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INDIA'S INFLATION
STORY THROUGH TIME

WORLD 8
OBAMA, CLINTON HELP BIDEN RAISE
\$26 MN FOR HIS RE-ELECTION

MONEY 10
FPIS MAKE REMARKABLE
COMEBACK

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12 SPORTS

Congress stunned by IT slap



Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh, Ajay Maken and Pawan Kherra during a Press conference in New Delhi on Friday

The Pioneer Photo

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Opposition parties, the Congress and the CPI on Friday, accused the ruling BJP of indulging in “tax terrorism” to financially cripple the Opposition parties ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. While the grand old party said it has received fresh notices from the income-tax department, asking it to pay ₹1,823.08 crore, the Communist Party of India (CPI) received an IT notice

over “dues” of ₹11 crore for using an old PAN card while filing tax returns during the last few years. On the other hand the Congress alleged that the BJP is in “serious violation” of income-tax laws for which authorities should raise a demand of more than ₹4,600 crore from the saffron party. Addressing a Press conference at the AICC headquarters along with Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh, party treasurer Ajay Maken alleged that the BJP is in

serious violation of income-tax laws and said the I-T department should raise a demand of ₹4,617.58 crore from the saffron party for such violations. Maken said political parties have to fill up a proforma of Form 24A, in which two basic and important information have to be furnished — the names and addresses of their donors. “We have analysed all the submissions of the BJP to the Election Commission (EC). The party has faltered every

year,” Maken claimed. Ramesh alleged that through the “electoral bonds scam”, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has collected ₹8,200 crore and used the route of “pre-paid, post-paid, post-raid bribes and shell companies”. On the other hand, the BJP is engaged in “tax terrorism”, he alleged. Maken alleged that the Congress and other like-minded Opposition parties are being selectively targeted by the I-T department, which he described as the BJP’s

“frontal organisation”. He said the Supreme Court will soon hear the Congress’s plea on the I-T department’s demands from it. Maken alleged that the “BJP-ruled I-T department” has so far forcibly taken out ₹135 crore from the Congress’s bank accounts due to an alleged ₹14 lakh non-compliance demand against the party. “This amount was recovered by freezing more than ₹270 crore of the Congress’s bank balance across several accounts,” he said. During this period of several weeks, the bank accounts of the Congress were effectively “frozen” in an illegal attempt to paralyse the party’s functioning during the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, Maken alleged. In the history of India, why is the Congress, a tax-exempt political party like others, being “forced” to pay income tax during the 2024 Lok Sabha election, he asked. “Why have the BJP or its alliance partners not been dealt with similarly? Why has the I-T department not taken cognisance of the Yediyurappa diaries, Jain diaries, Sahara diaries, Birla diaries, Bangaru Lakshman convictions and penalised the BJP?” he asked. The CPI on its part said the Left party is consulting its lawyers to challenge the notice of the tax authorities.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates during a meeting at his residence in New Delhi on Friday

Modi vows to arm rural women with technology

ARCHANA JYOTI ■
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday highlighted the transformative potential of technology in critical sectors such as agriculture, education, and health and emphasised the Government’s commitment to harnessing technological innovations to bridge the digital gap in rural areas to ensure inclusive development. During his conversation with philanthropist and Microsoft Co-founder Bill Gates, Modi also shared his vision of empowering rural women through access to technology and training, aiming to challenge traditional gender roles and foster economic independence. He emphasised the need for a

psychological shift, where villagers feel empowered to transform their communities through technology as was done by his Government through innovative programmes like ‘Namo Drone Didi’. “I want to give them technology in their hands and bring a psychological change. Everyone in the villages should feel that they are transforming their village,” he said adding that “he wants to allocate funds to scientists for local research in cervical cancer to develop vaccines at a minimal cost and that his new Government will work to ensure vaccination, especially for all girls”. Gates, in response, lauded India’s proactive efforts to promote technology inclusion and empower women. The philanthropist

highlighted successful collaborative initiatives between the Government and organisations like his foundation in revitalising traditional practices and promoting women’s participation in sectors such as agriculture. Gates said India brings out technology that can be made available for everyone and that helps uplift those who need it the most. The conversation extended to leveraging technology to enhance citizen services and improve ease of living. “Earlier, there was a push for stringent compliance requirements. But I advocated and ensured simplification, and made certain that data is uploaded to cloud (storage) with shared IDs, enabling us to access necessary information directly,” Modi said.



Bihar RJD president Jagdanand Singh and State Congress president Akhilesh Singh join hands with CPI-ML, CPM and other leaders after releasing Grand Alliance candidates’ list for Lok Sabha elections, in Patna, on Friday

PTI

INDIA Bloc in a bind in Bihar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
PATNA/NEW DELHI

Ending speculations though mired with a controversy over one Lok Sabha seat in Bihar, INDIA Bloc Opposition partners on Friday announced that the RJD will contest 26, out of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in the State while the Congress will contest nine seats, followed by CPI(ML) 3 and CPI and CPI(M) one each. While seat sharing has already been done in Delhi with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Bloc now awaits to share the deal in Maharashtra among the Congress, Uddhav Thackeray led Shiv Sena, Sharad Pawar-led NCP and other smaller parties where troubles are galore and stakeholders are making last minute efforts to salvage the alliance to contest in 48 Lok Sabha seats in the State. As per the announcement, the

Congress has been made to give up the Purnea Lok Sabha seat, which recent entrant Pappu Yadav, husband of Rajya Sabha MP Ranjeet Ranjan, was hoping to contest, claiming that he had received assurance of the Congress ticket from Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi.

The seat will be contested by the RJD, which recently gave the party ticket to JD(U) turncoat Bima Bharti, but stopped short of announcing it formally. The Mahagathbandhan’s seat-sharing announcement comes a day after the filing of nomination papers for the first phase of the Lok Sabha polls was over. The RJD has fielded its candidates in all four seats going to polls in the first phase, in what has been resented by allies as a “unilateral move”. Notably, the CPI and the CPI(M) have already announced their candidates for Begusarai and Khagaria respectively.



Judicial probe in Ansari death

PREETAM SRIVASTAVA ■
LUCKNOW:

Following the completion of postmortem formalities on gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari by a panel of five doctors, the local administration has initiated a judicial probe into his death. The Chief Judicial Magistrate Banda has directed a three-member team to conduct the investigation and submit their findings within one month. All proceedings, including the postmortem, were recorded as per protocol. Judicial probes are customary in cases of deaths in judicial or police custody. During the postmortem examination, Mukhtar’s younger son Umar Ansari, along with other family members and a few individuals from Ghazipur, were present. The procedure lasted over an hour, after which Ansari’s remains were transported under heavy security to Ghazipur for the final rites. The convoy, comprising 26 vehicles, including Vajras and ambulances, was closely monitored with CCTV cameras. Despite efforts by Ansari’s elder son Abbas Ansari, who is incarcerated, the High Court denied his request for parole to attend



An ambulance carrying the mortal remains of the jailed gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari leaves for his native place in Ghazipur, from a hospital in Banda, on Friday

PTI

the burial. In anticipation of Ansari’s arrival in Ghazipur, shops remained shuttered in Mohammadabad Yusufpur, his hometown. Security measures were intensified, with barricades erected outside his residence and restricted access to the premises. Ansari, a five-time MLA, passed away due to a cardiac arrest after being transferred from Banda jail to a hospital following deterioration in his health. Amidst Ansari’s demise, his

family alleges foul play, accusing authorities of administering “slow poison.” Umar claimed that his father had conveyed this suspicion to them and raised concerns with the court through legal channels. “We said this before also and even today we will say the same thing. On March 19, he was poisoned at dinner. We will move to the judiciary, we have full faith in it...” he said. In a petition filed by Mukhtar’s advocate in the

High Court and the Supreme Court, it is alleged that he was poisoned twice during lunch in Banda jail, suggesting a concerted effort by the Government administration to eliminate him. However, officials have refuted these allegations, asserting that the truth will be uncovered through the ongoing judicial probe. As the investigation unfolds, the circumstances surrounding Ansari’s death continue to spark debate and scrutiny.

UN steps on India's foot on its internal politics

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

A spokesperson for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said the world body “hopes” that in India and any country that is having elections, people’s “political and civil rights” are “protected” and everyone is able to vote in a “free and fair” atmosphere.

Spokesperson for the Secretary-General Stephane Dujarric made these remarks on Thursday while he was responding to a question on the “political unrest” in India ahead of the upcoming national elections in the wake of the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and the freezing of the Opposition Party’s bank accounts. “What we very much hope that in India, as in any country that is having elections, that everyone’s rights are protected, including political and civil rights, and everyone is able to vote in an atmosphere that is free and fair,” Dujarric said at the daily Press briefing on Thursday.

The response from the United Nations comes a day after the US also reacted to a similar question on Kejriwal’s arrest and freezing of the Congress party’s bank accounts.



DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■
DAMTA (TEHRI GARHWAL)

Unemployment is an issue and challenge being discussed within the sparsely accumulated locals of the villages nestled in interior terrains of Uttarakhand which the youths have termed it a “curse in Dev Bhumi”. And now with the Lok Sabha elections around the corner, the discussion within the people has gained momentum and given rise to individuals like Bobby Panwar spearheading a movement on the subject so much that he has thrown a tough battle for the sitting three-time Tehri Garhwal Lok Sabha MP Maharani Mala Rajya Rani Shah from the BJP and her opponent Jot Singh Günsola of the Congress. Shah is the Royal descendant of Kingdom Tehri and looking for a fourth straight victory.

Though Uttarakhand boasts for the first State to pass the Uniform Civil Code and the BJP hopes to retain all five Lok Sabha seats but the local issues like unemployment and health care is on top of the mind of voters and the Congress is attempting to regain the ground on the above subjects dominating the mind of youths to upset the ruling party here. Though the traditional voters will rally behind the Congress and the BJP, Panwar who is contesting the Lok Sabha as an Independent seems to have emerged the choice and voice of youths of Uttarakhand, particularly in the Garhwal (Tehri and Pauri) region and making inroads in Kumaon landscape above Ramnagar



Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami conducting road show campaign in Garhwal on Friday for party nominees for the Lok Sabha polls

Deepak Kumar Jha/Pioneer

till Pithoragarh. “I jumped into politics after two of my elder siblings remained unemployed. I send my younger brother to Delhi where he is doing some job. In the absence of employment in all sectors, including defence and paramilitary, youth are left with no option rather than wait for tourism cycle like summer, char dhaam yatras to put their stalls of snacks and beverages. We do not have any complaints regarding infrastructure issue as we understand it’s difficult in this tough terrain but employment is an issue now

deep into our heart,” said Panwar, the Independent Lok Sabha candidate from the Tehri Garhwal Parliamentary constituency. The other four Lok Sabha seats in Uttarakhand are Pauri Garhwal which has sitting BJP MP Tirath Singh Rawat but the current contest is between BJP’s chief media incharge Anil Baluni and Ganesh Gondyal of the Congress, Union Minister BJP’s Ajay Bhatt and Prakash Joshi of the Congress in Nainital Udhamsingh Nagar, Ajay Tamta of BJP and Pradeep Tamta of Congress in Almora, Trivendra Singh Rawat of BJP and Virendra



Rawat of Congress in Haridwar, a constituency represented by former CM and former Union Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has also been an entity in the State with a sizeable vote share and has announced its candidates for all the five Lok Sabha seats which goes to polls in the first phase of April 19. In 2019, the BJP got a massive 61.01 per cent vote share, while the grand old party 31.40 per cent followed by BSP which stood third, with 4.48 per cent vote share. Every household of villages in Uttarakhand claims of one family member in metros like Delhi, Mumbai, to farthest like Chennai, Bengaluru or Kolkatta. Similar is the case in nicely profiled cities of capital town Dehradun, Mussoorie, Almora, Haldwani and Nainital.

Mixed weather in Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal witnesses drizzles

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

There are two types of weather conditins prevailing in Madhya Pradesh, light clouds in Bhopal since morning while in Gwalior, Ratlam, Shivpuri, Mandsaur and Sagar, there was drizzle in the afternoon after sunshine. Hot winds are blowing in Jabalpur, Mandla, Damoh, Maihar, Satna.

According to the Meteorological Department, there may be light rain with thunder in Rajgarh and Shajapur in the next few hours. Wind can blow at a speed of 40 to 45 kilometers per hour. Rain is also expected in Ujjain, Ratlam, Dhar, Alirajpur, Barwani, Agar, Omkareshwar of Khandwa, Maheshwar of Khargone.

