going to visit a big retail outlet, where they might interact with a brand repre-



sentative and try out a demo unit. They might come across an Instagram post highlighting a new model. If this person is inclined towards gathering information and may have also read some reviews online and watched a YouTube influencer comparing different models. A few years ago, the number of people who have both offline and online dimensions in their purchase decision might have been very small, but this cohort is quite salient now. The challenging aspect in this customer journey is that the last A in AIDA, 'action' (purchase) might happen offline or online. Therefore, segregated structures for offline and online channels are not sustainable in the long term. It is clearly in the brand's interest that offline and online channels are,

"telling the same story." Whether this story is of a new feature or a new colour, whether it be a story told in a YouTube video or by an in-store demonstrator. Integration of offline and online channels is, therefore, essential for a coherent conversation with the consumer. No smart manager starts with making a case for unintegrated offline and online channels. This situation arises because of some recurring, largely structural issues. The offline channel is often managed through a command-and-control structure that has evolved over decades, while the online channel is relatively more nascent. Companies taking the latter lightly is of course rarely the case now but there's still much to learn about its dynamics. The narrative of D2C (direct-to-consumer) models being unviable that has set in among many minds after the boom and bust in the fortunes of D2C startups may delay integration efforts, but will not stop the growth in the salience of online channels. Managerial specialisation is another reason for offline and online channels not being

integrated. Individuals who have acquired expertise through experience on offline channels are not necessarily the ones best suited to build or develop online channels, but with time this will change. Online and offline channels sometimes end up being unintegrated because of the list (or checklist) approach to channel execution. In this approach channel management is essentially a set of activities to be completed in a particular order. While the list approach is a hallmark of the manager who is strong at execution, it is not ideal for capturing strategic thinking. The choice of a metaphor that represents strategic thinking is essential for the integration of offline and online channels. Interconnected funnels might be a good, safe choice of metaphor in case a manager is struggling to find the ideal one for her context. Structural adjustments and readjustments will continue to happen, but integrated channel thinking is inevitable, because of its direct impact on customer experience.

(The writer is Co-Founder of Channelplay; views are personal)



SUHAS MISRA

Forest fires are a grim environmental reality

The devastating wildfires highlight a pressing environmental crisis compounded by human negligence and systemic failures



Raging wildlife fires in Uttarakhand have made headlines during the last month. These forest fires are a grim environmental reality and also a reflection of human faults in a society riddled with romanticism and unbridled freedom. Adding to this the situation of indiscipline and scant respect for the law, the disconcerting picture is complete. The incidents of resource-destroying wildlife forest fires in the green hilly State of Uttarakhand are due to three factors as obliquely indicated above. These are — faulty living paradigms resulting in environmental pollution, a growing culture of unrestrained freedom among the youth and a weak administrative system that is unable to enforce existing laws. Global warming due mainly to the huge use of hydrocarbon aviation fuels is the big reason for wild forest fires the likes of which are regularly observed in Australia and the USA. The forest fires of Uttarakhand were quite similar to the fires in these countries. The naturally growing *Chir Pine* trees in this State are stated to be susceptible to fires. However, the triggering cause of the fire is atmospheric warming due to vehicular and industrial pollution.

Uttarakhand has a vast belt of pollution causing the pharmaceutical industry of the modern allopathic school which makes extensive use of chemical raw materials. The other cause is mischief-mongering by delinquent youngsters as evident from the news that 3 persons hailing from Bihar were arrested for setting forest tracts in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district on fire to get more social media views. Finally, flagrant violation of environmental protection laws of the land through illegal tree felling and construction practices constitutes the third reason. The sorry fact is that the media provides detailed coverage of such incidents but gives very empirical and glib explanations as to the causes of incidents. It doesn't provide any in-depth analytical reports on such incidents which will throw light holistically on their occurrence and prevention. Wildfires are a regular phenomenon in Australia and the USA as well as in some European countries. And they are intriguing. Geologists and Meteorologists in those supposedly developed and well-



THE MAIN REASON BEHIND THE OCCURRENCE OF WILDFIRES IS THE PRODUCTION OF EXCESSIVE HEAT AND DISTURBANCE OF WATER BALANCE IN THE ENVIRONMENT DUE TO EXCESSIVE HYDROCARBON BURNING

administered countries have neither complete nor correct explanations for these phenomena. But it is not difficult or impossible to arrive at the actual complete, scientific explanations. And that is possible only through the application of the scientific principles expounded in Vedic Physics. Through Vedic Physics, we can understand and explain all phenomena in nature precisely and perfectly. This is because; Vedic Physics provides a holistic exposition of natural phenomena. Its ambit covers the five primordial elements—earth, water, fire, air and ether. This exposition goes from outwardly perceptible physical events to the innermost levels of subtlest material existence. The Modern Physics of Western academia explains physical phenomena only to the extent of measurement of visible, audible or otherwise measurable physical phenomena. It has no concept of sub-nano material entities- mind (Anastasia) intellect (mahatvatva) and divinely originating rays (rashmiyan). Also, it has very little or virtually no understanding of ether.

Discourse of our Sanatan scientific literature dating back to 15000 years ago unfolds the mysteries of material nature comprehensively. Some of these texts are Aitreya Brahman and Shathpath Brahman. Picking out threads of core scientific precepts from these texts will enable us to refine our living paradigms and technologies in line with Vedic sciences. It will enable us to make environment-friendly construction practices and prevent natural disasters and catastrophic events like wildfires. The main reason behind the occurrence of wildfires is the production of excessive heat and disturbance of water balance in the environment due to excessive hydrocarbon burning. The primordial water element is the antidote to the primordial fire element. Vedic sciences provide all the solutions. Scientists of the Western, modern school have none. We must turn to our rich traditional Sanatan scientific literature of the yore to bring safety, stability and sustainability to the world before it is too late.

(The author is a management consultant; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Modi's diplomatic engagements



Propos the news story "India's foreign policy under Modi 3.0," published on June 20, this is my response. In less than a week of assuming office as the Prime Minister for the world's largest democracy, Mr. Modi is back where he excels—on the global stage. His visit to Italy for the G7 meeting, coupled with several bilateral discussions, underscores his commitment to reinforcing India's international

presence. This trip marks Modi's first abroad after being re-elected for a third term, a testament to his enduring influence and the resilience of India's democratic process. Despite not securing an outright majority, Modi's leadership is strengthened by a robust opposition, showcasing India's vibrant democracy amidst global democratic uncertainties. His experienced diplomatic team, led by seasoned External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, continues to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes. PM Modi's visit highlights India's strategic balancing act, especially regarding sensitive issues like the Ukraine conflict and Israel's security situation. As global dynamics evolve, India's role remains pivotal, further cemented by Modi's diplomatic engagements and the nation's unwavering democratic principles.

Aarohi Sharma | Jammu

Additionally, the Jammu and Kashmir Police have made progress in combating terrorism by arresting an accomplice involved in a recent attack on a pilgrim bus. This demonstrates a proactive approach to addressing security threats. The Prime Minister's schedule includes inaugurating development projects and participating in International Yoga Day, reflecting his commitment to promoting health and unity. The event promises to bring together thousands, emphasising the global impact of yoga.

Reyansh Tiwari | Tirupati

NAM FACES MYRIAD CHALLENGES

Madam — Apropos the news story "NAM faces challenges of neo-colonialism," published on June 20, this is my response. Churchill's warning that "those who forget history are condemned to repeat it" remains relevant. Reflecting on his 1948 speech, it's evident he criticised the colonial past while paradoxically supporting its continuation in Asia and Africa post-World War II. This paradox underlines the complex legacy of colonialism, still echoed

today. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1955 with India as a key player, sought to protect nations' sovereignty from colonial influences. NAM became a significant force, advocating for neutrality and independence during the Cold War. However, its relevance has waned post-Cold War as new forms of neo-colonialism—via economic and media control—emerge. Recent actions by France, maintaining economic dominance in African countries and interfering in geopolitical issues like Nagorno-Karabakh, highlight ongoing neo-colonialism. NAM's resurgence under Azerbaijan's leadership signals a renewed commitment to combating these modern threats. With Uganda set to lead NAM, it's crucial for member nations, including India, to unite against neo-colonialist pressures and uphold the movement's founding principles to ensure global sovereignty and peace.

Dhruv Patel | Rourkela

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

G7 SUMMIT AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The Summit acknowledged the critical role of the Global South



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The recent G7 meeting held in picturesque Apulia, Italy, had several pointers on the recent geopolitical shifts and changing equations between some of the most powerful nations in the world. Yes, the meme-worthy, Pictures of Stares, Namaskars and Parachute Landings, kept the social media alive and brought energy to an otherwise, boring round of meetings and dinners of world leaders, discussing topics of shared interest, the underlining points were not missed. First, the clear focus of the meeting, as highlighted in the joint communique was Ukraine to send some tough messages to China and other parties working covertly with Russia. In a not-so-veiled message and directly naming China the Joint Statement read “We will continue taking measures against actors in China and third countries that materially support Russia’s war machine, including financial institutions, consistent with our legal systems and other entities in China that facilitate Russia’s acquisition of items for its defense industrial base. We reiterate that entities, including financial institutions, that facilitate Russia’s acquisition of items or equipment for its defense industrial base are supporting actions that undermine the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. Accordingly, we will impose restrictive measures consistent with our legal systems to prevent abuse and restrict access to our financial systems for targeted individuals and entities in third countries, including Chinese entities, that engage in this activity. “The message to China was, don’t keep playing with fire, as one day, it may singe you. It may be worth mentioning that the US has undertaken several export control measures to prevent the transfer of high-tech equipment to China, which have dual-purpose utilities, i.e. can be used for making precision weapons as well as cyber surveillance tools. China was the only large economy, (not so direct a party to the Russia-Ukraine war), which was absent from the G7 summit. Recently Chinese President Xi Jinping undertook a tour of several European countries to ease the tariff-related issues, imposed by several European nations, against Chinese electrical vehicles. While some nations in Europe are committed to the US-led vision of hard measures on China, several others are on the fringe, tilting towards China.