Dewas, Guna, Ashoknagar, and Tikamgarh may experience clouds and drizzle.

According to Meteorological Center Bhopal, currently Western Disturbance is active. There is also a trough line. Because of this, there are clouds in the state. Similar weather will prevail on March 30 also. Another western disturbance is likely to become active from today. Its effect can be seen in the eastern and central parts of the state.

Guna, Ashoknagar, Sagar, Tikamgarh, Niwari, Chhatarpur, Damoh, Panna, Satna, Maihar, Rewa, Mauganj, Sidhi, Shahdol, Umaria, Anuppur, Dindauri, Seoni, Pandhurna and Balaghat.

Thursday night was the hottest in Tikamgarh state. The minimum temperature

was recorded at 27.6 degrees. It was 25.8 degrees in Narmadapuram and 25 degrees in Damoh.

There is a trend of extreme heat in the last days of March. Same thing is happening this time too. On March 28, the temperature increased in all the cities of the state and it was the hottest of the season. It is also expected to rain this time.

On Thursday, intense heat was seen in the entire state. Damoh was the hottest. The maximum temperature recorded here was 42.5 degrees. On Thursday, the mercury crossed 40 degrees in a total of 14 cities.

For the first time in the season in Bhopal, the day temperature has crossed 40 degrees. The temperature on Thursday was 40.5 degrees.

The Meteorological Department has predicted that the effect of heat will last for the next 4 days. However, the temperature may drop. The day temperature can remain between 36 to 38 degrees.

There may be light rain with strong wind in the old city including Berasia, Kolar of the capital Bhopal today and Friday. The Meteorological Department has issued this alert. In some areas, wind may blow at a speed of 30 to 40 Km. After 4 pm the weather also changed and winds started blowing.

There is a trend of intense heat in Bhopal in the last days of March. Between 2014 and 2023, there has been intense heat from 26 to 31 March. This time also there is intense heat in the last days. On

Thursday the day temperature had reached 40.5 degrees Celsius. The weather changed suddenly on Friday. It remained cloudy till 9 am. After this there was bright sunshine. However, the weather is expected to change in the afternoon. There is an alert of rain and strong wind in the forecast of the Meteorological Department. It was extremely hot in Bhopal on Thursday. Due to this the day temperature reached 40.5 degrees Celsius. If we look at the March data of the last 11 years, Bhopal was the hottest in March for the fourth time. Earlier, the temperature was 40.8 degrees on March 31, 2017, 40.8 degrees on March 31, 2019, and 41 degrees on March 30, 2021. A drop in temperature may be seen on Friday.



Muslim devotees offer prayer on the third Friday during the holy month of Ramadan at Jama Masjid in Bhopal on Friday. Pioneer photo

Bhopal may face shortage of petrol and diesel from April 1

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

There may be a shortage of petrol and diesel at the pumps in Bhopal city from April 1 as Reliance Depot, which supplies petrol and diesel to Indian Oil and Hindustan Petroleum have to follow the order of NGT and supply from bottom loading tankers instead of the existing top loading tankers from April 1.

Petrol pump dealers do not currently have bottom loading tankers. It will take seven to eight months to build a new tanker.

According to petrol dealers, we were informed about the new rule 20 days ago. However, supplies are still being made from Bharat Petroleum depots only

through top loading tankers. In such a situation, petrol will be available only in 45 out of 170 petrol pumps in the city.

State President of Madhya Pradesh Petroleum Dealers Association, Ajay Singh said that petrol and diesel will have to be brought from outside. In such a situation, many pump operators will call petrol diesel from other cities including Sagar and Itarsi depots. This may take 48 hours to 72 hours. That means petrol and diesel will be available at the pumps with a difference of one or two days.

Association official Nakul Sharma said that if the companies give us some more time, arrangements can be made.

Schools asked to vaccinate children from April 1

Bhopal: Bopal Collector Kaushalendra Vikram Singh has issued orders to all private and government school operators and principals regarding the vaccine for Japanese Encephalitis (Encephalitis). It has been said in the order that the new teaching session is starting from April 1. During this time, make parents aware about getting their children vaccinated for JE. Also submit the report by May 15. Along with schools, the operators of book and uniform shops will also make the parents who come to buy books and uniforms aware.

They have also been given instructions. Collector Singh said, from February 27, JE vaccine is being given to children aged 1 to 15 years in Bhopal district to prevent Japanese Encephalitis disease.

Div Commissioner for strict ban on illegal sale, transportation of liquor

PNS ■ INDORE

Indore Divisional Commissioner Deepak Singh has given instructions in the meeting held through video conferencing that in view of the Lok Sabha elections, illegal buying, selling, storage and transportation of liquor should be strictly banned.

The monitoring systems of the distillery should also be kept better. Flying squads should be kept active continuously. It should be ensured that there is no illegal buying, selling, storage or transportation of liquor anywhere. CCTV cameras should also be installed for monitoring.

Divisional Commissioner Singh joined the VC from Dhar.

In this meeting, Police Commissioner Indore Rakesh Gupta, IG Rural Indore Anurag, Additional

In the meeting, the Divisional Commissioner directed that elaborate arrangements should be made to conduct free and fair Lok Sabha elections in Indore division

Commissioner Commercial Tax Rajni Singh along with DIG Rural Indore Nimish Agrawal and DIG Khargone, Collectors of the districts of the division, Superintendent of Police, Excise and GST divisional/district level officers participated.

In the meeting, the Divisional Commissioner directed that elaborate arrangements should be made to conduct free and fair Lok Sabha elections in Indore division. It should be ensured that no one can tempt or influence the voters in any way during the elections. Voters should be able to vote boldly and without any

inducement.

Monitoring systems should be kept vigilant. CCTV cameras should be installed at liquor shops, bottling plants and distilleries. Liquor shops should be inspected regularly. Special surveillance should be maintained on border areas.

Divisional Commissioner Deepak Singh said that special attention should be given to the districts of Dhar, Alirajpur and Jhabua etc of the division. Instructions were given in the meeting that garments, sarees etc. should not be stored without documents.

New vehicles should not be transported without bill. Bogus

firms should be kept an eye on. All concerned departments should work in full coordination with the cooperation of the district administration. An SOP should also be issued for seizure and action against illegal material. Transportation and transactions of suspicious material should be monitored.

On receiving the information, the concerned departments should ensure action with full coordination.

In the meeting, the Divisional Commissioner took information from all the District Collectors and Superintendents of Police of the division regarding the actions being taken in the district against illegal liquor. All the District Collectors and Superintendents of Police gave information about the actions taken so far in their respective areas. It was told that special monitoring is being done on

buying, selling, storage and transportation of illegal liquor in the division.

The action to confiscate illegal liquor is also being taken strictly.

Divisional Commissioner Deepak Singh expressed satisfaction over the actions being taken against illegal liquor in the division and also wished everyone the best for doing good work.

In the meeting, IG Indore Rural Range Anurag said that special attention should be paid to the transportation of illegal liquor in Dhar, Alirajpur and Jhabua districts. Along with big vehicles, intensive checking of small vehicles should also be done. Apart from the main route, checking should also be done on the surprise route. Along with this, warehouses should also be checked continuously. Work in coordination with the border districts.



Christian devotees re-enact the scene of crucifixion of Jesus Christ during a religious procession on Good Friday at St Francis Assisi Cathedral Church, in Bhopal on Friday. Pioneer photo

Holi celebrated in AIIMS Bhopal premises by faculties, students

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Bhopal witnessed a jubilant gathering at its premises for the Holi Milan Samaroh on Thursday. The event was attended by distinguished guests including Prof Dr Ajai Singh, Executive Director of AIIMS Bhopal, faculty members, officers, students, residents, and other staff members.

Speaking on the occasion Prof. Dr. Ajai Singh said that as we gather today to celebrate the joyous festival of Holi, I am filled with immense happiness and gratitude to witness the vibrant spirit of camaraderie and cultural diversity that permeates our AIIMS Bhopal community.

Holi is not merely a festival of colors; it is a celebration of unity, harmony, and the triumph of good over evil. It brings together people from all walks of life, transcending barriers of age, gender, and status, to revel in the simple joys of life and forge lasting bonds of friendship. At AIIMS Bhopal, we are not just a community of healthcare professionals; we are a family bound by a shared commitment

to excellence, compassion, and service. Today, as we come together to mark this auspicious occasion, let us reaffirm our dedication to these values and rededicate ourselves to the noble cause of healing and caring for others.

Highlighting the cultural richness of the occasion, a vibrant cultural program was organized, showcasing the diverse talents within the AIIMS Bhopal community. The event featured mesmerizing performances that captivated the audience and added an extra layer of festivity to the atmosphere. One of the notable highlights of the evening was the enchanting rendition of "Faag Gayan," a traditional folk singing style synonymous with the festival of Holi. The melodious tunes reverberated through the air, further enhancing the festive fervor and spreading joy among all attendees.

In a departure from conventional celebrations involving synthetic colors, the participants opted for a more eco-friendly approach by playing Holi with flowers. This environmentally conscious gesture not only added a colorful spectacle to the event but also underscored the importance of sustainability and respect for nature.

Girl's body found, liquor shop set afire

PNS ■ JABALPUR

Residents of a village in Jabalpur district set ablaze a liquor shop after the body of an 8-year-old girl was found in a lake, a police official has said.

Irate villagers, including the mother of the victim, alleged she was raped, murdered and her body thrown into the lake by a person or group of persons who had liquor at the vend, which was set on fire on Tuesday night, the official said.

"The girl's body was found on Tuesday night. A short post-mortem suggests she was physically assaulted," Jabalpur (Rural) Additional Superintendent of Police Sonali Dubey told.

"The situation is under control. Police have been deployed in the village to maintain law and order. Her short post-mortem was conducted on Thursday. We are awaiting the detailed autopsy report. We are investigating whether a single person or a group committed the crime and whether she was murdered and the body thrown into the lake," Dubey said.

Some suspects have been picked up and are being questioned, the Additional SP said.

356 auxiliary polling stations made in Madhya Pradesh

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Chief Electoral Officer Anupa m Rajan said that auxiliary polling stations have been established in the polling stations in the state where the number of voters is more than 1500 for the convenience of the voters.

A total of 356 auxiliary polling stations have been set up in the state with the permission of the Election Commission of India.

One auxiliary polling station each has been made in Jaora, Bhitwarwar, Chanderi, Khurai, Sagar, Rajnagar, Dhauhani, Mudwara, Jabalpur Cant, Sihora, Seoni, Saunsar, Vidisha, Basoda, Shamsabad, Ichhawar, Sehore, Biaoara, Shajapur, Bhagwanpura, Indore-3, Ratlam City, Javra and Suwasra assembly constituencies of the state.

Similarly, two auxiliary polling stations each have been established in Gwalior East, Chhatarpur, Singrauli, Gadarpwara, Dewas, Khargone, Sendhwa, Jhabua and Nagda-Khachraud assembly con-

A total of 356 auxiliary polling stations have been set up in the state with the permission of the Election Commission of India

stituencies.

Three auxiliary polling stations each have been made in Gwalior Rural, Raghogarh, Bhopal South-West and Mandsaur , four each in Guna-Chhindwara, Bhopal Central, Barwah and Indore-4 and five each in Gwalior, Gwalior South, Dabra and Berasia assembly constituencies.

Seven auxiliary polling stations have been made in Jabalpur East, eight each in Narela and Depalpur, nine each in Ujjain South and Ujjain North, 18 in Indore-1, 18 in Indore-2, 19 in Sanwer, 20 in Dr. Ambedkar Nagar (Mhow), 29 in Huzur, 50 in Indore-5 and 53 in Rau assembly constituency.



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav and BJP State President VD Sharma inspect the under-construction building of BJP State headquarters in Bhopal on Friday. Pioneer photo

Ensure arrangements against extreme heat at polling booths

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Chief Electoral Officer Anupam Rajan has directed all the collectors and district election officers to make proper arrangements for protection from extreme heat (heat stroke) in all the polling stations. He said that arrangements should also be made for pure drink-

ing water and adequate chairs and benches for voters in the polling stations.

Rajan has given instructions to install sheds in polling stations to protect voters from sunlight. He has said that medical kits should also be kept in every polling station. After discussion with the Chief Medical and Health Officer, all necessary medicines use-

ful during summers should be provided in the medical kit.

All polling parties should also have ORS packets and leaflets with 'Do's and Don'ts to protect themselves from extreme heat. Along with all the necessary medicines, appropriate number of paramedical staff should be also deployed in the Sector Officer's vehicle.