Meanwhile, this G7 summit, in a backhanded compliment of sorts, for Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s vision of inclusion of Global South countries in world affairs, reiterated the importance of African nations and pledged several measures to boost the economic prosperity of the region. The Joint Statement Stated “We endorse African countries’ call for greater voice in international bodies and welcome the AU’s participation in the G20 as a permanent member and the creation of a third Chair for sub-Saharan Africa at the IMF Executive Board in November. We reiterate our support for the G20 Compact with Africa, as a tool to increase private sector investments, promote structural reforms and local entrepreneurship support and enhance cooperation, including in the energy sector.” PM Modi who was also in Apulia, as a special invitee, in his brief outreach session addressed highlighted the preeminence of Global South countries. He said “The countries of the Global South are bearing the brunt of global uncertainties and tensions. India has considered it its responsibility to place the priorities and concerns of the countries of the Global South on the world stage. We have given high priority to Africa in these efforts. We are proud that the G-20, under India’s chairmanship, made the African Union a permanent member. India has been contributing to the economic and social development, stability and security of all African countries and will continue to do so.” A new world order with multiple voices opining on global matters, at a time when existing political structures are being challenged domestically, was one clear message from the G7 meeting in Italy.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

The unseen burden of women’s unpaid labour



ARCHANA DATTA

Globally, women spend significant time on unpaid care work, limiting their participation in the labour market and affecting economic stability



In the early 60s when Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro, who died recently, earned some success, a newspaper ran a piece on her, which had a condescending headline the ‘housewife who finds time to write short stories’. The banter fell through Alice and she went on to win a Nobel in literature in 2013. While another Nobel winner in Economics in 2023, Claudia Goldin, explained in her research that a woman’s vocation is not always guided by her choice, but, more often by the ‘long-standing societal trends’, which build a ‘cult of domesticity’ around her, idealising her role as an unpaid caregiver. Not surprising that women spend almost 76.2 per cent of total hours, three times more than men, on unpaid care work (ILO). Of all regions, the Pacific and Asia present the worst scenario, with men performing the lowest share of unpaid care work (1 hour and 4 minutes). In 2018, 606 million working-age women expressed disappointment that they failed to enter the labour market because of the burden of unpaid care work, which was the case for only 41 million men. In terms of monetary value, women’s unpaid work may exceed up to 40 per cent of GDP in some countries (ILO). Social scientists contend that child-bearing, as well as the age and number of children, more than marriage, impede women’s entry into the labour market. Women (aged 25-54) face a wide disparity in labour force participation rate (LFPR), which remains only 61.4 per cent, as against men’s 90.6 per cent (World Bank, 2022). While, in the lone women households, with at least one child under 6, economic compulsion lifts women’s LFPR to about 65.8 per cent, but, it goes down to 48.7 per cent, when mothers live with a partner and a young child, as the ‘male breadwinner’ syndrome prevails (UNWomen). Notwithstanding, the ‘breadwinner moms’ also bear a heavier load at home,

even if they out-earn their husbands’ (Pew Research Centre). While, the ‘motherhood penalty’ is very much persistent in the USA (Harvard, 23). ‘Moms were six times less likely than non-mothers and 3.35 times less likely than child-free men to be recommended for a hire...and are 114 per cent more likely than dads to take a career pause (Mom Project, US, a career-resource platform for working mothers). ‘If a kid is sick,..... it’s going to be the woman to take time off, because they are paid less, which makes more economic sense’ (PNAS, 2023). While, a report by the British trade union association TUC, said that ‘men do not face a penalty as parents at all, rather, fathers who work full time, experience a wage bonus, when they have children, earning 22 per cent more’. ‘The disparity arises not because mothers actually become less productive employees, or fathers work harder becoming parents, but, because employers expect them to be so, indicating a clear-cut culture bias about gender and work’, said Michelle Budig, a sociology professor, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her research further revealed that on average, men’s earnings increased by more than 6 per cent when they had children, if they lived with them, while, women’s decreased by 4 per cent for each child they had (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, US, 1979 to 2006). In India, childbirth impacts women’s entry into the labour market, but, differently, in the context of urban and rural. A study, collecting the Life History Calendar (LHC) data from the

States of Karnataka and Rajasthan, suggested that motherhood may not be accompanied by a penalty in terms of labour market participation for rural women because of the predominance of informal and flexible employment, which are more conducive for childcare responsibilities than work in an urban or more formalised setting (Gautham 2021). The analysis of data from the Employment-Unemployment Schedule (EUS) of the NSS from 2004 to 2012 revealed that rural motherhood wage penalties are close to zero, whereas, urban women pay a large penalty of about 18 per cent of total wages and highly educated women, or women in regular or salaried wage work, incur a larger wage penalty after motherhood than their less educated or casual wage counterparts (Wilde et al. 2010). However, first-time fathers, both rural and urban, experience no negative wage effects following the birth of children. The lack of childcare facilities is one of the most significant impediments to gender equality in job markets (UNWomen). A macro-econometric analysis of childcare policies in 18 OECD countries (1980-2007) commented that measures like high levels of employment protection and longer paid leave are crucial for the survival of working mothers (Thévenon, 2013). In 2016, an analytical study (ITUC) in seven high-income OECD countries, appraised that an investment of two per cent of GDP in the care industry, could create nearly 13 million new jobs in the US, 3.5 million in Japan, nearly 2 million in Germany, 1.5 million in the UK, 1 million in Italy, 600,000 in


Australia and nearly 120,000 in Denmark and boost women’s employment rate by 3.3 to 8.2 percentage points, as against men’s 1.4 to 4.0 percentage points. Subsequently, similar research (ITUC) in emerging economies such as Brazil, Costa Rica, China (People’s Republic), India, Indonesia and South Africa, also substantiated that the same amount of investment in the health and care sector would bolster nearly 24 million new jobs would in China, 11 million in India, nearly 2.8 million in Indonesia, 4.2 million in Brazil and over 400,000 in South Africa and 63,000 in Costa Rica. While, the ILO’s recent global ‘Care at Work’ report exhorted that to reducing the gender gap in employment by 7 percentage points and the monthly earnings gap to 1.8 per cent by 2035, a sustainable annual investment of over \$204 billion, an average of 5.8 per cent of GDP per country, should be invested for universal childcare and long-term care services. While, feminist economists (Elson et al.) and proponents of the Purple Economy (Ilkharacan), vouched for recognising care as ‘an indispensable component of human well-being’ and called for a ‘caring and gender equal economic and social order’, by sharing caregiving responsibilities between the State and households and women and men. It is high time now that the world fulfils its SDG 2030 commitments and ensures women’s economic justice and equality, with appropriate policy formulations and resource allocations.

(The author is former Director General, Doordarshan & All India Radio, views are personal)

UGC set to revolutionise higher education in India

The University Grants Commission has introduced a transformative policy that is expected to align India with global educational practices

The University Grants Commission (UGC) in its recent decision has allowed Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which offer programs in regular mode, to admit students twice a year, from the coming academic year. This option would be made available only in those HEIs that intend to increase their student intake and offer new programmes in emerging areas. Earlier, the UGC had decided in its 571st commission held on 25 July 2023 to permit biannual admissions under Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Online modes in January and July during an academic year. Last year, after the UGC had permitted two cycle admissions in a year for ODL and Online modes, in addition to



MANOJ VARGHESE

a total of 19,73,056 students who were enrolled in July 2022, an additional 4,28,854 students joined in January 2023 in these programs. That means, nearly half a million students benefited from this decision. It also shows the dearth of seats and the craving for Degrees. This policy decision will benefit several students who especially intend to go abroad for their higher studies, as in most

countries this biannual mode of admissions exists for the diploma, degree and post-graduation courses after the senior secondary education. It will enhance international collaborations and student exchanges from foreign countries. As a result, the global competitiveness will improve and will be in alignment with the global educational standards. The biannual university admissions will help students who missed an entrance owing to a delayed result or health reasons, as they do not have to wait for one another full year. Most of the institution heads have welcomed the step, owing to the official directive and secondly as the intake will bring in extra revenue to their institutes. Some of them want to

test the water by introducing it in some selected courses. On the other side, some of them expressed concern over the additional space, infrastructure and faculty required to handle this extra burden of students. Enhancing the quantity is good, but the cost of the quality is what some educational experts fear. Recently, a German IT professional was travelling from Delhi to Dehradun on a Shatabdi train. He was on his vacation trip to India after a six-month long professional hard work. He narrated how the Germans work, “When they work, they work and then spare a few months to upgrade their skills and also go in a hibernation mode of rest for reviving themselves.” Whereas, we Indians, either

work throughout the 12 months of spring, winter, rainy and summer seasons; or follow a lacklustre attitude and take a back seat. In India, many scholars pursue a doctorate for the sake of procuring a PhD degree after their post-graduation. Whereas, in European countries like Germany, students while pursuing their secondary education develop the flare for a particular vocational course and practice it on grounds. After a while, they return to learn more about that particular profession through higher studies. No doubt, many of them do their PhD in plumbing or automobiles and add value to their profession. In countries like Germany, education is a lifelong learning process and addresses the

ever-changing demands of the labour market. The learning is procured through adult education, professional development, recognising prior experience, flexible learning pathways and providing opportunities for seniors to pursue personal interests. The ongoing learning and training is imparted through Evening classes, Workshops, Vocational courses and Non-formal educational programs tailored to adults seeking to acquire new skills or qualifications. These educational opportunities are provided by diverse entities, including municipal and private institutions, religious organisations, trade unions, industry and commerce chambers, associations, political parties, businesses, Government agencies, academies, family education centres, vocational schools, as well as media outlets like radio and television. In India, the recently introduced vocational degree courses like BVoc and MVoc have failed to take off and get the desired results as expected. The adult mindset is different here, as they prefer a white-collar job. But the reality is different. One of the ITI pass out in the AC stream, Mr Khatri, an entrepreneur was recently awarded for his turnover of over Rs 10 crore per year. It is not the Degrees, but the determination and expertise in their profession, that makes a person successful. In most of the developed countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK and Germany, college stu-

dents while pursuing their higher studies work and earn. The literacy campaign and the efforts to bring back the school dropouts in India have yielded good results. The missing link is the flare for a particular vocational course, hands-on training, experience in the respective field and the confidence to be of their own. A change in the mindset of senior secondary-level students towards their career perspective can make a difference. Adopting the worldwide model of universities is good, but engaging them after this biannual mode of education is what the policymakers need to ponder upon.

(The writer is a former editor and former media advisor to the Delhi Government; views are personal)

Putin signs deals with Vietnam

AP ■ HANOI

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a series of deals with his Vietnamese counterpart To Lam on Thursday, during a state visit that comes as Moscow is seeking to bolster ties in Asia to offset growing international isolation over its military actions in Ukraine. The two signed agreements to further cooperation on education, science and technology, oil and gas exploration and health. They also agreed to work on a roadmap for a nuclear science and technology centre in Vietnam.

Following the talks, Putin said that the two countries share an interest in “developing a reliable security architecture” in the Asia-Pacific Region based on not using force and peacefully settling disputes with no room for “closed military-political blocs”.

This was echoed by Vietnam's new President To Lam, who said they seek to further “further cooperate in defense and security to cope with non-traditional security challenges” while implementing energy projects and expanding investments. He also congratulated Putin on his re-election and praised Russia's “domestic political stability”.

The agreements between Russia and Vietnam were not as substantial as an agreement Putin signed with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un the previous day, pledging mutual aid in the event of invasion said Nigel Gould-Davies, a senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia with the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, and a former British ambassador to Belarus.

Putin arrived in Hanoi early Thursday morning from North Korea, where he and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed an agreement that pledges mutual aid in the event of war. The strategic pact that could mark the strongest connection between Moscow and Pyongyang since the end of the Cold War comes as both face escalating standoffs with the West.

Putin also met Vietnam's most powerful politician, Communist Party General



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, right, drives a car which was presented by Russia's President Vladimir Putin, left, at a garden of the Kumsusan State Guest House in Pyongyang, North Korea Wednesday. AP/PTI

Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, as well as Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, according to the official Vietnam News Agency. He is also scheduled to meet parliamentary chief Tran Thanh Man. Putin drove to Vietnam's Presidential Palace on Thursday afternoon, where he was greeted by school children waving Russian and Vietnamese flags. There, he shook hands with and embraced Lam before a bilateral meeting and a joint briefing to the media.

Russia is keen to maintain “close and effective cooperation” in energy, industry, technology, education, security and trade, Russian Ambassador to Vietnam Gennady S. Bezdetko said on Wednesday, according to Vietnamese official media. The trip has resulted in a sharp rebuke from the US Embassy in the country.

Much has changed since Putin's last visit to Vietnam in 2017. Russia now faces a raft of US-led sanctions for its invasion of Ukraine. In 2023, the International Criminal Court in Hague issued an arrest warrant for Putin for war crimes. The Kremlin rejected it as “null and void”, stressing that Moscow doesn't recognize the court's jurisdiction.

Putin's recent visits to China and now North Korea and

Vietnam are attempts to “break the international isolation”, said Nguyen Khac Giang, an analyst at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

The US and its allies have expressed growing concerns over a possible arms arrangement in which Pyongyang provides Moscow with badly needed munitions for its use in Ukraine, in exchange for economic assistance and technology transfers that could enhance the threat posed by Kim's nuclear weapons and missile programme. Both countries wouldn't want to take a risk, inviting the wrath of Western countries by supplying the Russians.” Hanoi and Moscow have had diplomatic relations since 1950, and this year marks 30 years of a treaty establishing “friendly relations” between Vietnam and Russia.

Evidence of this long relationship and its influence can be seen in Vietnamese cities like the capital, where the many Soviet-style apartment blocks are now dwarfed by skyscrapers and a statue of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union, stands in a park where kids skateboard every evening. Many of the Communist Party's top leadership in Vietnam studied in Soviet universities, including party chief Tron.

Programme.

It is unlikely that Vietnam will supplying significant quantities of weapons to Russia, because that would risk progress the country has made with NATO members on military equipment, particularly the US, which has donated naval patrol vessels and is in talks to supply aircraft, said Ridzwan Rahmat, a Singapore-based analyst with the defense intelligence company Janes. “There is progress that you wouldn't have imagined just 10 years ago,” he said. “So I would imagine Vietnam wouldn't want to take a risk, inviting the wrath of Western countries by supplying the Russians.”

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Defendant in Vatican trial takes case to UN, accuses pope of violating his rights

AP ■ JERUSALEM

One of the defendants in the Vatican's big financial trial has filed a formal complaint with the United Nations, alleging that Pope Francis violated his human rights by authorising wide-ranging surveillance during the investigation.

A lawyer for Raffaele Mincione, a London-based financier, submitted a complaint last week to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights via a special procedure that allows individuals or groups to provide the UN with information about alleged rights violations in countries or institutions.

The Vatican on Thursday rejected the claim, saying the investigation followed all relevant laws and international agreements and that no surveillance was ordered for Mincione.



The filing marks the latest and highest-profile complaint about the Vatican trial, highlighting the peculiarity of the Vatican's criminal justice system and its seeming incompatibility with European and democratic norms. The Vatican is an absolute monarchy where the pope wields supreme legislative, executive and judicial power.

The trial, which opened in 2021 and ended in December, focused on the Holy See's money-losing 350 million euro

investment in a London property but also included other tangents. Vatican prosecutors alleged brokers and Vatican officials fleeced the Holy See of tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions, and then extorted the Holy See for 15 million euros (\$16.5 million) to cede control of the property.

The trial ended in December with convictions for nine of the 10 defendants, including Mincione and a once-powerful cardinal, Angelo Becciu. The court's motivations for the sentence still haven't been published, but both Vatican prosecutors and the nine convicted defendants have announced appeals. Mincione's complaint to the UN focused on the role of the pope during the investigation, an area that was flagged as problematic by defense lawyers during the trial and external experts in its aftermath.

The complaint cited four secret executive decrees Francis signed in 2019 and 2020 that gave Vatican prosecutors wide-ranging powers to investigate, including via unchecked wiretapping and to deviate from existing laws. The decrees only came to light right before trial, were never officially published, provided no rationale or time-frame for the surveillance, or oversight of the wiretapping by an independent judge.

The chief prosecutor argued Francis' decrees provided unspecified “guarantees” for the suspects, and the judges rejected the defense motions at the time that claimed they violated the fundamental right to a fair trial. In a somewhat convoluted decision, the judges ruled that no violation of the principle of legality had occurred since Francis had made the laws.

Romania pres withdraws from race for NATO chief

Brussels (AP): Romania's president has withdrawn from the race to become NATO's next secretary general, leaving outgoing Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte all but certain to head the world's biggest military organisation from October. The office of President Klaus Iohannis said in a statement that Romania's security council has backed Rutte's bid.

It also said that Iohannis had informed NATO late last week that he intended to pull out. His withdrawal removes the last real hurdle Rutte might face. It should allow NATO to put on a show of unity and demonstrate solidarity with war-ravaged Ukraine when US President Joe Biden and his counterparts meet in Washington on July 9-11 to mark NATO's 75th birthday.

Duterte resigning from Marcos' Cabinet as alliance flounders

AP ■ MANILA

Philippines Vice President Sara Duterte is resigning from her posts of education secretary and head of an anti-insurgency body, as her whirlwind alliance with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. unravelled over key differences, including efforts to arrest a religious leader accused of child abuses and Manila's handling of escalating territorial disputes with Beijing.

Duterte will remain the vice president. Her resignation from the other posts she had in Marcos' Cabinet was accepted by the president and takes effect July 19, Communications Secretary Cheloy Garafil said in a statement on Wednesday.

Duterte, 46, did not cite any reason for her resignation, Garafil said, but there have been open political hostilities between her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte, and Marcos. She ran as the vice-presidential running mate of Marcos, the son and

namesake of an ousted dictator, under a hastily forged unity ticket and won with huge margins in 2022. The alliance of the scions of two authoritarian leaders combined the voting power of their families' political strongholds but compounded worries of human rights activists. The alliance, however, rapidly faced political headwinds.

Early this year, the former president accused Marcos' legislative allies of plotting to amend the constitution to lift term limits and warned that could lead to him being ousted by a public uprising like his father, the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, in 1986. He also accused Marcos of being a drug addict.

Marcos laughed off the allegations and claimed his predecessor was using fentanyl, a powerful opioid.

Duterte and his daughter, Sara, back Apollo Carreon Quiboloy, the leader of a Philippines-based church known as the Kingdom of Jesus Christ who has been

sought by Philippine authorities for his alleged involvement in child abuse and exploitation. Quiboloy had also been indicted on a raft of charges in the United States, including conspiracy, sex trafficking of children and sex trafficking by force. He has denied any wrongdoing.

On China's increasingly aggressive moves against the Philippines in the South China Sea, Marcos has become one of the most vocal critics of Beijing's actions, in sharp contrast to the vice president's refusal to comment on the issue.

Her father nurtured cosy ties during his presidency with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian leader Vladimir Putin while often criticising the security policies of the United States and its Western allies. Marcos, who took office in 2022, backpedalled by rapidly boosting security ties with Washington, which he said needed to have a presence in Asia as a counterweight to China.

Swedish court acquits former Syrian army gen

AP ■ COPENHAGEN

A Swedish court on Thursday acquitted a former Syrian army general accused of playing a role in war crimes in his home country more than a decade ago. Brig. Gen. Mohammed Hamo, who now lives in Sweden, was charged in February with aiding and abetting crimes against international law. Prosecutors said that as head of the Ordnance Department of the Syrian Army's 11th Division, he was responsible for providing the weapons that were used to commit war crimes in 2012.

The prosecutor alleged that Hamo had participated in the division's indiscriminate attacks on military and civilian targets in and around the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama.

The Stockholm District Court said it was “clear that the Syrian army's warfare in the conflict included indiscriminate attacks in violation of international law there.

However, Judge Katarina Fabian said the evidence that the prosecutor relied on was not sufficient to convict Hamo. Swedish news agency TT said that Hamo was the highest-ranking military officer ever to stand trial in a European court for international human rights violations in Syria. Syria has been ravaged by civil war for over 13 years.

Little is known about the 65-year-old Hamo. In June 2012, he was transferred to northern Syria, and the following month he decided to leave the army and fled to Turkiye. There, he joined a group that was fighting against the Syrian regime. He traveled to Sweden in 2015, where he sought asylum. He was granted asylum, but Sweden's Migration Board informed the government that Hamo was previously “a senior officer within the framework of an army that was systematically considered to have committed violations of human rights”. Hamo was living in central Sweden when he was arrested on December 7, 2021. A court

at the time released him two days later, saying there wasn't enough evidence to keep him incarcerated. He has since been free.

The unrest in Syria between Assad's regime and opposition groups began in March 2011, and later exploded into a civil war that has killed nearly half a million people and displaced half the country's pre-war population of 23 million.

Chief prosecutor Karolina Wieslander said that it had been “a tough case to investigate”, saying among others that the country was still at war, making it “hard to gather evidence”.

“It is positive that a court of law has ruled that what the Syrian government did was war crimes,” she told The Associated Press, adding they had not decided yet whether to appeal.

A lawyer for the eight plaintiffs who backed the case against Hamo told Swedish broadcaster SVT that they need to read the verdict before deciding whether to appeal.

Train collision in Chile kills at least 2 people and injures several others

Santiago (AP): At least two people were killed and nine others injured Thursday when a train full of passengers collided head-on with another train on a test run just outside Chile's capital of Santiago. Investigations were underway to determine the cause of the crash, which vaulted one car fully on top of a car from the other train.

The eight-car freight train, which was carrying 1,346 tonnes of copper, was also packed with people, while the other train had 10 workers on board operating a speed test, the state rail company said. Authorities have not identified the two people killed. The nine injured included four Chinese nationals who were receiving treatment at hospitals near the crash site in San Bernardo, Chile. “We have to identify what the causes are and take the corresponding measures,” Transportation Minister Juan Carlos Muñoz told The Associated Press.

British PM Rishi Sunak's party hit with election date betting allegations

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party is facing a series of allegations on Thursday involving his bodyguard and aides over betting around the general election date, which is scheduled for July 4. The Metropolitan Police initially suspended an officer from Sunak's personal security detail and later arrested the individual on suspicion of misconduct in public office.

Soon after, it emerged that the UK's Gambling Commission was investigating several individuals linked to the governing Tories over allegedly betting on the timing of the election. While betting is legal in the UK, any bets placed with the advantage of insider information could fall within the purview of illegality.

“The matter was immediately referred to officers in the Met's Directorate of Professional Standards, who opened an investigation, and the officer was also removed from operational duties,” the Met Police was quoted by the BBC as saying.



ing.

“The officer was subsequently arrested on Monday 17 June on suspicion of misconduct in public office. He was taken into custody and bailed pending further enquiries,” the Met Police said.

Last week, the ‘Guardian’ newspaper reported that Sunak's close parliamentary aide, Craig Williams, placed a GBP 100 bet with Ladbrokes at a five to one odds on a July election just three days before the British Indian leader had surprised the country with a summer election, as opposed

to a widely expected autumn date later in the year.

Williams, 39, is the Tory candidate for Montgomeryshire and Glynwdr in Wales. In a statement, he said his “flutter” on the election had prompted some “routine inquiries” and that he would “fully cooperate with these”.

“I don't want it to be a distraction from the campaign. I should have thought through how it looks,” he said.

It has since emerged that a second Conservative candidate, who is married to the party's Director of Campaigns – who would be expected to have knowledge of election matters, is also facing an investigation over allegedly betting on the timing of the general election.

While Laura Saunders, the Tory candidate for Bristol North West, is reportedly among those being looked into by the Gambling Commission, her husband Tony Lee is said to have taken “a leave of absence” from his role. “The Gambling Commission regulates gambling in the interests of con-

sumers and the wider public,” a commission spokesperson said.

“Currently, the commission is investigating the possibility of offences concerning the date of the election. This is an ongoing investigation, and the commission cannot provide any further details at this time. We are not confirming or denying the identity of any individuals involved in this investigation,” the spokesperson said.

Under Section 42 of the UK's Gambling Act 2005, it is an offence to cheat at gambling or to do anything that allows someone else to cheat. The Conservative Party has said that the Gambling Commission being an independent regulatory body, it would not be “proper to comment further, until any process is concluded”.

However, the Opposition Labour Party has mounted pressure on Sunak, with leader Keir Starmer calling for Saunders to be suspended and said it is “very telling” that action had not been taken.

Is Earth really getting too hot for people to survive?

Fort Collins (US)My parents said the planet is getting too hot for people to live here. They called it climate change. What does that mean? – Joseph, age 12, Boise, Idaho.