Delhi HC asks CBI to take steps on DDA allotted properties

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court has recently given directions to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to 'take appropriate steps, in accordance with law' in a case regarding the various properties spread across prime locations in the national capital, allotted by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) based on 'allegedly forged letters' from the Land & Building Department (L&BD) over the span of 40 years.

"The petition has brought to light certain alarming details about various properties allotted by the DDA based on allegedly forged letters from the L&BD. These properties are spread across Delhi and are of significant value, potentially worth crores of rupees," said a single-judge bench of Justice Prathiba Singh in its March 18 order.

Keeping in mind the gravity of the allegations, the court referred the case to CBI. "Given the gravity of the allegations, which suggest not only a breach of trust but also a blatant disregard for Rule of law governing public land allocation, there is an urgent need for an investigation that is both thorough and impartial. Thus, this Court is of the opinion that the present writ be considered as a complaint for the CBI to take appropriate steps, in accordance with law," stated the order.

The court also highlighted that the revelations made during the writ petition 'raises concerns about systemic vulnerabilities within these (DDA and L&BD department) authorities' and 'presents a significant challenge to the integrity of public administration and trust'. The order stated, "This Court is of the opinion that considering the complex situation

revealed through the various orders of this Court in the present writ petition—specifically, the issuance of forged recommendation letters by the L&BD for land allotments, and the subsequent unauthorised property allocations by the DDA—the disclosures made during the course of this writ petition presents a significant challenge to the integrity of public administration and trust."

"The involvement of various officials across multiple departments, along with the 40 year period over which these malpractices have occurred, raises concerns about systemic vulnerabilities within these authorities," Judge Singh said.

The order mentions that both the Delhi Police and Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs have consented to this matter being referred to the CBI and that the Court is of the opinion that

referring this matter to the CBI would help in accomplishing 'several crucial objectives of restoring the eroded public trust in allotment of land across Delhi'. Calling every public office bearer 'a steward of the public's trust', the Judge said, "The situation involving the distribution of forged letters by the L&BD, and the subsequent failure to take timely action against this malpractice, is a clear sign of the malaise that has crept into the public authorities and their functioning. When officials from organisations such as the DDA and the L&BD are implicated in such matters, it shakes the foundation of public trust."

Asserting that 'there has been a substantial monetary loss to the exchequer' due to the allotment of valuable properties on forged documents in areas of North Delhi, West Delhi and South Delhi, Justice Singh said, "Despite

the fact that such valuable properties in areas of North Delhi, West Delhi and South Delhi, which may have market value of more than Rs.1000 crores (as recorded vide order dated 6th November, 2023) appear to have been allotted on forged documents and there has been a substantial monetary loss to the exchequer, the stand of the DDA and the L&BD continues to be that the record is being traced and that action is being taken."

Justice Singh also ordered that the matter be converted into a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) and be placed before the Acting Chief Justice Manmohan for being taken up on the judicial side in the manner as deemed appropriate. It also directed the DDA to continue its enquiries and action can be taken in accordance with law in an expeditious manner. "Efforts shall be made to retrieve the properties which were



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav and BJP State President VD Sharma welcome Congress MLA Kamlesh Shah from Amarwara, Chhindwara district after he joins BJP at CM's residence in Bhopal on Friday. Pioneer photo



Former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in a Holi Milan programme during his election campaign for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in Raisen, Madhya Pradesh on Friday. Pioneer photo

Man marries four times, alleges wife at Gautam Nagar police station

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

In Bhopal, a woman has filed a complaint against her husband in Gautam Nagar police station.

In the complaint, the husband has been accused of marrying four times without informing her.

The victim said that after her husband's misdeeds were exposed, she was beaten and thrown out of the house. The police have received the complaint application and started investigating the matter.

According to the information, the 32 year old victim lives in Nariyal Kheda. In the complaint application given to the police, she told that she was married in 2019 to a young man living near Kohefiza police station. My in-laws started

harassing me after marriage. Her in-laws along with her husband used to taunt her for not getting dowry as per their wish. The husband used to pressurize her to bring Rs 5 lakh as dowry. Used to beat if his demands were not fulfilled.

The victim claims that the husband had married four more times without informing her. When she came to know about this, her husband beat her. In June 2023, she and her seven-month-old child were thrown out of the house. The accused husband is also in contact with two other women. Even after this she kept trying to save the house. But recently the husband sent a divorce notice. He is also continuously threatening to kill me.

The complainant told that she has complained to the Gautam Nagar police station about all the atrocities committed by her husband. The police have assured that after investigation they will file a case against the accused husband. In the complaint application, the victim has also accused her husband's aunt of harassing her. The police is investigating the matter

The woman said that the accused used to divorce her thrice every day during the fight. He has sent a notice for divorce citing these three issues. The complainant has demanded strict action against the husband. His allegation is that he has misled and entered into relationships with other women also.

Youth cheated to the tune of Rs 3.35 lakh in name of providing Patwari's job

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

A youth preparing for competitive examinations in Bhopal was cheated by a fraudster to the tune of Rs 3.35 lakh in the name of facilitating Patwari job and his wife a nursing job. When the victim failed to get the job even after paying the money, the matter was reported to the police. Police have registered a case of fraud after investigation.

Misrod police station in-charge Manijraj Singh Bhadauria said that Vikas Patel and his wife, living in Jatkhedi area, are preparing for competitive examinations. Last year in January 2023, Vikas met a man named Pawan Suryavanshi. During the conversation, Pawan lured and said that he knew many officials in government offices. He can get government jobs for Vikas and his wife. Vikas

When the victim failed to get the job even after paying the money, the matter was reported to the police

fell into his trap and gave Rs 3.35 lakh to Pawan. When he did not receive the job appointment letter even after paying the money, Pawan asked for his money back but Pawan escaped with excuses. When the accused did not pay the money for several days, Vikas complained about the matter to top police officials. On the investigation report received from the officials, Misrod police has registered a case of fraud against Pawan Suryavanshi.

AAP is synonymous with forgery and is trying to portray Kejriwal's arrest as sacrifice: BJP

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva on Friday said here the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is synonymous with forgery and is trying to portray Arvind Kejriwal's arrest as a sacrifice. Making this charge, Sachdeva said after the arrest of their two former ministers, a Member of Parliament, and some leaders of the party, now Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is in custody for the liquor scam. Instead of apologizing to the public for embarrassment, the party is now trying to portray Arvind Kejriwal's arrest as a sacrifice, whereas, on one hand, where the arrest of Arvind Kejriwal is being portrayed as a sacrifice in the same scam, on the other hand, by bringing Chief Minister's wife to the forefront to garner sympathy and holding press conferences devoid of any logic, they are trying to confuse the people, the BJP leader claimed.



He said no matter how hard the AAP and their leaders try, neither will the people of Delhi be misled nor will there be any misunderstanding about Kejriwal's arrest. The public knows well that Manish Sisodia, Sanjay Singh, Vijay Nayyar, all have been in jail for a long time in the liquor scam, their bail applications have been rejected from trial court to Supreme Court, and now Kejriwal's arrest is the final link in the same scam, not any sacrifice.

Sachdeva said the AAP runs many political campaigns like "I am also Kejriwal", but they all fail when they go among the

people.

Now, the AAP has issued WhatsApp numbers to connect with Arvind Kejriwal's wife to gather sympathy, on which common people are unlikely to comment, only professionals associated with AAP will file comments.

Sachdeva said if Kejriwal is in jail, then it is a matter of contemplation how WhatsApp messages will reach him, all this is just a campaign of AAP to stay relevant in news.

The Delhi BJP President said when investigative agencies ask Chief Minister Kejriwal for his phone, Minister Atishi's bluffs on it. They must tell the reason that whether it is Kejriwal today or Manish Sisodia earlier, both have been changing their mobile phones in a secretive manner every day. An ordinary person uses a phone for two to three years, but it is astonishing that Kejriwal and Sisodia change phones every day and both have admitted to having changed many phones.

Entire country has been ashmed of politicisation of probe agencies, alleges AAP

New Delhi: Continuing its attack on the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Friday claimed that the entire country was ashamed over the "politicisation" of central probe agencies ED and CBI by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Launching a scathing attack on BJP, AAP said that the people will respond to this in the coming Lok Sabha elections 2024.

"The Enforcement Directorate is working as BJP's political weapon and it wants to get details of AAP's Lok Sabha election strategy by accessing Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's phone," senior AAP

leader Atishi alleged, while claiming that Kejriwal's mobile phone is a few months old and did not exist when the policy was formed and implemented. She claimed that the saffron party wants to know the details of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections through Kejriwal's phone. "They want it because they will find in it details of AAP's Lok Sabha poll strategy, campaign plans, talks with INDIA bloc leaders and information regarding media and social media strategy," she said.

AAP spokesperson Jasmine Shah termed ED as the "biggest political washing machine". Referencing to the electoral bonds, Shah said,

"The BJP has developed the biggest political washing machine in the last ten years that churns out election donation and falsehood when businessmen and politicians facing corruption charges are put inside" He further said NCP (Ajit Pawar camp) leader Praful Patel, who is facing multiple cases, got a clean chit from the CBI. "The case in which he has been given a clean chit involved the merger of Indian Airlines and Air India when he was Civil Aviation minister. As per CBI charge sheet and a CAG report, there was a big scam involved and Rs 840 crore of public exchequer was lost," he claimed.

He claimed that Patel was eventually a clean chit when the Ajit Pawar group joined the BJP alliance in Maharashtra. "The summonses and attachment of properties stopped and no charge sheet was filed and the whole probe has been put on backburner," he said.

Shah also raised accusations on ED for not opposing NCP (Ajit Pawar camp) leader and Maharashtra Minister Chhagan Bhujbal bail application saying a related file was missing.

"On the other hand, four top leaders of the AAP including Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal were arrested despite no solid evidence or even a penny worth of evidence in the

excise policy case being probed by the ED and CBI for nearly two years," he alleged.

Claiming that the nation is ashamed by the 'politicisation' of ED and CBI, the AAP leader claimed, "The whole country is watching and is ashamed by the way the ED and CBI have been politicised. People will respond to this in the coming elections."

Kejriwal was arrested on March 21 by the ED in a money laundering case linked to the now-scraped excise policy linked money laundering case. The INDIA bloc is organising a 'maharally' at Ram Leela Maidan on March 31 to show their anger against the arrest of Kejriwal.

Noida police nabs four persons for extortion

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Noida Police on Friday said they have arrested four people, including a woman, for allegedly extorting money from a city resident after befriending him over Facebook using a false identity.

The accused, all aged between 21 and 25 years, had created a Facebook account in the name of a girl "Nagar Pari" and used it to interact with the complainant, who is a graduation student here, the police said.

"The complainant said he was called for a meeting by

the girl on March 14 near a private hospital located in Sector 62. When the student reached the decided location, he found a woman and her two male accomplices who were already there," a police spokesperson said.

"The student said he was cheated by them and the trio took his mobile phone and forced him into transferring Rs 17,120 to their account after threatening to kill him," the spokesperson said.

Additional DCP (Noida) Manish Mishra said the local Sector 58 police station officials on Thursday evening nabbed the thugs, including the woman

member of the gang.

"Around Rs 15,000 cash and six mobile phones were seized from their possession. During the probe it has come to light that the gang used social media accounts made under fake identities to befriend people and dupe them in a similar manner," Mishra said.

Those held have been identified as Abhishek Sharma, Firoz Khan, Shashipal Prasad and Shivani, the police said.

The FIR has been lodged under IPC sections 420 (cheating) and 386 (extortion), the police said, adding the accused have been sent to judicial custody.



Visually impaired artists Divyati Jain Garg and Deepnala Lohade perform in a cultural programme 'Saaz Aur Awaaz' organised by Swaranjali Cultural Social Welfare Society at Lions Ashiana Senior Citizen Home in Bhopal on Friday. Pioneer photo

Union Minister Puri inaugurates Lok Sabha election office in Delhi

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP's special election office for upcoming Lok Sabha elections was inaugurated here on Friday with a collective puja ceremony by Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, Lok Sabha election in-charge Om Prakash Dhankar, co-in-charge Alka Gurjar, state president Virendra Sachdeva, and other leaders.

In the large garden behind the party office, a special Swiss tent with 400 seats has been set up as a meeting hall, along with various election management committee cabins for different election activities. Additionally, a Swiss tent has been set up on the right side of the entrance gate of the office in the garden area for press conference hall, media seating, party spokesperson room and dining area.

In puja program, MPs Harsh Vardhan and Ramesh Bidhuri, Organizational General Secretary Pawan Rana, all seven candidates, Manoj Tiwari, Ramveer Singh Bidhuri, Harsh Malhotra, Kamaljeet Sahrawat, Yogendra Chandoliya, Praveen Khandelwal, and Bansuri Swaraj, Election Management Committee Coordinator Ajay Mahavar, former President Vijendra Gupta, and Aadesh Gupta, along with senior leaders of the party, election management committee members, state officials, district presidents, MLAs, councilors, and workers were present.

In his welcome address, State President Sachdeva said today the whole country has pledged to make Honorable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi the Prime Minister for the third time, and for this pledge, our seven candidates are continuously working hard. He said that today we are fortunate that Shri OP Dhankar will guide us in the Lok Sabha elections.

In his address, Hardeep Singh Puri commented on Arvind Kejriwal's arrest saying that Kejriwal has been accusing others of lies and shortcomings from the beginning. When Delhi turned into a gas chamber due to pollution, he blamed the entire fault on Punjab, but when his party's government was formed in Punjab, the situation worsened.

Puri said Kejriwal accuses that he was arrested without any reason, but why does he not tell that after nine summons since November 2023, he was arrested on the 10th summons by the ED. He said inside Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal's politics is now limited for a short period of time. When Puri was asked how serious challenge the AAP-Congress alliance in Delhi was for the BJP, he said, "Which alliance? What are you talking about? They (Congress) have not released the names of candidate." He slammed AAP and its leaders saying they joined politics pledging to fight corruption and now they have allied with the "most corrupt" Congress.

Yogi's visit to Gautam Buddh Nagar deferred

Noida: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's proposed visit to Gautam Buddh Nagar on Saturday has been deferred and he is now likely to come to the constituency on April 1, a local BJP leader said.

BJP's Gautam Buddh Nagar unit president Gajendra Mavi said the chief minister was scheduled to hold a 'Prabuddh Sammelan' in Greater Noida on Saturday but the programme has now been deferred.

"Chief Minister Adityanath is now scheduled to visit Gautam Buddh Nagar constituency on April 1 for the programme to be held at Greater Noida," Mavi added.

A senior police officer also confirmed to PTI that the chief minister's Saturday visit stands cancelled. The UP CM is among

the listed 'star campaigners' of the Bharatiya Janata Party for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in the state.

Adityanath kicked off the election campaign on March 26 with public rallies in Mathura, Meerut, and Ghaziabad on the same day. He has back-to-back canvassing programmes scheduled across Uttar Pradesh in the coming weeks.

Mahesh Sharma is once again BJP's Lok Sabha candidate from Gautam Buddh Nagar, which goes to polls on April 26 in the second leg of the seven-phased elections. Sharma won from the seat in 2014 and 2019 as well. This time Sharma is pitted against Samajwadi Party's Mahendra Singh Nagar and Bahujan Samaj Party's Rajendra Singh Solanki, among others.

6,728 dog bite cases reported in Bhopal in past three months

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

In the state capital 6,728 dog bite cases have been witnessed in the past 3 months ; dogs are attacking more on children.

As the heat increases, cases of dog bites, i.e. attacking by stray dogs, have increased in Bhopal. The figures in the last 3 months are shocking.

In January, February and March alone, dogs have made 6 thousand 728 people their victims. This is more than 50% compared to the figures of the last 2 years. Never before have so many cases been reported in 2 years.

Every day 70 to 80 cases of dog bites are reaching Jaypee and Hamidia Hospital. In some areas the number of dogs have

increased, which is making adults more victims.

The latest and biggest incident is of March 19. In Ganganagar Banganga area, the jaw of 6 year old Humer was torn by dogs. He had 20 stitches and could not eat anything for 4 days. Humer is admitted in Kamla Nehru Hospital for the last 10 days. He will also undergo surgery.

This time there have been more cases of dog bites in Bhopal compared to the last two years. According to reports received from various hospitals, there were a total of 8124 incidents of dog bites in the year 2022, which increased to 16387 in the year 2023. This year, 6728 incidents have been reported in January, February and March. Apart from this,

the Municipal Corporation is also not making proper arrangements for sterilization. Dr. Jeevan Singh Meena, Associate Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Gandhi Medical College, said that immunoglobulin is given through injection to a person seriously injured by a dog bite. This is an antibody. This reduces the risk of a dog bite victim getting rabies. Severe dog bite means the dog's teeth entering the person's body and reaching the person's bloodstream.

According to Dr. Meena, after dog bite, anti-rabies vaccine is administered to the person concerned. This vaccine produces anti-rabies antibodies in the person's blood within 10 to

12 days. There is a need to give immunoglobulin to those dog bite victims who have deep dog bites on their face, hands, neck.

According to the immunoglobulin consumption report of the Health Department, the number of severe dog bite cases has increased by 1300 percent in the last three years. In the year 2020-21, only 5 dog bite victims were injected with immunoglobulin to protect them from rabies infection. The number of dog bite victims who received immunoglobulin injections has increased to 65 in the year 2023-24. Which is 1300 percent more than the consumption of immunoglobulin injection in the year 2020-21.

44 per cent sitting LS MPs face criminal charges, says ADR

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Out of the 514 sitting Members of Parliament in Lok Sabha, a staggering 44 per cent ie 225 have criminal cases against themselves with 29 per cent facing serious criminal cases, including allegations of murder, attempt to murder, promoting communal disharmony, kidnapping, and crimes against women, an analysis of self-sworn affidavits by the poll rights body Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) has found. Additionally, a noteworthy 5 per cent of these MPs are billionaires, with assets exceeding Rs 100 crore. The report further delves into the severity of these criminal cases, revealing that 29 per cent of elected representatives facing charges are embroiled in serious criminal allegations, including murder, attempted murder, promoting communal disharmony, kidnapping, and



crimes against women. Shockingly, nine sitting MPs face murder charges, with five belonging to the BJP. Moreover, 28 MPs have charges related to attempted murder, and 16 MPs face accusations of crimes against women, including three allegations of rape, as per the ADR. The report also sheds light on the financial aspects of these lawmakers. It has highlighted the disparity in wealth among these MPs, with some possess-

ing assets worth hundreds of crores while others have minimal assets. Among major parties, the BJP and the Congress have the highest number of billionaire MPs, though the analysis shows significant representation from other parties as well. Notably, the top three MPs with the highest declared assets are Nakul Nath (Congress), DK Suresh (Congress), and Kanumuru Raghu Rama Krishna Raju (Independent).

Regarding the distribution of criminal cases among states, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Himachal Pradesh stand out with more than 50 per cent of their MPs facing criminal charges. The analysis also sheds light on the educational background, age, and gender distribution among sitting MPs. As per the analysis by the organization, 73 per cent of MPs hold graduate or higher educational qualifications. However, political parties seem to be reluctant in giving tickets to the women as only 15 per cent are fair sex, indicating a significant gender disparity in parliamentary representation. Moreover, the distribution of criminal cases among states highlights Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Himachal Pradesh as areas with more than 50 per cent of their MPs facing criminal charges.

79,000 poll code violation complaints received through cVigil app: ECI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) on Friday said its C-Vigil mobile application has become an effective tool in the hands of people for flagging poll code violations and since the announcement of the Lok Sabha election, more than 79,000 complaints have been received. More than 99 per cent of the complaints have been resolved and close to 89 per cent of those were resolved within 100 minutes, the poll panel said. More than 58,500 complaints (73 per cent of the total number of complaints) received were against illegal hoardings and banners, the EC said, adding that over 1,400 complaints received pertained to money, gifts and liquor distribution. Close to 3 per cent of the complaints (2,454) were related to defacement of property. Of



the 535 complaints received for display of firearms and intimidation, 529 have been resolved, the poll panel said. A total of 1,000 complaints were for campaigning beyond the prohibited period, including those related to the use of

speakers beyond the permitted time. The EC pointed out that at the press conference to announce the Lok Sabha poll schedule, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar had urged citizens to be vigilant and use the app

to report Model Code of Conduct violations and distribution of any kind of inducements among voters. The seven-phase polls were announced on March 16 and voting will take place between April 19 and June 1.

BJP slams Opposition for criticising UP Government on Mukhtar death

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Friday hit back at Opposition parties for criticising the Uttar Pradesh Government over the death of jailed gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari, saying they have the habit of emotionally exploiting every issue to vitiating communal harmony. While former Union minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi targeted Opposition parties, Alka Rai, a BJP leader and the wife of MLA Krishnanand Rai who was killed at the behest of Ansari, described his death as "divine justice". "I always had full faith in God," she said. Her son Piyush Rai rejected the suggestion from some opposition parties, including the state's main opposition Samajwadi Party, that there was a conspiracy behind Ansari's death. It is a wrong allegation levelled due to politics of appeasement, he said. "They (critics) are looking for religion in a criminal," he said. His mother said victims of Ansari's crime and their families will be happy at his end. Alka Rai had been elected to the Uttar Pradesh assembly



on the BJP ticket in the past. The BJP is yet to name its candidate for the Ghazipur Lok Sabha constituency which is currently represented by Ansari's brother Afzal Ansari. Naqvi, in his reaction, accused opposition parties of spreading "communal poison" despite the state administration's statement on his death. In a reference to the criminal past of Mukhtar Ansari, who had been an MLA for several terms, he said his history cannot be ignored. The region he came from used to be a citadel of the Left but turned into a hotbed of criminals, he said. Ansari, who was convicted in

several cases, died of cardiac arrest at a hospital in Banda in Uttar Pradesh on Thursday. He was brought to the Rani Durgavati Medical College in Banda from the district jail in "an unconscious state" and, according to its principal Suneel Kaushal, he died at the hospital following cardiac arrest. Samajwadi Party leader Shivpal Singh Yadav said the court should take cognisance of Ansari's death in "suspicious" circumstances. BSP supremo Mayawati said the allegations of Ansari's family regarding his death require a high-level probe to bring out the facts.

India holds wide ranging talks with Ukraine

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As Ukraine conflict continues, India and Ukraine on Friday here held "open and wide-ranging" talks as part of a bilateral engagement between its Foreign Ministers, with discussions focusing on the "ongoing conflict and its wider ramifications." Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba's two-day visit to India comes amid efforts to seek a peaceful resolution to the more than two-year-old Russia-Ukraine conflict. He arrived here on Thursday. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met Kuleba at the Hyderabad House. After the meeting, Jaishankar in a post on X said, "An open and wide-ranging conversation with Ukraine FM @DmytroKuleba this afternoon." "Our discussions focused on the ongoing conflict and its wider ramifications. Exchanged views on various initiatives in that context. Spoke as well on global and regional issues of interest to both of us. Reiterated our commitment to strengthen the overall relationship, including bilateral cooperation," he said. Jaishankar also shared some photographs of



him shaking hands with his Ukrainian counterpart and the bilateral meeting. In his opening remarks at the meeting, Jaishankar welcomed Kuleba to India, and said he was glad to see that "some of our bilateral mechanisms have also met" which has created "a certain momentum in our bilateral relationship." "Welcome to India, to New Delhi. We have been looking forward to this visit, and I'm very glad that despite our - both of us have fairly heavy travel schedules, we have been able to match it and organise this meeting," he said. Jaishankar added that in recent months, "we've had actually interactions at various levels. I'm glad to see that some of our bilateral mechanisms have also

met. I think this has created a certain momentum in our bilateral relationship." "And today, after this discussion in the afternoon, we look forward also to the meeting of the Inter-Governmental Commission," he said. "Your visit gives us an opportunity, obviously, to understand the situation in your own region, and I look forward to hearing your perspectives on that. I think our teams have prepared a very substantial agenda of our discussions, and I would invite you to make your opening remarks," Jaishankar said. On Thursday, Kuleba had posted on X, "I began my visit to New Delhi upon @DrSJaishankar's invitation. The Ukrainian-Indian cooper-

ation is important and we will be reinvigorating ties. Building on the dialogue between @ZelenskyyUa and @NarendraModi, we will pay specific attention to the Peace Formula." During his weekly press briefing, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, in response to a query on Kuleba's visit, on Thursday said there will be a "bilateral engagement with the external affairs minister in which they will go over a gamut of issues that lie in the domain of bilateral relations". They will also "review the Inter-governmental Commission that was held earlier," he had said. The two leaders will also discuss regional and global issues of common concern, Jaiswal had said, adding that there are several other engagements also lined up for the Ukrainian foreign minister. "Our position is very clear on peace initiatives and how we look at the Ukraine-Russia conflict. We continue to encourage peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy and remain open to engaging all ways and means that would help achieve this objective," the MEA spokesperson had said on a query on India's position on the peace conference in

Switzerland. The peace formula proposed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2022 follows 10 principles aimed at ensuring a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 20 had held separate conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Zelenskyy and asserted that dialogue and diplomacy were the way forward for the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Modi had spoken to Putin over telephone to congratulate him for winning a fifth term in office in the recent elections, and followed it up with a phone call to Zelenskyy to convey India's "consistent support" for all efforts for peace and bringing an early end to the ongoing conflict. During the telephone conversation, the Ukrainian President had thanked India for its support for his country's sovereignty and said that it would be important for Kyiv to see New Delhi attend the inaugural Peace Summit in Switzerland. Zelenskyy had hailed India's continued humanitarian assistance for the people of Ukraine as the two leaders had discussed ways to further strengthen their bilateral partnership in various spheres.