Many countries have seen extremely hot weather lately, but in most of the inhabited world, it's never going to get “too hot for people to live here,” especially in relatively dry climates.

When it's hot outside in dry places, most of the time our bodies can cool off by evaporating water and heat from our skin as sweat.

However, there are places where it occasionally gets dangerously hot and humid, especially where hot deserts are right next to the warm ocean. When the air is humid, sweat doesn't evaporate as quickly, so sweating doesn't cool us the way it does in drier environments.

In parts of the Middle East,

Pakistan and India, summer heat waves can combine with humid air that blows in off the sea, and this combination can be truly deadly. Hundreds of millions of people live in those regions, most without access to indoor air conditioning. Scientists like me use a “wet bulb thermometer” to get a better sense of this risk. A wet bulb thermometer allows water to evaporate by blowing ambient air over a damp cloth. If the wet bulb temperature is over 95 F (35 C), and even at lower levels, the human body won't be able to let enough heat out. Prolonged exposure to such combined heat and humidity can be fatal.

During a severe heat wave in 2023, wet bulb temperatures were very high over the lower Mississippi Valley, though they didn't reach fatal levels. In Delhi, India, where air temperatures were over 120 degree Fahrenheit (49 Celsius) for

several days in May 2024, the wet bulb temperatures came close, and several people died from suspected heatstroke in the hot and humid weather. In conditions like that, everyone has to take precautions.

IS IT CLIMATE CHANGE?

When people burn carbon – whether it's coal in a power plant or gasoline in a vehicle – it creates carbon dioxide (CO2). This invisible gas builds up in the atmosphere and traps the Sun's warmth near the Earth's surface. The result is what we mean by “climate change.”

Every bit of coal, oil or gas that ever gets burned adds a little bit more to the temperature. As temperatures rise, dangerously hot and humid weather has begun to spread to more places. Areas of the US Gulf Coast in Louisiana and Texas are increasingly at risk of dangerous hot and humid conditions

in summer, as are heavily irrigated areas of the desert Southwest where water sprayed over farm fields adds moisture to the atmosphere.

Climate change causes a lot more problems than just hot, sweaty weather. Hot air evaporates a lot more water, so crops, forests and landscapes in some areas dry out, which makes them more susceptible to wildfire. Each Celsius degree of warming can cause a sixfold increase in wildfire over parts of the western US.

Warming also makes ocean water expand, which can flood coastal regions. Rising sea levels threaten to displace as many as 2 billion people by 2100.

All of these impacts mean that climate change threatens the global economy. Continuing to burn coal, oil and gas could cut global incomes by about 25% by the end of the century, according to one estimate.

Good news and bad news

There's both bad news and good news about climate change in the future.

The bad news is that as long as we keep burning carbon, it will continue to get hotter and hotter.

The good news is that we can substitute clean energy, like solar and wind power, instead of burning carbon, to power the products and services of modern life.

There's been tremendous progress in the past 15 years in making clean energy reliable and affordable, and almost every country on Earth has now agreed to stop climate change before too much damage is done.

Just as our ancestors built better lives by switching from outhouses to indoor plumbing, we will avoid making our world unlivable by switching from coal, oil and gas to clean energy.

Germany arrests man accused of plotting Islamic State attacks

Berlin (AP): An Iraqi man who is accused of standing by to carry out attacks for the Islamic State group after he arrived in Germany in 2022 has been arrested, prosecutors said Thursday.

The suspect, identified only as Mahmoud A. in line with German privacy rules, was arrested on Wednesday in Esslingen, near Stuttgart in southwestern Germany, federal prosecutors said in a statement. A judge ordered him to be kept in custody on suspicion of membership in a foreign terrorist organization pending a possible indictment.

He is accused of joining IS in Iraq in or before May 2016 and fighting for the extremist group.

OpenAI founder sets up new AI company

Washington (AP): Ilya Sutskever, one of the founders of OpenAI who was involved in a failed effort to push out CEO Sam Altman, said he's starting a safety-focused artificial intelligence company.

Sutskever, a respected AI researcher who left the ChatGPT maker last month, said in a social media post on Wednesday that he's created Safe Superintelligence Inc. with two co-founders. The company's only goal and focus is safely developing “superintelligence” - a reference to AI systems that are smarter than humans.

The company vowed not to be distracted by “management overhead or product cycles”, and under its business model, work on safety and security would be “insulated from short-term commercial pressures”, Sutskever and his co-founders Daniel Gross and

Daniel Levy said in a prepared statement.

The three said Safe Superintelligence is an American company with roots in Palo Alto, California, and Tel Aviv, “where we have deep roots and the ability to recruit top technical talent”. Sutskever was part of a group that made an unsuccessful attempt last year to oust Altman. The boardroom shakeup, which Sutskever later said he regretted, also led to a period of internal turmoil centred on whether leaders at OpenAI were prioritising business opportunities over AI safety.

At OpenAI, Sutskever jointly led a team focused on safely developing better-than-human AI known as artificial general intelligence, or AGI. When he left OpenAI, he said that he had plans for a “very personally meaningful” project, but offered no details.

N Korea-Russia def pact far from unique

AP ■ BANGKOK

A new mutual-defence pact signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un commits each country to come to the other's aid if attacked. Just what the threshold for such assistance would be is currently unclear — maybe deliberately so, to deter other countries from putting it to the test. Putin initially told Russian media that the partnership provides for “mutual assistance in the event of aggression against one of the parties”, while North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency later reported that the pact's Article 4 called for assistance “in the event that either of the parties is invaded and pushed into a state of war”.

If the pact is triggered, the countries' obligations are also vague, with KCNA reporting that if one is attacked the other must deploy “all means at its disposal without delay” to provide “military and other assistance”. Experts note that the language is almost identical to that of a previous mutual defense pact from 1961 between the Soviet Union and North Korea, which was never put to the test. Such pacts are not uncommon and are rarely invoked, while often being touted as a means of deterring aggression, though the agreement between the two unpredictable and autocratic leaders of nuclear nations immediately raised concerns globally.

The United States has many similar treaty obligations with other Asian nations, not to mention through NATO's Article 5 provision, which says that an attack on a member of the alliance is to be considered an attack against all of its members. The only time NATO's Article 5 has been invoked has been to come to the defence of the US after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Russia also has mutual defense pacts with several post-Soviet states through its Collective Security Treaty Organisation alliance, including Belarus and Kazakhstan. China has only one mutual defense agreement, and it's also with North Korea, formally known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

WHAT'S KNOWN, AND NOT KNOWN

Seoul (AP): Both Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un say a new strategic partnership is a breakthrough, but what it means for their relationship is still uncertain. The pact requires both countries to use all available means to provide immediate military assistance in the event of war, according to North Korean state media. While the agreement, inked on Wednesday at a summit in Pyongyang, could represent the countries' strongest deal signed after the Cold War, there are differing opinions on how strong the security commitment is. Kim claimed that the deal elevated bilateral relations to the level of an alliance, while Putin was more understated and did not call it an alliance. North Korean state media released the text of the agreement, which also includes broader cooperation in military, foreign policy and trade. Russia has not published its version of the text. Relations between sprawling Russia and small, isolated North Korea — both of them nuclear powers — have warmed significantly in recent years amid Russia's growing acrimony with the West over the invasion of Ukraine and suppression of all domestic opposition. One of the first knock-on effects of the agreement came on Thursday, when South Korea's government said it would reconsider its policy of limiting its support to Ukraine to non-lethal supplies. South Korea, a growing arms exporter, has provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but it

has not directly provided weapons to Kyiv.

WHAT DID RUSSIA AND N KOREA PROMISE?

Most of the debate over the partnership agreement revolves around the article that pledges mutual aid. According to North Korean state media, the section states that if one of the countries gets invaded and is pushed into a state of war, the other must deploy “all means at its disposal without delay” to provide “military and other assistance”. But it also says that such actions must be in accordance with the laws of both countries and Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which recognises a UN member state's right to self-defence.

To some analysts, that sounds like a promise that either nation would intervene if the other comes under attack, renewing a pledge made under a 1961 treaty between North Korea and the Soviet Union. That deal was discarded after the collapse of the USSR, replaced in 2000 by one that offered weaker security assurances.

Cheong Seong Chang, an analyst at South Korea's Sejong Institute, said the agreement echoes the language of the 1961 treaty, as well as provisions of the US-South Korea mutual defence treaty about activating channels to coordinate if either of faces the threat of invasion. “North Korea and Russia have completely restored their Cold War-era military alliance,” Cheong said. Other experts were more cautious, saying the section is

carefully worded to avoid implying automatic interventions and strictly limits the circumstances in which either country would be obligated to step in. And the language of the agreement is much less important than what each nation is actually capable of and willing to do, Du Hyeogn Cha, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said. While it's rare for any defence treaty to spell out specifically that a country is required to automatically intervene to defend a partner under attack, the strength of the commitment can be signalled in other ways, such as how the US stations thousands of troops in South Korea and closely coordinates with its ally over training and weapons systems, Cha said. But Russia, for instance, doesn't have a troop presence in North Korea and the countries have no established track record in joint military activities and coordination, aside from the North's alleged munitions transfers to Russia.

The fact that the article invokes the countries' domestic laws and the UN Charter could reflect that Russia tried to limit its defense obligation to very narrow conditions: when it's clear North Korea did not instigate the aggression, the attack on the North is legally recognised in Russia as war, and Russia's defence of the North is justified by the UN, Cha said. “The agreement is a symbolic statement vowing the expansion of cooperation, but it leaves a lot of room for interpretation when we get into practice,” Cha said.

the 1951 treaty with the Philippines that has been in focus, as China pursues sweeping claims in the South China Sea ever more aggressively, leading to physical confrontations with Philippine ships. Three weeks ago, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. told a defence forum in Singapore that if one of his citizens were killed by China, it would be “very, very close to what we define as an act of war”, giving rise to new fears that the tensions could spark a broader conflict between the US and China.

Just this week, after at least eight Filipinos were injured in a scuffle as China's coast guard tried to prevent them from delivering fresh supplies to a territorial outpost, the US renewed its warning to Beijing that it was obligated to defend the Philippines. US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell told his Philippine counterpart that Washington's treaty obligation “extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft — including those of its coast guard — anywhere in the South China Sea”, according to the State Department. In addition to its NATO obligations, the US also has mutual defence agreements with multiple Central, South American and Caribbean nations under the 1947 Rio Treaty.

The US does not have a mutual defense pact with Taiwan and adheres to a so-called One China policy, in which it recognizes only Beijing as the government of China but allows informal relations and defence ties with Taiwan. China maintains that self-governing Taiwan is a part of its territory and has not ruled out taking the island by force if necessary. The US has left it intentionally vague how it would respond if Taiwan were to be invaded by China, pursuing a policy known as “strategic ambiguity”.

At the same time, US President Joe Biden has said on several occasions that the US would respond militarily if China invaded Taiwan. US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin said earlier this month, however, that war with China was neither imminent nor unavoidable, stressing the need for continued dialogue.

Russia hammers power grid in Ukraine again

Kyiv's drones target enemy oil depots

AP ■ KYIV

Russia resumed its aerial pounding of Ukraine's power grid and Kyiv's forces again targeted Russian oil facilities with cross-border drone strikes, seeking to curb each other's ability to fight in a war that is now in its third year, officials said on Thursday.