Defence Secretary visits Coast Guard facilities in North West region

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane visited the Indian Coast Guard facilities in the North West Region on March 28-29 and inaugurated the infrastructure for the Hovercraft Maintenance Unit (HMU) at Okha, defence ministry said here on Friday. Giving details, officials said Coast Guard OTM and Married Accommodation at Inaz Village Veraval was inaugurated by Defence Secretary's wife Gayatri Aramane on Friday. The Defence Secretary was also briefed about the upcoming 200 mtr ICG Jetty Construction work at Okha. He appreciated the role played by ICG, in safeguarding national maritime interests in its area of responsibility. The hovercrafts are based at Okha and Jakhau for maintaining surveillance in 50 Islands in the Area of Responsibility (AoR), Gulf of Kutch, in the shallow water and marshy terrain along the coast of Gujarat. The field facility for HMU will enable timely technical support, upkeep maintenance of these hovercrafts which in turn will ensure optimum operational availability and keep them in ever ready state to meet any operational requirement. HMU facilities comprise of ACV parking for technical assistance, Office Building, Workshop and Maintenance Area. The Coast Guard Residential



Area (CGRA) at Inaz Village Veraval includes 60 Nos of Married Accommodations, an all-weather Helipad, living Accommodations for Subordinate Officers and Naviks, a Parade Ground, and a Mess. The presence of a helipad adds a strategic advantage to various operations in Veraval that includes addressing maritime emergencies, search & rescue missions, and surveillance activities. The ICG Regional Headquarters (North West) was established on December 16, 2009 at Gandhinagar. It executes ICG's mandated charter in maritime zones in Gujarat, Daman and Diu. The ICG is focused on the development of berthing and other infrastructure which underscores the commitment of equipping with facilities for operating advanced surface and air platforms. In addition to the recently inaugurated Jetty at Vadinar, ICG is also constructing 100 mtr jetty extension at Porbandar and 125 mtr jetty at Mundra in addition to the 200 mtr jetty at Okha.

Second edition of trilateral exercise concludes in Mozambique

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The second edition of India-Mozambique-Tanzania trilateral exercise (IMT-TRILAT) concluded at Nacala, Mozambique on Thursday, navy said here on Friday. The week-long exercise underscores the importance of enhanced maritime cooperation and interoperability between the Navies of India, Mozambique, and Tanzania. Giving details here, officials said Indian ships INS Tir and Sujata participated in IMT TRILAT 24 through a series of joint exercises, training sessions and collaborative activities, providing invaluable opportunities for all three Navies to exchange knowledge, enhance capabilities and bolster maritime security in the region. The IMT TRILAT 24 Exercise unfolded in two phases. The initial harbour phase from March 21 to 24 saw intensive training sessions concurrently held onboard INS Tir at Zanzibar and INS Sujata at Maputo. Activities included vital training on Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS), Damage Control and Firefighting Drills, communication procedures and medical lectures with CPR demonstration and casualty evacuation (CASEVAC). The sea phase commenced on March 24 wherein INS Tir and INS Sujata embarked sea riders from the Tanzanian and Mozambique Navies respectively. Joint operations with



Mozambique Naval ship Namatili and Tanzanian naval ship Fatundu showcased significant synergy and sustained efforts with the regional Navies in line with the vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). The evolutions at sea involved simulated VBSS exercises and night manoeuvres. The sea riders were imparted training on bridge watch keeping, damage control and firefighting. The ships also undertook joint surveillance of EEZ off Tanzania and Mozambique in the area of operation. The closing ceremony, held onboard INS Tir and INS Sujata at Nacala, Mozambique featured representatives from all three navies. The closing remarks highlighted successful collaboration, understanding of maritime capabilities and shared

objectives achieved during the exercise. It emphasised continued collaboration towards maritime security and regional stability underlining India's commitment as the preferred security partner. In addition to IMT TRILAT, various official and training exchanges, cross deck visits, sport fixtures and Yoga were held as part of the long range training deployment of the ships. The ships were open to visitors at Zanzibar, Maputo and Nacala, wherein more than 1,500 people including school children, Indian diaspora and local populace visited the ship. Outreach activities were also conducted at Mizzizini orphanage center at Zanzibar and Obra Dom Oratio Reception Centre at Maputo fostering bonds of friendship.

Modi promotes millets in interaction with Bill Gates

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Amidst discussions spanning wide-ranging and serious topics such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), climate change, healthcare, and digital inclusion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his free-wheel conversation with philanthropist Bill Gates on Friday promoted his favourite cereal millets, also called as Shri Anna while giving tips on how to maintain well-being and inner peace in hectic times. Gates, Microsoft co-founder, had sought advice from him on how he manages to maintain high energy levels despite his demanding schedule. In response, the Prime Minister attributed his energy and sense of relaxation to a natural state of being. Despite working tirelessly, he said that he finds inner peace and calmness, which helps him navigate through hectic times. "I find my inner peace through a spiritual practice instilled in me by my teachers which energises me to a great strength. This energy does not stem from physical strength but my dedication and emotional connection to the mission at hand, focusing solely on it," Modi told Gates. "Additionally, my body has adapted to little rest. I sleep for less hours, work late into the night, yet wake up early, feeling refreshed. This resilience partly comes from a period spent in the Himalayas, where I followed the tradition of bathing in early morning hours which has conditioned my body over time," the Prime Minister explained.



"As a result, I don't need conventional methods to relax." When Gates asked Prime Minister Modi how millet is changing the way vegetarian food is looked at globally, he said that promoting millet can be a big way forward as switching to it can bring several health benefits. "Even within vegetarian options, some choices are harmful and switching to millet could bring significant benefits. I have seen a significant increase in millet production. Many reputable companies are now offering millet-based products, enhancing its value and making it both common and trendy. Even five-star hotels have introduced special millet menus. And it is improving the livelihoods of small farmers," said Modi. "Millet is a superfood. I celebrated 2023 as the Year of Millet with the UN. Millet has great benefits. It grows in barren land. It needs minimal water and does not require any fertiliser," the Prime Minister further explained. At this Gates shared his experience during his visit to Odisha where he was offered a millet. "When I went to

Odisha, I came to know that millet was a very popular food there a long time ago and now it is coming back in the market with the joint efforts of the government. They even took me to the shops where they offered me very nutritious foods and they tasted good to me," Gates added. In order to increase production and productivity of Shree Anna, the Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (DA&FW) is implementing a Sub-Mission on Nutri-Cereals under National Food Security Mission (NFSM) in all districts of 28 States & 2 Union Territories viz. Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. The interventions such as formation of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) for Shree Anna, setting up Centers of Excellence (CoE) and seed hubs for Shree Anna have also been supported under NFSM. In addition, states such as Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhhand and Uttar Pradesh have initiated Millet Missions in the States to promote millets.

Modi, Shah can solve all problems at national level: Former PM Gowda

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda on Friday said there are no leaders other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah who can solve all the problems at the national level. At the same time, the JD(S) patriarch underlined the need for better coordination between his party and BJP to achieve the target of winning all the 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka. JD(S) joined the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in September last year. As part of the seat-sharing deal in the State, BJP will contest in 25 constituencies and the JD(S) in three. Noting that the role of former Chief Minister and BJP stalwart B S Yediyurappa was very important, Gowda said he must forget whatever had happened in the past “because the time is very short”. “Our opponents are so strong. Don't think that we are going to win all the 28 seats unless and until we forget what all had happened in the past and our differences,” the 91-year-old said at a coordination meeting of the two parties here. Stating that “other than Modi there is no leader in this country”, Gowda said he knows each and every corner of the nation having served the country as Prime Minister for a decade. “Only Modi and Shah are the two leaders who can solve all the problems at the national level,” the nonagenarian leader said. Gowda cautioned the BJP and JD(S) leaders against taking the Congress lightly as, he claimed, the Mallikarjun Kharge-led outfit has “huge financial resources.” “In the present Congress government



JD(S) supremo HD Devegowda, BJP leader BS Yediyurappa, JD(S) leader HD Kumaraswamy, BJP incharge Radha Mohan Das, Opposition leader R Ashoka and Karnataka BJP president BY Vijayendra during the BJP-JD(S) Co-ordination meeting, in Bengaluru on Friday

(in Karnataka), money reserve is one of the major areas for them. Can you challenge? Entire Bengaluru and every department are in the hands of one leader. It is not easy to challenge the Congress resources. Not so simple,” he said. According to Gowda, no one knows how much money has been pumped in by the Congress in Mandya from where his son and former Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy is contesting as the BJP-JD(S) alliance candidate. “Today this so-called Congress is only in four states and the money has to be

supplied from Karnataka. The president of AICC (Kharge) is from Karnataka. Please understand. It is not so easy (to win the election),” he said. To highlight the “resource mobilisation” by the Congress in the Lok Sabha election, Gowda said never ever in the history of Karnataka 94 MLAs are holding the position of cabinet rank (including by way of holding positions as chairpersons of various state-owned boards and corporations.) He also lashed out at Siddaramaiah for his statement “where is JD(S) in the state?”

“I will prove that 91-year-old Deve Gowda has the strength to demonstrate where the JD(S) is. I will not be scared. I don't have any fear,” he said. Speaking on the occasion, Yediyurappa expressed confidence that the BJP-JD(S) alliance will win all the 28 seats. Yediyurappa also hit out at the Congress government for allegedly stopping all the development works. “There is nothing much to say about this government. People have lost their trust in it. Its coffers are empty and development works have come to a halt,” he added.

HIMACHAL MULTI CRORE SCHOLARSHIP SCAM

CBI files charge sheet against 20 institutes, 105 individuals

PTI ■ SHIMLA

The CBI has concluded its investigation in the Himachal Pradesh multi-crore scholarship scam with the filing of charge sheets against 20 institutions and 105 persons, officials said on Friday. The charge sheets have been filed against the owners of educational institutes, the staff of Directorate of Higher Education, Shimla; bank officials and other private persons involved in the misuse of funds under scholarship and reimbursement scheme of fees launched by the Union government and implemented through the state government to help the students of SC, ST and OBC categories, a statement issued by the CBI said. The scholarship scam started in 2012-13, when the scholarships for Schedule Caste (SC), Schedule Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC) students of the state for pre-matric and post-matric students under 36 schemes were not paid to the eligible students. Eighty per cent of the scholarship money was paid to the private institutions. The scam was unearthed following reports that the students of the government schools in the tribal Spiti valley in Himachal's Lahaul and Spiti district had not been paid a



scholarship for the past five years. A case was registered by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in the year 2019 on the request of the Himachal Pradesh government against the private educational institutions in Himachal for fake and fraudulent claims of scholarships of about Rs 181 crore during the year 2013 to 2017. Searches were earlier conducted at about 30 places on the premises of some people which led to the recovery of incriminating documents. Subsequently, 19 accused, including the chairman, vice chairman, directors and employees of the educational institutes; bank officials and officials of the education department were arrested. The scholarships of about 32,000 students were not credited in their accounts and 80 per cent of the scholarship money was paid to private institutions. Twenty two educational institutions were on the CBI

radar in the scholarship scam for not only committing irregularities but also for allegedly asking the students to pay money for the release of scholarship. The investigations had revealed that fake letterheads were used by several educational institutions to show false affiliation in order to mislead the education department which failed to ensure physical verification of the infrastructure and the strength of students. The other discrepancies included non-submission of Aadhaar numbers of the students by the institutions, using same Aadhaar accounts to withdraw the scholarships of multiple students who did not exist and opening of fake accounts in three nationalised banks. The then superintendent grade-II in the higher education department, Arvind Rajta, who was dealing with disbursement of scholarships, had given over Rs 28 crore of scholarship money to nine fake institutions in which his wife had 33 per cent stakes.