With no major changes reported along the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line, where a recent push by the Kremlin's forces in eastern and northeastern Ukraine has made only incremental gains, both sides in the war have taken aim at distant infrastructure targets. In its seventh major attack on Ukrainian power plants since Moscow intensified energy infrastructure attacks three months ago, Russia fired nine missiles and 27 Shahed drones at energy facilities and critical infrastructure in central and eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian air force said. Air defences

intercepted all the drones and five cruise missiles, it said. The attack hit power structures in the Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv and Vinnytsia regions of Ukraine, causing “extensive damage”, according to national power company Ukrenergo. Seven workers were injured, it said. Ukrenergo announced extended blackouts across the country despite electricity imports and help with emergency supplies from European countries. Private energy company DTEK said one of its power plants was hit in the overnight attack but did not specify its location. Three company employees were injured and the plant's equipment was severely damaged, DTEK said on social media.

Among the most damaging recent strikes on Ukraine's energy supply were an April barrage that damaged Kyiv's largest thermal power plant and a massive attack on May 8 that targeted power generation and transmission facilities in several regions. Rolling blackouts have affected Ukrainian households and industry. The Russian Defence Ministry said in a statement that the strikes aimed at Ukrainian

energy facilities that are needed to produce weapons and military equipment. Ukraine, which is heavily dependent on Western military aid, is developing a small but fast-growing defence industry. In Russia, meanwhile, authorities in two regions reported fires at oil storage depots after drone attacks, two days after a Ukrainian strike started a huge blaze at another refinery. Ukraine has in recent months stepped up aerial assaults on Russian soil, targeting refineries and oil terminals in an effort to disrupt the Kremlin's war machine. The overnight drone attacks were carried out by Ukraine's Security Service, known by its acronym SBU, a Kyiv security official told The Associated Press. The attacks triggered fires at the facilities, which processed and stored crude oil and its derivatives used to supply the Russian army, the official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information. The head of Russia's Adygea region, Murat Kumpilov, said a Ukrainian drone attack sparked a fire at an oil depot in the town of Enem that was later extinguished.

Treason trial of Russian American woman opens amid tensions

AP ■ MOSCOW

The trial of a Russian American dual citizen whom Russia accuses of treason opened on Thursday amid rising tensions between Washington and Moscow that have included the arrests of two American journalists.

The trial is being held behind closed doors in Yekaterinburg, in the same court that next week is to begin hearing the case of Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter who was arrested in March 2023 and charged with espionage. The defendant was identified by Russian authorities as Los Angeles resident Ksenia Karelina, although US media reports frequently use the surname Khavana, the last

name of her ex-husband. Karelina was born in Yekaterinburg and was arrested in February while visiting family. Russia's main domestic security agency, the Federal Security Service, charges that Karelina raised money for a Ukrainian organization that was providing weapons, ammunition and other supplies to the Ukrainian military. Her boyfriend has said she made a single donation of about \$50 to a Ukrainian organization, according to media reports. Karelina faces a sentence of 20 years in prison if convicted. Almost all Russian criminal cases that make it to court end in convictions. Gershkovich, the highest-profile American behind bars in Russia, is accused of gathering secret information

from a tank factory in Yekaterinburg's region. His employers deny the allegation, and the US State Department has declared him to be wrongfully detained. Gershkovich's trial, also closed, is to begin on Wednesday. A journalist for US-funded Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe with US and Russian dual citizenship has been held since October on charges of gathering military information and failing to register as a foreign agent. Since sending troops into Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has sharply cracked down on dissent and has passed laws that criminalise criticism of the operation in Ukraine and remarks considered to discredit the Russian military.

35 Pakistanis among over 900 died during Haj in S Arabia

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

At least 35 Pakistanis were among more than 900 people from around the world who died during this year's Haj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia marked by searing heat, the government has confirmed. Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs said on Wednesday that Haj was challenging this year due to extreme heat and harsh weather conditions, with temperatures reaching 50 degrees Centigrade. Saudi state TV said temperatures on Monday rose as high as 51.8 degrees Celsius at the Grand Mosque in Makkah. The Director General of Pakistan's Haj Mission, Abdul Wahab Soomro, said on Wednesday that as of June 18, a total of 35 Pakistani casualties had been reported. This includes 20 in Makkah, six in Madina, four in Mina, three in Arafat and two in Muzdalifah, the Dawn newspaper quoted Soomro as say-

ing. He said the Saudi government had set up a system for burials in Haramain, and arrangements were made to send the body of any Pakistani pilgrim back to the home country if the heirs demanded so. Saudi Arabia has not officially provided information on fatalities, though it reported more than 2,700 cases of “heat exhaustion” on Sunday alone. Soomro also asked the general public not to heed social media posts about the hardships faced by the pilgrims, calling them “inauthentic”. In a statement issued in Islamabad, Soomro referred to a video clip circulating on social media that showed bodies lying on footpaths and people appealing to officials — also seen in the video — to put the bodies into the ambulances parked nearby. “It has come to our attention that some videos are circulating on social media websites in which pilgrims are shown,

and no one is coming to help [them]; these videos are baseless because their authenticity could not be verified, and their date or year could not be determined,” he said. He pointed out that verified information had to come from the Saudi government, which was later verified by the mission. While deaths among pilgrims are not uncommon (there were more than 200 last year), this year's gathering is being held amid particularly high temperatures. Haj season changes every year according to the Islamic calendar, and this year, it fell in June, one of the hottest months in the kingdom. On Monday, Saudi Arabia advised pilgrims against performing the “stoning of the devil” ritual between certain hours due to high temperatures. According to the Dawn newspaper, more than 900 deaths were reported this year. Several Indians were also among the dead.

Malaysian PM says China a ‘true friend’, not to be feared

AP ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on Thursday rejected the notion that China's dominance is to be feared, calling China a “true friend” at the end of Premier Li Qiang's visit to mark 50 years of diplomatic ties between their countries. While the leaders raised some contentious bilateral issues, Anwar said they discussed them as “equal partners, as trusted friends.” He didn't give details but likely referred to the prickly issue of overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea.

“People say, well, Malaysia is a growing economy. Don't let China abuse its privilege and extort from the country. I said no. To the contrary, we want to benefit from one another, we want to learn from one another and we want to profit from this engagement,” Anwar told some 200 business leaders at a luncheon attended by Li. Anwar said he rebuked the “incessant propaganda that we



should cast aspersions and fear the dominance of China economically, militarily, technologically.” “We do not. We in Malaysia, having a neutral stance, have the resolve to work with all countries and with China,” he said. “We see Premier Li Qiang as a friend that would work together with us.” Li, the first Chinese premier to visit Malaysia since 2015, flew in for a three-day visit on Tuesday on the last leg of a regional tour. Li, China's No. 2 leader after

President Xi Jinping, was also the first Chinese premier to visit New Zealand and then Australia in seven years. The two leaders on Wednesday agreed that China and other claimant countries in Southeast Asia should tackle the South China Sea dispute “independently and properly” through dialogue and cooperation, and via bilateral settlement. No details were given but the statement came amid concerns the dispute could escalate tensions between the US and China.

China says Dalai Lama must correct political propositions

PTI ■ BEIJING

China on Thursday asked the Dalai Lama to thoroughly reflect and completely correct his political propositions for it to hold talks with him and asked the US to respect its sensitivity and importance to Tibet-related issues as Washington is set to pass a tough Tibet policy law. On the central government's contact and talks with the 14th Dalai Lama China's policy is consistent and clear, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told a media briefing. The key is that the 14th Dalai Lama must thoroughly reflect on and completely correct his political propositions, he said, without elaborating. China watched warily the high-powered US Congressional delegation's visit to Dharamsala and its meeting with the 88-

year-old Dalai Lama besides the strong remarks made by its leading members US House Foreign Affairs Committee chair Michael McCaul and former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi questioning China's policy towards Tibet and their call to Beijing to hold talks with the Dalai Lama. Their visit came as US President Joe Biden was set to sign the Tibet policy bill adopted by both the US Senate and the House of Representatives. The bill awaits Biden's signature to make it into law. The bill seeks to counter China's narrative about its control over Tibet and promote dialogue between the Chinese government and the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, who is based in India since he fled the Himalayan region in 1959. On Tuesday, Beijing urged Biden not to sign the



Tibet policy bill, warning of “resolute measures”. On the US delegation's visit to Dharamsala and its talks with the Dalai Lama, Lin said, “We urge the US to clearly see the sensitivity and importance of Xizang-related issues and earnestly respect China's core interests on its comments on

Xizang, refrain from any forms with the Dalai group and stop sending out to the world wrong signals.” He also criticised the reported remarks by the Tibet government-in-exile that it is going to use the new Tibet legislation passed by the US Senate and Congress to try to force China to come to the negotiating table and urge other countries to put pressure on Beijing to hold talks with it. “The so-called Tibet government-in-exile is an out-and-out separatist political group and an illegal organisation in total violation of China's constitution and laws. It is not recognised by any country,” Lin said. After the US Congressional talks with the Dalai Lama, McCaul said on Wednesday that the Tibetans have the right to self-determination and should be allowed to practise their reli-

gion freely. At a felicitation ceremony held after the seven US Congress members met the Tibetan leader, McCaul said the delegation had defied a warning from the Chinese Communist Party. “The Tibetan people possess a distant religion, culture and historic identity and they should have a say in their own future. You should be able to freely practise your religion and that is why we are here today in defiance of the CCP (Communist Party of China) warning,” he 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 at the event organised by the Dharamsala-based Central

Future of refugees in Indonesia awaiting resettlement unclear

AP ■ TANJUNGPINANG

Morwan Mohammad walks down an old hotel corridor on Batam Island in northwestern Indonesia before entering a 6-square-meter (64-square-foot) room that has been home to him and his growing family for the past eight years. Mohammad, who fled war in Sudan, is one of hundreds of refugees living in community housing on the island while waiting for resettlement in a third country. Hotel Kolekta, a former tourist hotel, was converted in 2015 into a temporary shelter that today houses 228 refugees from conflict-torn nations including Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere. The island, just south of Singapore, has a population of 1.2 million people. Indonesia,

despite having a long history of accepting refugees, is not a signatory to the U.N. Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol, and the government does not allow refugees and asylum-seekers to work. Many had fled to Indonesia as a jumping-off point hoping to eventually reach Australia by

boat, but are now stuck in what feels like an endless limbo. Mohammad and his wife arrived in Jakarta nine years ago after traveling from his hometown Nyala to Jeddah and onward to the sprawling Southeast Asian archipelago, where their first stop was the UN refugee agency office in the capital.

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Sensex, Nifty scale fresh record high levels on robust FII inflows

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty soared to new lifetime highs on Thursday, fuelled by intense buying in market heavyweights Reliance, ICICI Bank and HDFC Bank amid a recent surge in foreign capital inflows. Besides, stable global crude prices extended support to capital markets amid investors looking for fresh triggers, traders said. Rallying for the sixth straight session, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 141.34 points or 0.18 per cent to settle at a new closing peak of 77,478.93. During the day, it surged 305.5 points or 0.39 per cent to 77,643.09. As many as 2,282 stocks advanced while 1,571 declined and 128 remained unchanged on the BSE. The BSE benchmark has jumped 1,022.34 points or 1.33 per cent in the last six days. The NSE Nifty rose 51 points or 0.22 per cent to settle at its fresh closing high of 23,567. Intra-day, it soared 108 points or 0.45 per cent to 23,624. "FIIs have been net buyers in Indian equities for the last three days and have bought Rs 12,600 crore, which includes a few large block deals. On the domestic front, the market is consolidating with a positive bias amid strong FII flows and healthy macros. Also, an expectation of a growth-focused budget is aiding sentiments and is likely to lead to sector-specific action," said Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial



Services. Among the 30 Sensex companies, JSW Steel, Tata Steel, Axis Bank, Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank, Hindustan Unilever, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Asian Paints were among the biggest gainers. In contrast, Mahindra & Mahindra, Sun Pharma, NTPC, Wipro, State Bank of India and Power Grid were among the laggards. "Markets were a bit volatile in early trade but settled in positive territory to move in a range-bound manner thereafter, as investors resorted to stock-specific selection after witnessing record-breaking spree over the past few sessions. Also, US indices were closed on Wednesday, and hence, domestic investors were cautiously optimistic," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1 per cent, and the midcap index rallied 0.55 per cent. Among the indices, realty jumped 1.97 per cent, commodities climbed 1.88 per cent,

metal rallied 1.87 per cent, energy surged 0.90 per cent and industrials (0.50 per cent). Telecommunication, utilities, auto, power and tech were the laggards. "Global shares held around record highs on Thursday, helped by investor confidence in the chance of a drop in US interest rates this year, while the pound held steady ahead of a Bank of England meeting later in the day. "European stocks strengthened after the Swiss National Bank delivered a second interest rate cut of 25 bps to 1.25 per cent," Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research at HDFC Securities, said. In Asian markets, Seoul and Tokyo settled in the green, while Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. Markets in Europe were trading in positive territory. US markets were closed on Wednesday in observance of Juneteenth. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 7,908.36 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. "....The decline in US bond yields has facilitated robust FII inflows in recent days," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.16 per cent to USD 85.21 a barrel. "In the near term, market attention is expected to centre around the upcoming Union Budget and the progress of monsoon," Nair said. Rising for the fifth straight session on Wednesday, the BSE benchmark climbed 36.45 points or 0.05 per cent to settle at 77,337.59.

Rupee plunges 17 paise to settle at over two-month low of 83.61 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee plunged 17 paise to settle at over two-month low level of 83.61 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday amid surging crude oil prices due to renewed geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, even though the domestic equity markets hit fresh peaks. According to forex traders, inflow of foreign capital and positive momentum in domestic equity markets failed to support the local unit which gave in to the pressure due to a firm American currency against major rivals overseas. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.43 and touched the intra-day high of 83.42 against the greenback. During the session, the currency hit an all-time low of 83.68 against the dollar. The rupee finally settled at 83.61 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a steep fall of 17 paise from its previous close. On Wednesday, the rupee settled 1 paise lower at 83.44 against the US dollar. Earlier, the domestic currency closed at 83.61



against dollar on April 16 this year. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the rupee depreciated on strong US dollar and mixed to weak Asian markets. "Traders may take cues from weekly unemployment claims, building permits, Philly Fed manufacturing index, housing starts and current account data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.30 to Rs 83.80," Choudhary said. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading higher by 0.21 per cent at 105.10.

FIU slaps ₹18.82 cr penalty on crypto exchange Binance

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Financial Intelligence Unit has slapped a penalty of Rs 18.82 crore on one of the world's largest crypto exchange Binance for alleged contravention of the country's anti-money laundering law. The federal agency issued an order Thursday charging the exchange with "dereliction of duty" as a reporting entity, with its operations that of a Virtual Digital Asset Service Provider, under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The summary order accessed by PTI said Binance was first issued a notice in December last year since it operated in India and provided services to Indian clients. Binance had not registered as a reporting entity with FIU, as required under the PMLA. It did it in May this year after the Union government banned its URLs in India and was issued a notice, along with eight other crypto firms, by the the FIU, a senior officer said. The exchange has not commented on the penalty

order yet. "After considering the written and oral submissions of Binance, the Director, FIU-IND, based on the material available on record, found that the charges against Binance were substantiated. "Consequently, the Director FIU-IND vide order dated 19th June, 2024 in exercise of powers under Section 13 PMLA, imposed a total penalty of Rs. 18,82,00,000 on Binance...", the order said. The exchange has been charged under Section 12 (1) of the PMLA which mandates a reporting entity to maintain a record of all transactions and timely furnish it to the FIU. The order said the FIU has also issued "specific directions" to Binance for "ensuring diligent compliance with the obligations outlined in Chapter IV of the PMLA, in conjunction with the PMLA Maintenance of Record Rules (PMLA Rules) of 2005 for prevention of money laundering activities and combating the financing of terrorism."

India, Cambodia discuss investment treaty, UPI tie-up

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India and South East Asian Ination Cambodia are negotiating collaboration in UPI-based digital payment to promote trade and tourism, the commerce ministry said on Thursday. Both sides also deliberated upon diversification of the trade basket by identifying new products, bilateral investment treaty, recognition of Indian pharmacopoeia and collaboration in the pharma sector. These issues among others were discussed during the second meeting of the India-Cambodia Joint Working Group on Trade and Investment (JWGITI) here on Wednesday. Pharmacopoeia is a set of standards and quality specifications for ingredients, preparation and dosage forms of medicines manufactured, sold, consumed and exported in a country. Indian Pharmacopoeia Commission (IPC) is an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare which sets standards for all drugs that are manufactured, sold and consumed in India. "The meeting discussed the progress of the ongoing efforts for collaboration in (Unified Payment Interface) UPI-based digital payment to promote trade and tourism," it said in a statement. India has already collaborated



with countries like the UAE on UPI. The meeting was co-chaired by Joint Secretary in the Department of Commerce Siddharth Mahajan and Director General for International Trade in the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce Long Kemvichet. Mahajan mentioned the measures for deepening bilateral trade and investment and also emphasised on creation of mechanisms for cooperation and collaboration in sectors of mutual interest. The Cambodian side elaborated on the numerous investment opportunities that Cambodia presents for Indian businesses. The JWGITI was first held in July 2022 virtually. This was the first physical meeting after it was institutionalised. Cambodia is a member of the 10-nation Asian bloc. Asean

(Association of south East Asian Nations) members include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. India has a free trade agreement with Asian and it was implemented in 2009. The bilateral trade between India and Cambodia has increased to USD 403.78 million (exports USD 185.39 million and imports USD 218.4 million) in 2023-24 from USD 366.44 million in 2022-23. The principal commodities exported from India are pharmaceutical products, bovine meat, motor vehicles (autos, motorcycles and spare parts), raw hides and leather, and chemicals. The main imports include chemicals, vegetable oil, articles of apparel and clothing, and footwear.

India's tech startup funding at USD 4.1 bn in H1 2024; tops H2 2023, trails year-ago levels: Tracxn

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian tech startups raised a total USD 4.1 billion in H1 2024, four per cent higher than H2 2023, although the numbers still trailed the levels seen a year ago, according to a report by market intelligence platform Tracxn. At USD 4.1 billion, India still remains the fourth-highest funded country globally in the tech startup landscape, it said. The United States led in overall funding volumes,

followed by the UK and China. "Indian tech startups raised USD 4.1 billion in H1 2024, a 4 per cent increase from USD 3.96 billion in H2 2023. Though there was a 13 per cent decrease compared to USD 4.8 billion raised in H1 2023, India still remains the fourth-highest funded country globally in the tech startup landscape," the Tracxn report said. Tracxn, India Tech Semi-Annual Funding Report H1 2024 offered insights on

funding trends, sector performances, and notable developments in the Indian technology sector for the said period. Citing key trends, it said seed-stage funding increased to USD 455 million, up by 6.5 per cent from H2 2023 but down 17.3 per cent from H1 2023. Early-stage startups were at a steady USD 1.3 billion, consistent with H2 2023 but 28 per cent lower than H1 2023. Late-stage funding rose to

USD 2.4 billion, marking a 3.8 per cent increase from H2 2023, although it saw a slight 1.3 per cent drop compared to H1 2023. "Despite these challenges, the first half of 2024 witnessed 8 funding rounds surpassing USD 100 million such as Flipkart's USD 350 million Series J round led by Google, Apollo 24/7's USD 297 million PE round, and Meesho's USD 275 million Series F round," it said. Neha Singh, Co-Founder of Tracxn noted that despite four

consecutive half-year periods of declining funding since H1 2022, signs of stabilisation are indeed becoming visible, and on the rise. "India's robust performance as the fourth-highest funded country in the tech startup ecosystem is encouraging. From emerging developments in retail and enterprise applications to pioneering advancements in fintech, Indian startups are transforming industries and driving economic growth," she said.

Financial sector participants pitch for tax sops, removal of tax anomalies in Budget

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Financial sector players on Thursday made a case for tax sops in the upcoming FY25 Budget for deepening of the market. In a pre-Budget meeting with Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman here, some of the players urged the government to fix tax arbitrage wherever it exists. This was the second Pre-Budget Consultation which was attended by leading experts of the financial and capital markets sector in connection with the forthcoming General Budget 2024-25, the finance ministry said in a post on X. The full Budget 2024-25 is expected to be presented in



Parliament next month. Emerging out of two-hour meeting with the finance minister, Arun Kohli, MD & Country Head, Morgan Stanley India Company, said tax policies need to be stable and long-term oriented. Participants also made their point on capital gains tax and securities transaction tax. According to George Alexander Muthoot, MD of

Muthoot Group, some of the players pitched for deepening the market and provide some tax incentives. "We've suggested that since NBFC credit has grown and RBI has flagged over-dependence on banks, allocation of funds from SIDBI and NABARD could increase for refinancing of NBFCs," Raman Aggarwal, Director FIDC said. NBFCs (non-banking financial companies) also sought clarity on GST demand on co-lending and payment of GST on service fee, Aggarwal said. Asset management companies discussed issues related to GIFT CITY also and the ways to retain capital within the country, he added.

Uber Green electric cabs launched in Kolkata

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Uber on Thursday announced the launch of its flagship electric vehicle service, Uber Green, in Kolkata, marking a step towards eco-friendly urban transportation. Uber becomes the second ride-hailing service provider to offer electric vehicles in the city, following Snap E, another brand operating with an all-EV fleet. "Enhancing the air quality in Kolkata is a shared duty we all must embrace. I commend Uber for introducing 'Uber Green' in Kolkata, a significant step towards reducing carbon emissions in our city," West Bengal Transport Minister Snehasis

Chakraborty said. "This service allows residents to book zero-emission rides with ease through the Uber app, promoting sustainable travel across the city, including routes to and from Kolkata international airport," Uber said in a statement. The company did not disclose details on the number of vehicles under Uber Green or its expansion plans for the city. The company has committed to becoming a zero-emissions mobility platform by 2030 in Europe and North America, and globally by 2040. EV drivers on Uber are going electric five times faster than the general public, the company stated.

North Indian tea output may be hit by 60 million kgs till June

PTI ■ KOLKATA

The North Indian tea industry is facing a production shortfall of 60 million kgs till June of the current crop year over the corresponding period last year due to adverse weather conditions, according to an estimate by a tea body. The loss of the first and second flush crops, which produce the highest quality teas of the year, will undoubtedly impact the producers' revenue and may push tea prices higher, officials say. The states of Assam and West Bengal, which comprise the North Indian tea industry, are experiencing a precarious situation. Excessive heat coupled with a rain deficit in May, followed by excess rainfall and a lack of sunshine, has severely impacted production. Tea Association of India (TAI) president Sandeep Singhania estimated that the combined crop loss is estimated to be 60 million kgs



by June compared to the previous year's output. "As reported by the member tea estates of the association, the tea estates of Assam and West Bengal are estimated to be behind by around 20 per cent and 40 per cent respectively during May 2024 compared to last year," he

said. Data released by the Tea Board of India indicates a drop in production of around 8 per cent in Assam and around 13 per cent in West Bengal up to April 2024 compared to the same period last year. TAI said IMD data showed

significantly less rainfall between 50 and 80 per cent in the major tea-growing districts of West Bengal and between 10 and 30 per cent in Assam compared to the normal rainfall for the period. Detailing further about the adverse weather conditions, the TAI noted that the tea-growing districts of Assam and West Bengal received the southwest monsoon a week earlier and during the first half of June, the tea-growing districts of West Bengal and Assam experienced significantly higher rainfall. According to data from the India Meteorological Department, West Bengal received 15-66 per cent more rain than usual, while Assam saw an increase of 3-20 per cent compared to the average for the month, Singhania said. Excessive rainfall coupled with practically no sunshine during the day has hampered crop production in both states, affecting the first and second-flush teas, which fetch the best prices in any tea crop year, the official said.