INDIA parties stage protest in Mumbai, call Kejriwal arrest illegal

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Opposition INDIA bloc parties staged a protest in Mumbai on Friday against the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in an excise policy-linked money laundering case and called the ED action “illegal” and “unjustified”. Demonstrators held a ‘satyagraha’ (a form of non-violent resistance) at south Mumbai's Azad Maidan and called for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s resounding defeat in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. The anti-BJP grouping consisting of more than two dozen parties reiterated commitment to their united struggle against the Modi government's “tyranny”. Political workers cutting across party lines braved scorching heat to register their protest against Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate last week. The Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is a constituent of INDIA, which was formed last year to take on the BJP and the Lok Sabha polls. In attendance at the protest site were Varsha Gaiikwad, Mumbai Congress president, Bhaji Jagtap Congress MLC, Preeti Sharma-Menon, AAP

Mumbai chief, Rakheeh Jadhav, Mumbai head of NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar), Vidya Chavan of NCP(SP), Shailendra Kamble of CPI-M, Samya Korde of Peasants and Workers Party of India and a few other leaders of INDIA. Sharma-Menon said previous arrest of former Delhi ministers and AAP politicians Manish Sisodia and Satyendar Jain has disrupted the work they were doing in education and healthcare fields, respectively. “It is not Manish Sisodia who is in jail, it is education (portfolio held by him as deputy CM) in India that is in jail. It is not Satyendar Jain who is in jail, it is healthcare that is in jail. And it is not Arvind Kejriwal who is in jail, it is India's hope that has been imprisoned,” she maintained. The AAP leader asserted Kejriwal's arrest has galvanized the masses. “This is not about Arvind Kejriwal or the Aam Aadmi Party, it is the people of India versus Narendra Modi. Kejriwal's arrest has galvanized the Indian masses, INDIA parties will unitedly defeat the BJP and end Modi's tyrannical rule. We will save our country, we will save our Constitution, we will prevail,” said Sharma-Menon.

Mizoram CEO holds meeting to devise strategy to ensure high voter turnout

PTI ■ AIZAWL

Mizoram Chief Electoral Officer Madhup Vyas has held a meeting with poll officials to discuss strategy to ensure high voter turnout in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in the state, an official statement said. The CEO expressed his concern over “lower voter turnout in Lok Sabha polls as compared to state assembly elections” in the past, it said. Mizoram registered one of the highest voter turnouts in India in the assembly polls, held in November last year, while the polling percentage in the last Lok Sabha elections in 2019 was “even lower than the national average of 67 per cent”, the statement said. The state recorded a 63.13 per

cent voter turnout in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, which was much lower than the over 80 per cent turnout registered in the state assembly elections last year. Elections to the lone Lok Sabha seat in Mizoram, which is reserved for Scheduled Tribe, will be held on April 19. Various issues related to voter education were discussed during Thursday's meeting, the statement said. It stressed on the need to focus on youth participation, especially first-time voters, and to undertake awareness campaigns at the micro-level. The departments of school, higher and technical education, sports and youth services will be roped in for the task, it added.

ENPO sticks to decision not to take part in LS poll process

PTI ■ KOHIMA

The ENPO has stuck to its decision not to take part in the ensuing Lok Sabha elections until its demand for a separate state carved out of Nagaland is fulfilled by the Centre, its leaders said on Friday. The Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation (ENPO) held a closed-door meeting with 20 MLAs of the region and the lone Rajya Sabha member of Nagaland, who also hails from there, at Tuensang on Thursday. “We have decided to stand firm to abstain from the ensuing Lok Sabha elections and also not to allow any campaign within our jurisdiction till the demand for Frontier Nagaland Territory is fulfilled by the Centre,” ENPO



vice president W Bendang Chang told PTI over the phone. Eastern Nagaland Legislators Union (ENLU) official C L John confirmed that all the 20 legislators of the area and the Rajya Sabha MP attended Thursday's meeting that continued till 7 pm. “During the meeting, we appealed to the ENPO and tribal bodies to revoke their decision but it did not

materialise. They concluded that the final decision would be taken only after consultation with people,” John told PTI. Asked if the ENLU had received any assurance on the demand for Frontier Nagaland Territory from the Centre during their recent visit to Delhi, he said there was “no assurance” but “we have asked the state government to submit its view”.

John said ENLU will meet with Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio on the matter at the earliest. ENPO president R Taspikiu Sangtam said the “public emergency”, which was declared on March 5, would continue and the decision on the next course of action to press their demand would be taken after consultation with the public. During the “public emergency”, the ENPO, the apex body of seven Naga tribes of the region, and its frontal organisations have not been allowing any political campaign. The ENPO has been demanding a separate state since 2010, claiming that the six districts in the eastern part of Nagaland have been neglected in all aspects for years.

No threat to religious minorities in country under Modi Government: Muraleedharan

PTI ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

In the wake of criticism from the Latin Catholic Archdiocese about lack of proper government intervention in violence against Christians in the country, Union Minister V Muraleedharan said here on Friday that religious minorities were not facing any threat in the country. Minister of State for External Affairs Muraleedharan, who is also the BJP-led NDA candidate from Attingal Lok Sabha constituency, said he has interacted a lot with senior priests of the church and has never got the feeling that they were concerned the Christian community was not safe in the country. The violence against Christians in the country, especially in Manipur, is being used by the Congress and the Left, during the LS poll campaign, to target the BJP which is striving to woo the Christian community in the southern state to end their electoral drought in Kerala.



The BJP leader also claimed that even senior priests have said incidents of violence were not a religious issue, but a racial one. He was responding to queries from reporters at the BJP office here where it

was announced that he would be filing his nomination on Saturday. It was also announced that the deposit amount of Rs 25,000, to be submitted along with the nomination, was being given by students who were rescued from Ukraine after the war with Russia broke out there. After the announcement, reporters pointed out that Latin Catholic metropolitan Archbishop Thomas J Netto in the morning said Christians in various parts of the country, especially in Manipur and north India, were being subjected to “cruelty and violence by dark forces” and alleged there was no effective intervention against it by government authorities. Muraleedharan said he cannot respond to it without hearing what the Archbishop said in its entirety. “However, under the Narendra Modi government, religious minorities in India are not facing any threats. That is the reality,” he contended.



Mizoram observes Good Friday with religious fervour

PTI ■ AIZAWL

Good Friday was observed with religious fervour to mark and commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Good Friday observance began on Thursday evening with different local churches holding special services and administering holy communion (sacrament) to adhere to the commandment of Jesus, who instructed his disciples to do it just a night before his crucifixion. Holy Communion or Lord's Supper symbolises the blood and flesh of Jesus Christ, which he sacrificed for humans. It signifies the New Covenant, with Jesus Christ being the sacrificial lamb for humanity. On Friday, all local churches of different Christian denominations, including Presbyterian and Baptist churches, held special church services and delivered sermons related to the crucifixion of Christ. Most local churches organised

congregational singing or services, locally known as “Zaikhawm or Lengkhawm”, to observe the day. Zaikhawm is an integral part of the important days like Christmas, Good Friday and Easter Sunday for the Christian Mizos. Respective Roman Catholic churches also organised mass and took out Good Friday processions in the streets, singing hymns and preaching the gospel about the sacrifice made by Jesus so that humans are redeemed from their sins and have eternal lives. All government offices, educational institutions, commercial banks and private institutions were closed on Friday as the government declared a public holiday to mark the day. Streets in Aizawl were deserted looks, with only a few vehicles plying on the roads. Good Friday observance will be followed by the Easter Sunday celebrations on March 31 to commemorate the resurrection of Christ.

Kangana launches campaign with roadshow in Mandi

PTI ■ SHIMLA

Actor Kangana Ranaut began her Lok Sabha election campaign in Mandi constituency on Friday with a roadshow, hailing Prime Minister Narendra Modi with “Jai Shri Ram” and asserting that the BJP's main agenda is development. A large number of people turned up to see the Bollywood actor, a four-time National Award winner who was born in Mandi's Bhambala town. Amidst the chants of “Jai Shri Ram”, the BJP workers welcomed Ranaut by showering flowers on her and dancing to the beat of drums. Ranaut started the roadshow in her home town with “Modi Ji ko Jai Shri Ram”. She hailed other BJP leaders with similar slogans.

“Development is BJP's main agenda and we will spare no effort to win the elections under the guidance of Prime Minister Modi,” she said, adding that the “people of Mandi will tell what is in their hearts”. This was Ranaut's first public appearance in her constituency after getting the BJP ticket on March 24. In October 2022, Ranaut had said she was open to contesting from Mandi if the BJP offered her a ticket. Crediting PM Modi with a “change in the country” since 2014, Ranaut had said a feeling of pride and nationalism prevails among every Indian. At present, the Mandi Lok Sabha seat is being represented by Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee president Pratibha Singh, wife of former chief



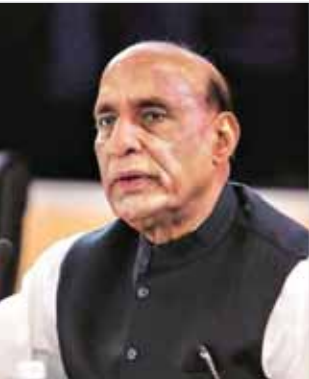
BJP candidate actor Kangana Ranaut during a roadshow ahead of Lok Sabha elections, in Mandi PTI

minister Virbhadra Singh and mother of Public Works Minister Vikramaditya Singh. She won the 2021 Lok Sabha bypolls. Earlier on Wednesday, Singh had announced that she would not contest the Lok Sabha elections as the situation was “not favourable” and that workers were disheartened. But after the announcement of Ranaut's name, she has left the decision to contest on the Congress High Command. The election to four Lok Sabha seats of Shimla, Mandi, Hamirpur and Kangra would be held along with by-elections in six assembly seats in the last phase on June 1. While the BJP has announced its candidates for the four Lok Sabha and six assembly seats, the Congress has not announced its candidates so far.

Responsive Govt

Rajnath defends Agnipath scheme but, ahead of polls, says it is not carved in stone

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, while defending the Agnipath scheme for recruitment of young defence personnel, has also expressed the Government's openness to alterations "if deemed necessary". The implications of the scheme stretch beyond national security, particularly concerning India's relations with its neighbour, Nepal. In June 2022, the Centre rolled out the Agnipath scheme for short-term induction of personnel into the armed forces to bring down the age profile of the three services. Under this scheme, all military recruitment transitions to an 'All India All Class' basis, where, in the selected youth, termed Agniveers, commit to four years of service, including a six-month training period. Following this tenure, 25 per cent of Agniveers transition to permanent service, while the remainder pursues alternative employment opportunities outside of the armed forces. Agniveers receive a starting monthly salary of Rs 30,000, escalating to Rs 40,000 in the fourth year, with a portion allocated to the Agniveer Corpus



Fund, matched by Government contributions, resulting in a substantial payout of Rs 11.71 lakh at the end of four years. Additionally, each Agniveer receives non-contributory life insurance cover of Rs 48 lakh for the duration of the engagement. However, there are no gratuity or pension benefits for Agniveers, with those opting for permanent service committed to a minimum additional 15-year tenure. The scheme aims to address military restructuring and modernisation needs while infusing technology-savvy youth into the armed forces. By selecting only 25 per cent of Agniveers for permanent service, the military seeks to ensure a high-quality pool for Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) while

curbing rising pay and pension expenses. Despite the offered benefits, concerns have arisen regarding its potential impact on military ethos, professionalism and operational efficiency. Questions linger regarding the maintenance of unit cohesion, the readiness of inexperienced Agniveers for live operational scenarios and the long-term attractiveness of military service. Critics question the scheme's impact on the regimental system of the Indian Infantry and advocate for rigorous testing before full implementation. While some argue for gradual induction to mitigate adverse effects, others emphasise the need for empirical evaluation to safeguard military standards. Broadly speaking, the scheme has not gone down well with the aspiring youth. They feel that most of them would be left without a job in their prime. Moreover, the Gurkhas of Nepal have summarily rejected this scheme and are now looking for options in other countries. This seriously jeopardises India's defence muscle. It has been almost four years since the scheme was launched, and it is the first time the Government has shown its openness to make amendments. The Congress has already termed it an election gimmick. Whatever the reasons, it would be good if the Govt returns to the drawing board and reconsiders the various issues in national interest.