Ola Electric, Emcure Pharma get Sebi's nod to float IPO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Electric two-wheeler company Ola Electric and Bain Capital-backed Emcure Pharmaceuticals have received Sebi's approval to raise funds through initial public offerings (IPOs), an update with the markets regulator showed on Thursday. The two companies, which filed their preliminary IPO papers with Sebi in December 2023, obtained observations on June 10, it added. In Sebi's parlance, its observations means its go-ahead to float the public issue. Ola Electric's proposed IPO is a combination of fresh issue of equity shares up to Rs 5,500 crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of 9.52 crore equity shares by promoters and investors, according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP). The Bengaluru-based company proposed utilising the proceeds from the fresh issue for capital expenditure



to be incurred by the subsidiary OCT for the Ola Gigafactory project, payment of debt by subsidiary OET, investment into research and product development, expenditure for organic growth initiatives, and general corporate purposes. Ola Electric manufactures EVs and core EV components such as battery packs and motors at Ola Futurefactory — manufacturing facility in Krishnagiri. The company is in the process of building an EV hub in Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri districts in Tamil Nadu, which includes the Ola Futurefactory, the upcoming Ola Gigafactory, and co-located suppliers in

Krishnagiri district. Ola Electric introduced its first EV model 'S1 Pro' in August 2021 and currently has a portfolio of 5 scooter models. Within nine months of Ola Electric delivering its first EV scooter, it has become the best-selling electric two-wheeler player in India based on E2W registrations listed on the VAHAN Portal of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. As of the three months ended June 2023, it had an E2W market share of 31 per cent and aims to explore exporting EVs to specific international markets in the future. The company operated direct-to-customer (D2C) omni-channel distribution network, comprising 935 experience centres situated across India, which include 414 service centres, as of October 31, 2023. For the fiscal year 2023, revenue from operations jumped more than seven times to Rs 2,630.93 crore

against Rs 373.42 crore a year ago. Emcure Pharmaceuticals' IPO is a combination of fresh issuance of equity shares worth Rs 800 crore and an OFS of 1.36 crore equity shares by promoters and existing shareholders, as per the draft red herring prospectus. Those selling shares in the OFS include promoter Satish Mehta and investor BC Investments IV Ltd, an affiliate of US-based private equity major Bain Capital. Currently, Satish Mehta holds a 41.92 per cent stake in the company and BC Investments owns a 13.09 per cent stake. Proceeds of the fresh issue will be used towards payment of debt and for general corporate purposes. Pune-based firm Emcure Pharmaceuticals is engaged in developing, manufacturing, and globally marketing a broad range of pharmaceutical products across several major therapeutic areas.

INDIAN ROWER BALRAJ TO LEAVE FOR PARIS 20 DAYS IN ADVANCE TO ACCLIMATISE WELL

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Competing in the high-endurance men's singles sculls rowing event at the Olympics can be tough, but Balraj Panwar, India's only qualifier for the Paris Games, hopes to make it count by training there for 20 days. Panwar will be among the first batch of athletes to reach Paris to acclimatise themselves to the conditions. "We are going there 20 days in advance and I'm sure it won't feel 'strange'. It will help us acclimatise to the weather and be ready," Panwar said in a virtual media interaction organised jointly by SAI, IOA and the Rowing Federation of India. Indian doubles sculls rower Salman Khan will be his training partner and will set the pace for him during training at a club in France before the actual competition. "You are alone in the waters in men's singles sculls and there is a lot of mental as well as physical training needed. With Salman in training, I hope to get myself ready fully before the big event." Panwar, who hails from Haryana, bagged the Olympic quota after winning a bronze medal in the men's single sculls (M1x) event at the Asian and Oceanian Rowing Olympic Qualification Regatta, in



Chungju, South Korea last month. Having started rowing only three years back, Panwar has shown tremendous improvement and narrowly missed out on a bronze medal at the Hangzhou Asian Games last year. "With each tournament, our experience increases. The Asian Games was an important stepping stone in my journey and I will be going to Paris with full preparation." In men's singles sculls, no Indian rower has reached the semifinals and Panwar is chasing the dream of achieving the best-ever finish for the country at Paris. "No Indian has made it to the semifinal in rowing. I hope to make it to the semi-finals and achieve the best-ever feat for the country," he said. He is being coached by veteran rower Bajrang Lal Thakkar, who represented India in the same event at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. "Besides the training part, the race involves a lot of small nuances and Thakkar sir is helping me by telling me about how to start, pace the race and finish well." As for the mental preparation, Panwar is attending a weekly class by a sports psychologist. "Mental health is crucial because in single sculls we are alone and need to motivate ourselves," he added.

WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP



FIDE officials in Chennai today for venue recce

PTI ■ CHENNAI

A two-member team of the International Chess Federation (FIDE) will be here on Friday as part of their inspection for the World Championship venue. "FIDE's Planning and Development Commission Secretary, Kermen Goryaeva, and FIDE's Head of PR, Anna Volkova, will be on duty for this," reliable sources told PTI. Chennai is one of the three cities, with Delhi and Singapore being the other, that are in the race to host the World Championship encounter. While Delhi's bid happens to be from the All India Chess Federation (AICF), the Chennai bid has been put forward by the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT). The World Championship

clash is slated between November 20 and December 15, with defending champion Grandmaster Ding Liren of China locking horns with GM Dommaraju Gukesh of India. The 18-year-old Indian qualified for the World Championship by winning the Candidates Tournament held in Toronto this April. Gukesh had finished atop the table with a score of 9/14, ahead of Hikaru Nakamura of the USA, Ian Nepomniachtchi of Russia and Fabiano Caruana of the USA, who were placed second, third and fourth, respectively. Fellow Indian GM R Praggnanandhaa finished fifth, while country-mate Vidit Gujrathi was placed sixth. Meanwhile, Liren has confirmed his participation in the event giving his 'mandate', according to sources.

Hockey India names 27 core probables for pre-Olympic camp

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Hockey India on Thursday decided to keep faith in its proven performers while announcing a 27-strong list of men's team core probables for a pre-Olympic national camp which will be conducted from July 21 to July 8 at the SAI centre here. India are placed in a tough Pool B in the Olympics along side Belgium, Argentina, New Zealand, Australia and Ireland. The Tokyo Games bronze-winners will start their Olympic campaign against New Zealand on July 27. The Indian team is returning to the national camp after a successful outing in the FIH Hockey Pro League, where it currently occupies the fourth spot after earning 24 points from 16 matches. The core group includes goalkeepers Krishan Bahadur Pathak, PR Sreejesh, Suraj Karkera and defenders Harmanpreet Singh, Jarmanpreet Singh, Amit Rohidas, Jugraj Singh, Sanjay and Amir Ali. The mid-fielders called up include Manpreet Singh, Hardik Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Sumit, Shamsher Singh, Nilakanta Sharma, Rajkumar Pal, Vishnukant Singh, Akashdeep Singh and Mohammed Raheel Mouseen. Mandeep Singh, Lalit Kumar Upadhyay, Abhishek, Dilpreet Singh, Sukhjeet Singh, Gurjant Singh, Bobby Singh Dhami and



Araijeet Singh Hundal are the forwards who have been included. Striker Dilpreet Singh is a notable absentee from the core list. Indian men's hockey team chief coach Craig Fulton feels the Pro League outing against top teams of the world was a great experience for his side. "We are looking to start an important block of training in this camp, and we need to make sure that we are in the best form ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympics. The players have learned a lot from their matches in the FIH Hockey Pro League 2023/24," he said. "It has helped us in realising where we need to improve. We have a lot of time to work on those areas. We have a strong mix of players who are capable

of winning anything," the South African added. **INDIAN MEN'S HOCKEY TEAM 27-MEMBER CORE GROUP:** **Goalkeepers:** Krishan Bahadur Pathak, PR Sreejesh, Suraj Karkera **Defenders:** Harmanpreet Singh, Jarmanpreet Singh, Amit Rohidas, Jugraj Singh, Sanjay, Amir Ali **Midfielders:** Manpreet Singh, Hardik Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Sumit, Shamsher Singh, Nilakanta Sharma, Rajkumar Pal, Vishnukant Singh, Akashdeep Singh, Mohammed Raheel Mouseen **Forwards:** Mandeep Singh, Lalit Kumar Upadhyay, Abhishek, Dilpreet Singh, Sukhjeet Singh, Gurjant Singh, Bobby Singh Dhami, Araijeet Singh Hundal.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

World Rugby Hall of Famer Waisale Serevi, who is widely considered the greatest rugby sevens player of all time, has been appointed head coach of the Indian men's and women's teams. The Fijian also enjoyed a long career in fifteen-a-side rugby at both club and national levels. Renowned globally as the 'King of Sevens', he was also an advisor on behalf of World Rugby to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), for the inclusion of Rugby Sevens in the Olympics. "The core impetus for all of us

Hall of Famer Waisale Serevi named head coach of Indian men, women rugby 7s teams

at Rugby India is to do better today than we did yesterday. To go one step farther every day in our quest to compete with the world's best," said Rahul Bose, President, Rugby India. "...It is a privilege for us to welcome Waisale Serevi as the Head Coach of the Indian National Sevens teams. We wish him the best and are excited to see him mold the future of Indian Rugby," he added.



A five-time winner at the prestigious Hong Kong Sevens, Serevi steered Fiji to their maiden world series title in his first year as player-coach in 2005-06. His most recent stints in coaching were with the Rhinos Rugby USA, Jamaica Sevens team, and Russia Sevens team. "It is an honour and privilege for me to be part of the Rugby family in India, I am grateful and I thank god for the opportunity.

From Japan, England, France, the USA, I have now made my way to India," said Serevi. "Fourteen years ago, Rugby was relatively unknown in the USA, I've done a lot of work there. India today is at a similar crossroads. "India and Fiji hold a close relationship. It gives me great pride to be a Fijian coming to India, to help them take Rugby to the next level," he added.

Murray unsure of readiness for Wimbledon after back injury

AP ■ LONDON

Andy Murray retired from his second-round match at Queen's Club because of a back injury on Wednesday, raising doubts about what is expected to be his final Wimbledon appearance. The 37-year-old Murray stopped playing while trailing Jordan Thompson 4-1, and the former No. 1 player said he'd get scans on Thursday. The two-time Wimbledon champion, who has signaled his intention to retire later this year, said he "wouldn't know" about whether he'll be ready when play starts July 1 at the All England Club. Murray, who has won the Queen's Club title five times, said he was experiencing



problems with his right leg even before getting to the court. He was in obvious pain during the warmup and into the match. After three games, Murray received treatment on his surgically repaired right hip, right knee and lower back. Earlier, Sebastian Korda beat former Queen's Club champion Grigor Dimitrov to

reach the quarterfinals at the grass-court tournament. Korda, who reached the final on grass in 's-Hertogenbosch last week as he prepares for Wimbledon, won their second-round match 6-4, 3-6, 7-5. "It was a big struggle. We were both serving well and waiting for our chances and there weren't many. But when they came, I tried to take them," said the 23rd-ranked Korda. "It is incredible playing at Queen's, it is one of my favorite tournaments." Dimitrov won the Queen's Club title in 2014. It was Korda's seventh victory over a Top 10 opponent. He will next take on Rinky Hijikata for a spot in the semifinals.



Messi could be playing in his final tournament

AP ■ BUENOS AIRES (ARGENTINA)

It's sad but true, Copa America could mark Lionel Messi's final chapter with Argentina's national soccer team. The World Cup winner will turn 37 during the tournament in the United States, which kicks off Thursday. He's clearly past his peak at Inter Miami after two decades of playing at the highest level in Europe. Messi has not set a date for his retirement and has kept the door open to playing in a sixth World Cup in 2026 to defend his title from Qatar. But he already recognizes his shortcomings. "I don't think about that yet. The moment I feel that I am not going to help my team, I will retire," Messi said in March in an interview with Saudi broadcaster Riyadh Season. "I always ate well, trained. But as I grew I became aware that the physical effort we make is getting harder. As you grow old, things become more difficult." Last year, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner struggled with muscular injuries while playing in MLS and for Argentina. That didn't change much in 2024. Messi has shown he enjoys going out at night with his wife, Antonella, and his friends in Miami. He spends time with his three children, starts new businesses and lives as if soccer is slowly becoming a smaller part of his life. Still, he has 12 goals and 13 assists for Inter Miami this season. "I have a good time at the club. I am lucky to have teammates and friends (Luis Suárez, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba, all former Barcelona players) by my

side," Messi told ESPN. "I have a good time in the national team, where I have teammates and friends, too. And I enjoy the little details that I know that when I don't play anymore, I'm going to miss." Ángel di María, a 36-year-old winger who has played alongside Messi for years with the national team, is sure to bid farewell to international soccer after the Copa America. That has also brought more questions about whether the team's biggest star will remain on the squad. "As long as I feel like I'm fine and I can continue contributing, I'm going to do it. Today, the only thing I think about is getting to the Copa America well and being able to compete in it," Messi told the Star Plus platform in December. "Fighting for it again, as we always did, trying to be champions." Argentina's all-time top scorer and the national team's leader with 26 World Cup appearances is also seeking records in the continental competition. Messi, who won the South American championship in 2021, wants to become the Copa America's leading scorer. He has 13 goals in six editions, four behind Norberto Méndez of Argentina and Zizinho of Brazil with 17. He also wants to be the player with most appearances in the Copa America, a record he currently shares with former Chile goalkeeper Sergio Livingston, both with 34 games. Messi's teammates don't want to see him go. "We'll see how long, but while he's here we're going to enjoy it to the fullest," Argentina defender Cristian Romero said.



Inter Miami beats Columbus Crew 2-1

AP ■ FORT LAUDERDALE (USA)

Ian Fray and Leo Campana each scored in the opening 22 minutes, and short-handed Inter Miami beat the Columbus Crew 2-1 on Wednesday night without Lionel Messi and Luis Suárez. Miami (12-3-5) played without Messi, Suárez and midfielder Matías Rojas due to international duty in the Copa América. Columbus (7-3-6), the reigning MLS Cup champions, had won its last four road games. Columbus hasn't played at Lower.com Field since May 11, a string of six straight games. Fray, in his first MLS game since July 15, 2023 due to an

ACL surgery, opened the scoring in the 10th minute by heading in Julian Gressel's corner kick. Campana made it 2-0 in the 21st with his fifth goal of the season. Campana's header was saved by Patrick Schulte, but he was first to the rebound. Cucho Hernández scored for Columbus in the 40th when he poked home Aidan Morris' cross for his sixth goal. Columbus midfielder and captain Darlington Nagbe became the 10th player in MLS history to make 400 regular-season appearances. Dax McCarty (477) and Kei Kamara (429) are the only active players with more games played.

Knighton allowed to run at US trials after contamination case

AP ■ EUGENE (USA)

Sprinter Erriyon Knighton Stested positive for a banned substance that an arbitration panel determined came from contaminated meat, a decision that keeps the 200-meter specialist eligible to run at the upcoming U.S. Olympic trials. The 20-year-old from Florida, who holds the under-18 and under-20 records in the 200 meters, tested positive for the performance enhancer trenbolone during an out-of-competition test in March, according to the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, which revealed details of the case Wednesday. Though the arbitration panel cleared Knighton to run in the 200, starting June 27, the decision can be appealed by either the Athletics Integrity Unit, which oversees doping in track and field, or the World Anti-Doping Agency. Neither WADA nor AIU immediately returned emails from The Associated Press seeking comment. "We did what the rules require



us to do in all positive cases," USADA CEO Travis Tygart said. "We can take comfort that justice was served and transparency as required by the rules was achieved." Tygart said the contaminated meat came from oxtail at a bakery in central Florida. A USADA investigation, including obtaining the meat and testing it, along with interviews with the manager of the bakery, Knighton, his girlfriend and his mother, backed up the sprinter's contamination claim. When Knighton qualified for the Tokyo Olympics in 2021,

he became the youngest male since Jim Ryun in 1964 to make the U.S. Olympic team. He finished fourth in the 200 behind Andre De Grasse, Kenny Bednarek and Noah Lyles. Knighton finished second behind Lyles at last year's world championships. Contamination cases such as Knighton's aren't unheard of, though they have come under closer scrutiny of late in the wake of a case involving 23 Chinese swimmers whose positive tests for a banned heart medication were deemed to have come because of contamination.

WADA accepted the explanation from Chinese authorities and did not pursue that case, which became public after reporting by The New York Times and the German broadcaster ARD. That decision has been roundly criticized by USADA and others because the initial positives were not made public. Part of WADA's argument has been to point out contamination cases that originated in the United States - which have involved everything from meat to dog medicine - have not always resulted in sanctions. USADA has insisted it has followed the rulebook in all those cases, including making public any violation, even if it did not result in a penalty. Perhaps the most controversial contamination case in the U.S. Involved distance runner Shelby Houlihan, who got banned before the 2021 Olympic trials, even though she claimed her positive test was the result of a burrito she bought that contained meat laced with nandrolone.

Huge fan of Bumrah, don't want thing be changed in his unorthodox action: Ambrose

PTI ■ BRIDGETOWN (BARBADOS)

Curtly Ambrose is a huge fan of Jasprit Bumrah and despite the Indian spearhead's struggles with stress fractures in the past, the Caribbean legend would not want to change anything in his unorthodox action as he feels every fast bowler takes the field with a risk of getting injured.

Bumrah, arguably the best all-format pacer in the game right now, has had his fair share of back problems and underwent a surgery in March last year. After a long rehab, Bumrah made a comeback ahead of the ODI World Cup in India in November and he has not looked back since then.

The 30-year-old can get wickets in a T20 at any stage of the game and in the longest format, he has the ability to strike with both the new and the old ball, more so when it is reversing.

In a telephonic interview with PTI, Ambrose said Bumrah should not change a thing unless he sustains a serious injury.

"What I can tell you something about Jasprit Bumrah, I'm a big fan. Right from ever since I saw him the first time. He's so unconventional but highly effective. And that's what I like about him. When you look at traditional fast bowlers, you wouldn't look at Bumrah, he's so unorthodox.

"He has done a great job for India and still doing a great job in all formats. I met him a couple of years ago when India played in Antigua. He's someone I've always enjoyed watching because he's so different," said Ambrose who is involved with promoting the ongoing T20 World Cup here.

Bumrah's open-chested action



does put pressure on his back but Ambrose believes every fast bowler has to deal with risks like that. "From my little experience, there are no two bowlers who are exactly alike. Bowlers may have similarities but they are never exactly alike and we all have our different styles everyone is different.

"In terms of his longevity, in terms of injuries, (for) every fast bowler, there is always risk of being injured. But at the same time you can't go out there thinking that way. "You've got to go out there

and do the job to the best of your ability and whatever happens, happens. The only way he should change is if he, may be, sustains a serious injury or has to re-model his action or something," said the 60-year-old who played 98 Tests for the West Indies taking 405 wickets.

Ambrose, who troubled the world's best batters with the extra bounce he created because of his 6'7" frame, also doesn't believe that the stress on Bumrah's back is only because of his action. "I've never been through it

(stress fracture). So it would be unfair for me to even try to say what to do. I will leave that for the medical expert. I don't think Bumrah's stress comes totally from his action. "You can look at Ian Bishop, he had a perfect action and he also had stress fracture," reasoned the cricketer from Antigua.

Too much cricket being played, Test cricket is real cricket

The international calendar is busier than ever before with T20 leagues around the world taking a lot of space. Ambrose

acknowledged that the game has changed drastically and too much cricket is having an adverse impact.

"The game has become a bit more commercialised. Too much cricket is being played as well. Players are leaving from one series to the next, there is franchise cricket as well. Guys could get burnt out.

"It's still exciting, there are wonderful players around but too much cricket is being played and that to me would be a bit of a concern," said Ambrose.

Kuldeep will come into play in the Caribbean: Rahul Dravid

PTI ■ BRIDGETOWN

Without giving too much away, India head coach Rahul Dravid hinted at the possibility of playing wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav in the Caribbean leg of the T20 World Cup, starting with the Super 8 opener against Afghanistan.

India did not play either Kuldeep or Yuzvendra Chahal in the USA leg of the tournament considering the pace-friendly conditions. However, the conditions are different in the Caribbean where wrist spinners have already made an impact with Adam Zampa being a case in point.

India could drop a pacer and include Kuldeep in the team.

How tough was it to leave Kuldeep, who has been India's standout spinner over the past 12 months, out of playing eleven in USA?

"It's tough to leave anyone out. I mean all the four guys that we left out in those games, to be honest, are all quality players. It's just that the conditions and what we felt was the requirement in that particular venue made us go with that particular combination where we felt that there wasn't a huge role for spin and it was more of pace more of kind of conditions.

"And we also wanted to ensure that we had the depth on those tricky kind of tickets. So that's what we went there with. You know, it might be different here. Without giving too much away, certainly. You know, it might be slightly different here. That you might need an extra spinner and then someone like Kuldeep or Yuzi can come into play. They become a very good factor for us," said Dravid ahead of the Afghanistan fixture.

We have definitely pushed the needle in batting.

India were guilty of being too conservative in their approach in the previous two editions of T20 World Cup but Dravid feels the team has turned the tide on that front.

"We have actually been to be able to push the needle forward in terms of our batting there. Sometimes in certain conditions, you just got to be mindful of conditions also. Sometimes we just get carried away with pushing the needle forward in T20 cricket.

"Cricket is a very condition specific game. It's one of the only sports left where the surface makes such an impact on the actual skill levels, the actual performance levels, what is an acceptable performance level.

"It's one sport that we play that where the surface makes a huge difference and it has to be brought into consideration at all times. And I think we saw that in the US that had to be brought into consideration not only for us but for other teams as well," said the outgoing



India coach.

Dravid expects the wind to be a factor at the Kensington Oval on Thursday, bringing the fast bowlers like tournament's leading wicket taker Fazalhaq Farooqi into play.

"It is not just their spinners, their pacers are also experienced and doing well. Afghanistan is a very dangerous team in this format of the game. They play a lot of T20 cricket and their cricketers are very prominent members of their IPL teams. They have showed that with their performances in the World Cup."

Dravid loves the cricket culture in the Caribbean and is looking forward to the business end of the tournament. He was cheekily reminded by a scribe on India's infamous Test defeat against the West Indies at this venue back in 1997 when the visitors were bundled out for 81 chasing 120 on a treacherous pitch.

"It's also now lovely to come to the Caribbean, you know, come to Barbados, come to this ground which has a great history, a great tradition of great... Country and this region. We've had a couple of days of really good practice. We are ready, we rested, we feel we are prepared."

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