PICTALK



Christian devotees during a play on crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the occasion of Good Friday, in Hyderabad

PTI

India's green energy comes of age

India emerges as a frontrunner in the global shift towards green energy, with solar power leading the charge

Steadfast in its pursuit of becoming a \$5 trillion economy by 2024-25, India continues to ascend to the position of a frontrunner in the global shift towards green energy. Solar power spearheads this transformative journey having contributed 53.2 per cent of the overall capacity addition to India's cumulative power generation capacity, which soared to 428.3 GW by the close of December 2023. The solar industry statistics above do not just paint a bright picture; they aren't just a testament to its environmental stewardship, but rather one to its self-sufficiency and its contribution to the transformation of the global energy environment. What a remarkable journey this continues to be! Of all RE sources, the versatility of solar energy renders it scalable and inclusive as a solution for implementing the green agenda. A plethora of other factors have, however, significantly contributed to charting India's path towards a shining energy-efficient future. The green pivot against the larger climate change battle and more par-



ticularly directed at plateauing power sector emissions has been driven by the synergy between Government initiatives, technological advancements, and increasing awareness of the benefits that accrue from RE, more particularly from the solar energy potential that India holds. When the goals were surpassed (the National Solar Mission that targeted 100 GW of solar power capacity by 2022), more ambitious targets (achieving 280 GW of solar capacity by 2030) were set. The goals were not just spelled out, but guided through a clear roadmap for RE integration vide the declaration of trajectory for Renewable Purchase Obligation (RPO) until 2029-30. On one hand, utility projects were prioritised through

increased tendering and the implementation of the "Development of Solar Parks and Ultra Mega Solar Power Projects Scheme" which accorded approval to 50 solar parks across 12 states. On the other hand, decentralised generation was not left behind- the Rooftop Solar Programme launched in 2014 that aimed to install 40 GW by 2022 was extended to 2026 and has now been complemented by The Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana. To democratise solar energy access, such decentralised sustainable energy solutions are being actively recognised as complementary means to achieving India's green energy goals. From one of the largest importers to now one of those witnessing the highest dip in solar-related imports from China, India is well on its trajectory of breaking this manufacturing monopoly, expecting ~40GWp of PV manufacturing facilities to be set up by 2025. The approach towards propelling the nation's solar implementation agenda has been rather comprehensive and market-driven. Multiple factors seem to have been

converging in the market including the emergence of credit-worthy commercial and industrial customers as demand drivers for RE, enhanced financial incentives, tax benefits and subsidies. Standards have been established for the manufacturing of solar PV systems and inputs, India is strategically aligning itself with global efforts to attain the SDGs, and very deftly so by nudging investments to their right use and their right IRRs. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of up to 100 per cent has been allowed through the automatic route, encouraging international investment. The solar sector remains at the forefront given India's compelling solar potential and the aforementioned factors. However, tackling challenges that crop up in its energy goals' implementation shall be rendered easy with the adoption of a holistic approach involving collaboration across diverse stakeholders, objectives, policies, and solutions. (The author is an investment professional and specialises in green financing; views are personal)



HIMANI SABHARWAL

India's inflation story through time

From the humble beginnings of the *pai* to the modern era of the rupee, the narrative of inflation paints a vivid picture of economic transformation

One way of knowing about inflation in India is to place a series of old coins on a table, and compare those coins with today's currency. Today, few would believe that well into the twentieth century, there was a *pai* which was 1/92nd of a rupee. 16 annas made a rupee; one anna was divided into four *pice*; one *pice* comprised three *pais*. One could, for example, buy puffed rice, gram or chana or peanuts for one *pice*. When that became impossible, the Government stopped minting the coin. The *pice* or three *pais* together continued to be minted until well after World War II. Today, a rupee is about the least required to buy anything; effectively ten rupees are required to acquire anything worthwhile, no matter how poor the buyer is. As a child of ten years, I ate my first chocobar made by a British company called Magnolias, delivered at one's doorstep by a dry ice-filled cart at 25 *paise*. Today, its minimum price is Rs.10, which makes inflation look benign, 40 times between say and 2024, i.e., 77 years. The price of the cheapest variety of rice against a Government-issued ration card in 1945 was three *anas* per *seer* or say nineteen *paise* per 800 grams. Today in 2024, similar rice would cost say forty rupees per kilogramme, or 1,000 grammes, say twenty-five rupees per *seer* or 132 times. Food grains have become much more expensive than ice-cream! Tea, which was at the first point of wholesale, was two rupees for the equivalent of one kilogramme, which is Rs. 150 today or 75 times higher. Commenting on inflation, a small shopkeeper or a hawker, would say no matter the inflation, we people are much better off than our parents and grandparents. Inflation in the Western as well as other centuries is actually much higher than in India. This phenomenon does not show up because the exchange rates are adverse to the Indian rupee. The British pound is about Rs. 100 when exchanged, but its purchasing power in Britain is not



much better than Rs. 10. This is primarily because India imports more than exports. The message is eloquent; must times our economy to be able to export more even if the payment is in rupees as well as in the importers currency which is viable. There seems to be a systematic policy by Government to meet its purpose of meeting the economy's money supply needs. Some more money has been provided for moderate growth so the path of prosperity and growth is steady. This is like a corporate house increasing its profit every year and an unemployed welcoming an increment annually. To put it another way, the money or currency supply is increased moderately every year to enable the economy to grow and not shrink. The national or central bank of every country should manage its money. Another way of looking of inflation is creating money in advance of production is order to expand the economy. It is like a loan without having to pay interest by the country's economy. But with it, the duty of the central bank to watch the production of

“THE PRINTING MONEY IS JUSTIFIED, BUT IF THERE ARE DELAYS IN EXPANDING THE FACILITIES FOR THE PRODUCTION OF GOODS AND SERVICES, INFLATION WOULD TAKE PLACE. THIS MEANS THAT PRICES WOULD GROW AND PEOPLE WOULD BEGIN TO DEMAND AN INCREASE IN THEIR INCOME

goods and service is increased commensurately, with the extra money printed every year. It is like an interest-free loan strictly in order for the economy to be able to invest in the productivity of goods and services. This must be done efficiently, and in reasonable time. The printing money is justified, but if there are delays in expanding the facilities for production of goods and services, inflation would take place. This means that prices would grow and people would begin to demand increase in their income. Since increasing taxation would bring further hardship on people's pocket, the Government would have no alternative but to print more money in order to satisfy people's legitimate demands. This privilege of Governments of printing money at their discretion, is a luxury, but has cost quite a few countries, making them go virtually bankrupt. What else can one expect of an economy that is hit by inflation of say 80 per cent, year after year? Zimbabwe eventually grew tired of printing money, after doing it wantonly for a long time. It gave up the chase and declared the US

dollar to be the only legal tender in the country. Pakistan at present is in the grip of an inflationary spiral. Even a much better organised country like Sri Lanka nearly went to the brink of being trapped in this spiral. Many others haven't fared any better; a large country like Turkey is in the grip of such a spiral. Not many years ago, Brazil found itself in a situation of having to reduce the value of its currency almost every morning. Hotels in Rio de Janeiro would quote their room rents in US dollars for the day, pasting the same on the room doors. Contrast this financial jugglery with what William Pitt the Younger, who was Prime Minister of Britain at the turn of the 18th into the 19th century, did. He intended to make his tax collection exceed the national expenditure year after year, for a long enough time, so that Britain could be governed without raising taxes and the nation could run solely on the interest generated on treasury surpluses over the years. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EMPOWERING THE ELECTORATE

Madam — Apropos news article "One vote can change country's fate: UP CM Adityanath," published on March 28, this is my response. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath emphasised the transformative power of a single vote during a conference organised by the BJP in Muzaffarnagar. Adityanath's remarks underscored the pivotal role citizens play in shaping the nation's destiny. He highlighted instances where one vote influenced the region's trajectory, emphasising the need for responsible voting to combat anarchy and safeguard faith. Furthermore, Adityanath juxtaposed the BJP's commitment to national welfare against the opposition's alleged focus on familial interests. He credited the BJP-led Government for achievements such as the construction of the Ram temple and the cessation of extortion, contrasting it with the previous administrations' failures. Adityanath's call to prioritise the nation's interests resonates in a political landscape often clouded by divisive agendas. His message reinforces the significance of informed and conscientious voting for a brighter collective future.

Sneha Gupta | Delhi

BREAKTHROUGH IN BLAST CASE

Madam — Apropos news article "NIA arrests key conspirator in Bengaluru's Rameshwaram Cafe blast case," published on March 28, this is my response. The arrest of Muzammil Shareef marks a significant stride in the investigation into the Rameshwaram Cafe blast case. The coordinated effort by the NIA across multiple states underscores the gravity of the situation. Shareef's alleged involvement in providing logistical support to the main accused sheds light on the intricate web of this nefarious plot. The blast's aftermath, causing injuries and property damage, underscores the threat posed by such incidents. The ongoing raids and seizures of dig-

Political fallout of Kejriwal's arrest



Apropos Editorial "Truth travels freely," published on March 29, this is my response. The arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) has not only stirred domestic uproar but has also garnered international attention. Kejriwal alleges political conspiracy behind his arrest, linking it to his anti-corruption stance and the ruling party's electoral bond donations. His wife's hint at crucial re-

lations adds intrigue to the unfolding drama. Amid accusations of being the mastermind of a multi-crore liquor scam, Kejriwal's arrest has ignited debates on political vendetta versus accountability. The international community's scrutiny, particularly the US State Department's remarks on India's internal affairs, underscores the global interest in this case. However, the essence of justice lies in due process. While authorities assert a strong case, the lack of transparency raises concerns. Hastily orchestrated actions risk backlash, especially with elections looming. This saga underscores the perpetual struggle for transparency and justice in governance. Regardless of political affiliations, the public demands accountability. As events unfold, the nation awaits the resolution of Kejriwal's legal battle, cognizant of its broader implications on democracy and governance.

Khirabdi | Noida

ital devices signify a comprehensive approach to unravelling the truth. However, the fact that key suspects remain at large indicates the challenges ahead. As a concerned citizen, one hopes for swift justice and a thorough uncovering of the broader conspiracy. Such incidents remind us of the constant vigilance required to safeguard our communities against extremist threats.

Lavanya Dubey | Jind

WOMEN BREAKING THE STEREOTYPE

Madam — Beauty should not have any bars of religion or orthodox mentality, today women are no longer subjects of particular control and limits. Saudi Arabia's made a breakthrough while announcing their first Miss Universe Pageant. So far, Saudi Arabia has been caught in a gender divide debate, as their women are not been granted liberty and equal status like what they mentioned. But now Ms Romy Alqahtani will become the representative face of mil-

lions of Saudi women who are not only equivalent and capable like their male counterparts but also among the best. Her representation had been a historic moment as she is the face whose front run was made possible with the struggle of the struggle of thousands such women. The era belongs to the women-led development and with Ms Romy Alqahtani's breakthrough from a society mostly targeted at the gender-divided country, hope that more such women representation like her will write new stories, and initiate more women's growth stories. Middle East in particular is facing a renaissance for women's participation and women's success, let's congratulate the women of the 21st century for breaking the stereotype and writing their success stories.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

HAPPINESS IS TO LIVE IN THE NOW



RAVI VALLURI

The kingdom of happiness is embedded in our thought processes, feelings and emotions

The country was Japan. It was the Meiji era. A professor was keen to learn the teachings of Zen philosophy. He approached an estimable master. The master offered him a cup of tea and poured it into a cup. The tea was filled up to the brim. However, the Zen master kept pouring in tea. Soon, the tea began overflowing. The professor requested the Zen Master not to pour any more tea into the cup. The friar replied that the professor would be able to learn the pristine tenets of Zen only if he cast away all the self-opinionated beliefs, thoughts and emotions like the overflowing cup of tea.

Past baggage and impressions need to be dissolved and a seeker needs to truly become hollow and empty to acquire knowledge, or else we remain shipwrecked our entire lives and stranded at a particular spot. If not, there is no progression in life.

To be genuinely happy and joyous, the human mind needs to live in the present and not oscillate between the past and the future. The past is full of regrets and unfulfilled desires and the future is gripped by anxieties and fears. True enlightenment is attained to remain only in the present moment. Happiness is a good habit. It increases our self-confidence and aura. William James, an American psychologist, once said, 'The greatest discovery was the power of the subconscious mind touched by faith.' Faith is the intellectual powerhouse that provides us with the supreme confidence to be in the present and become successful without being attached to the success.

'Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things', PHIL 4:8.



Continuously dwelling on fear, worry, anger, hate and failure, makes an individual depressed and unhappy. Life is the projection of our thoughts. We are essentially what we think and a manifestation of our thoughts. We miss precious moments of happiness by harbouring antipathetic and demonic thoughts in our minds.

We are subsumed by negative emotions and thought processes. Febrile thoughts such as 'the world has conspired against me', 'I do not get the right breaks', 'I do not succeed', and 'everything goes wrong in my life' normally cannonade our minds. Such negativity drains us both physically and emotionally. Negativity, as a result, begets negativity. The human mind also has an errant habit of postponing happiness. Often, we hear statements like - 'If I was made head of the organisation', 'if I featured on page 3 of the magazine', 'if I was married to a beautiful princess, then I would live like a king'. We end up daydreaming and living in an illusory world. Humans just need to live in the now. We all have clearly forgotten the power of NOW.

Apart from living in the Present Moment, humans need to make positive affirmations - 'I choose happiness today, I choose love today, I choose right action today and this can be done only now'. By being regretful, we do not count our blessings. We need to handle it with skill and dexterity and not be judgmental. The universe resonates with the positive vibrations in our minds.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Bridging the skill gap in labour-intensive industries



DINESH SOOD

As the spectre of automation looms large, proactive measures are imperative to equip the workforce with the requisite expertise



Amidst rapidly evolving technologies to stay globally competitive, the labour-intensive manufacturing sector has a significant opportunity to address the complex issue of unemployment in the country. The manufacturing sector has the potential to accommodate seven to eight million youths entering the labour force annually, as per the 'India Employment Report 2024', recently released by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Institute for Human Development (IHD). The report reveals that India's youth account for almost 83 per cent of the unemployed workforce and the share of youngsters with secondary or higher education in the total unemployed youth has almost doubled from 35.2 per cent in 2000 to 65.7 per cent in 2022. The unemployment rate among youths was six times higher for those with secondary or higher education (18.4 per cent) and nine times higher for graduates (29.1 per cent) compared to those who cannot read and write (3.4 per cent). The brimming challenge of unemployment is majorly due to the skill gap towards the adoption of evolving technologies. The ILO and IHD report warned of the growing uncertainties in the labour market due to rapidly changing technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), which will significantly impact the labour market.

AI presents a significant opportunity to enhance labour productivity and increase the incomes of workers. However, it also cautioned that disadvantaged states are less prepared for this, and active policies and programmes need to be formulated and implemented to skill youths.

A report by Nasscom-Zinnov says that India will face a shortage of 14-19 lakh tech professionals by 2026. As compared to the current tech workforce in the country, India needs 52 lakh tech professionals. By 2026, India is estimated to have 75-78 lakh tech professionals. However, the requirement is being

ENCOURAGING COLLABORATIONS AMONG GOVERNMENTS, EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND INDUSTRIES IS CRUCIAL FOR DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING TARGETED TRAINING PROGRAMMES THAT DIRECTLY ADDRESS SKILL GAPS IN SPECIFIC SECTORS

pegged at 93-96 lakh techies, reflecting a gap of 14-19 lakh tech workforce. The skills gap is not solely due to the digital transformation of the industry; it is creating more job opportunities in operations. To bridge this gap, companies must diversify and expand their workforce to include workers with expertise in robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT), AI and analytics. Job openings for roles such as Robot Teaming Coordinators, Smart Factory Managers, Digital Twin Engineers, and Smart Quality Assurance (SQA) Managers are increasingly common.

Companies must embrace these changes and take proactive measures to address the skills gap to stay competitive in the market. Out of the 468 million people in the workforce, 92 per cent are in the informal sector. Shockingly, only 31 per cent are literate, with 13 per cent having only primary education and 6 per cent being college graduates. Moreover, only about 2 per cent of the workforce has formal vocational training, and just 9 per cent have non-formal vocational training. There is a need to increase the proportion of formally skilled labour from 5.4 per cent to at least 15 per cent of India's workforce by 2022-23. However, this goal has not yet been achieved, and it is crucial to re-evaluate our strategies to address this gap.

Given these discouraging realities addressing the challenges requires collaboration among stakeholders, including Governments, educational institutions, industries, and individuals to create a skilled and efficient workforce ecosystem. It is not enough to simply have degrees; we must prioritise inclusivity and eliminate divisions based on gender, location, and organised or unorganised work.

This requires a comprehensive approach. We must bring our skill development infrastructure up to global standards by creating National Occupation Standards (NOS) and Qualification Packs (QP) that meet international requirements for various job roles. It is imperative to act with urgency and determination to achieve these goals for globally competitive smart manufacturing.

Revisit the skill gap: The labour force from agriculture predominantly shifted to the construction and services sectors, highlighting a clear mismatch between job creation and the skill sets of the workforce. The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) should collaborate with industries to identify skill gaps. Establishing a District-level Skill Development Plan (DSDP) to create a state-level Skill Development Plan (SSDP) is crucial. The central and state Governments must share the financial burden of unskilled workers with employers for the first six months. Addressing the gap between the demand and supply of skilled workers through on-the-job training (OJT) is essential.

Fostering a culture of continuous learning and upskilling within workforces is essential for maintaining competitiveness. Employers should provide access to training programmes and resources to enhance individual skill sets and foster adaptability and innovation within the organisation.

Public-private partnerships: Encouraging collaborations among Governments, educational institutions and industries is crucial for designing and implementing targeted training programmes that directly address

skill gaps in specific sectors. This collaborative approach ensures alignment between educational curricula and industry needs, promoting effective skill development and enhancing workforce readiness for the evolving demands of various sectors.

Creating apprenticeship and mentorship programmes is integral, enabling experienced professionals to transfer their invaluable knowledge and skills to the next generation. These initiatives not only bridge the skills gap but also foster a culture of experiential learning and continuous improvement within the workforce.

Supportive Government policies that offer tax incentives to companies investing in employee training play a core role in progressive workforce development. These mechanisms encourage the private sector to prioritise continuous skill building, creating a resilient and adaptable workforce.

In conclusion, it is crucial to have proactive collaboration among stakeholders, make strategic investments in education and training, foster a culture of continuous learning, and promote diversity and inclusion. These factors are all essential in addressing the evolving challenges of the labour-intensive manufacturing sector. Ignoring any of these aspects would hinder our ability to build a strong and sustainable workforce for the future.

-The writer is a Co-Founder and MD, of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), Network Member, of India International Skill Centres, an initiative of GoI. Views expressed are personal.

India's Green Energy Revolution takes a leap forward

The launch of Open Access Rules 2022 heralds a significant turning point for India's renewable energy sector

The launch of the Electricity (Promoting Renewable Energy Through Green Energy Open Access) Rules, 2022, widely known as the Green Energy Open Access Rules (GOAR) 2022, marks a pivotal moment for the renewable energy sector in India. These regulations, designed to boost the generation, purchase, and consumption of green energy, are a cornerstone in the advancement of India's ambitious Renewable Energy programmes.

Exploring the Key Features of the Green Energy Open Access Rules 2022

Central to GOAR 2022 is the establishment of a uniform Renewable Purchase Obligation (RPO) across all entities within a distribution



KAVIRAJ SINGH

licensee's area. This requirement aims to ensure a collective push towards renewable energy procurement, thus forwarding India's green energy targets. Importantly, GOAR 2022 expands the scope of RPO to include Green Hydrogen and Green Ammonia, highlighting the Government's dedication to enhancing the renewable energy mix.

One of the rule's primary ini-

tiatives is granting Green Open Access to all consumers, thereby facilitating unbiased access to electrical transmission and distribution systems for consumers, generators, and state distribution companies (DISCOMs). This initiative is instrumental in promoting the adoption of green energy across diverse sectors.

Another remarkable feature of GOAR 2022 is the reduction of the Open Access transaction threshold from 1 MW to 100 kW for green energy consumers, making renewable power more accessible to a broader audience.

Furthermore, under GOAR 2022, consumers have the right to request Green Power from their DISCOMs, which are then required to procure and supply such green energy,

ensuring the availability of affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy. The process for obtaining Green Open Access has been simplified, with a stipulated approval timeline of 15 days, thereby minimizing bureaucratic delays and fostering easier access to renewable energy.

The rules also encourage Commercial and Industrial consumers to voluntarily purchase green power, supporting businesses in achieving their sustainability goals while potentially benefiting from cost reductions associated with renewable energy consumption.

The Significance of Green Energy Open Access Rules 2022

The enactment of GOAR 2022 is a crucial step towards India's

transition to renewable energy and its broader climate change mitigation efforts. It encourages a shift among smaller industries, commercial consumers, and large households towards green energy, promoting the diversification of India's energy portfolio away from fossil fuels.

Aligning with India's renewable energy targets, GOAR 2022 significantly contributes to the national goal of installing 250 GW of renewable capacity by March 2028 and 500 GW by 2030. These rules underline India's commitment to its renewable energy ambitions and climate objectives.

Moreover, GOAR 2022's promotion of green energy is in harmony with India's commitment to reducing emissions by

45 per cent by 2030 and achieving net-zero emissions by 2070. This initiative is vital for mitigating climate change impacts and reducing carbon emissions.

The renewable energy sector stands to gain from economic growth, job creation, and investment opportunities stimulated by the implementation of GOAR 2022. This progress is anticipated to drive innovation, technology development, and infrastructure investment within the sector.

Lastly, diversifying the energy mix through the promotion of renewable sources under GOAR 2022 enhances India's energy security by reducing its dependence on imported fossil fuels.

This strategic move strengthens India's energy indepen-

dence and shields it from global energy market fluctuations. Potential Advantages of Implementing Green Energy Open Access

The introduction of the Green Energy Open Access Rules 2022 offers numerous benefits, supporting India's climate commitments and facilitating a transition towards sustainable energy sources. By promoting the adoption of renewable energy, these rules contribute to reducing dependence on fossil fuels and lowering carbon emissions.

Access to competitive green power pricing under GOAR 2022 could lead to cost savings for consumers over time, making renewable energy an economically attractive option. Moreover, by expanding access to clean energy, espe-

cially in regions with limited grid connectivity, these rules promote energy equity and inclusivity, improving energy access for remote and underserved communities.

Furthermore, the shift towards renewable energy adoption encouraged by GOAR 2022 helps mitigate environmental impacts, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and reliance on non-renewable resources.

By fostering the generation, purchase, and consumption of green energy, Open Access Rules play a crucial role in achieving India's renewable energy targets, climate goals, and sustainable development objectives.

(The writer is founder of Earthood; views are personal)

Obama, Clinton help Biden raise record \$26 mn for his re-election

AP ■ NEW YORK

Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and some big names from the entertainment world teamed up Thursday night to deliver a rousing New York embrace of President Joe Biden that hauled in a record-setting USD 26 million-plus for his reelection campaign. The mood at Radio City Music Hall was electric as Obama praised Biden's willingness to look for common ground and said, "That's the kind of president I want." Clinton said simply of the choices facing voters in 2024: "Stay with what works." Biden himself went straight at Donald Trump, saying his expected GOP rival's ideas were "a little old and out of shape." Moderator Stephen Colbert, in an armchair conversation with the trio, called them "champion talkers" and joked that the three presidents had come to town "and not one of them is here to appear in court," a dig at Trump's many legal troubles. The eye-popping fundraising haul was a major show of Democratic support for Biden at a time of persistently low poll numbers. The president will test the power of his campaign cash as he faces off with Trump, who proved with his 2016 win over Democrat Hillary Clinton that he didn't need to raise the

most money to seize the presidency. During the nearly hourlong conversation, Obama and Clinton explained just how hard Biden's job is. They spoke of loneliness and frustration over policies that work but aren't immediately felt by the public. They gave an insider's view of the office as they sought to explain why Biden was best for the job. "It is a lonely seat," said Obama, who had hitched a ride to New York on Air Force One with Biden. The talk was by turns humorous and serious, ending with all three donning sunglasses in the mostly dark music hall, a nod to the trademark Ray-Ban sunglasses that Biden often wears. The sold-out Radio City Music Hall event was a gilded exclamation mark on a recent burst of campaign travel by Biden, who has visited several political battlegrounds in the three weeks since his State of the Union address served as a rallying cry for his reelection bid. Thursday's event also brought together more than three decades of Democratic leadership. The music hall's marquee advertised the big-dollar night as "An Evening with Joe Biden Barack Obama Bill Clinton." NYPD officers lined surrounding streets as part of a heavy security presence.



President Joe Biden, center, and former presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton participate in a fundraising event with Stephen Colbert at Radio City Music Hall, Thursday in New York.

AP/PTI

Protesters angry at Biden's handling of the war in Gaza and strong support of Israel briefly disrupted the show, drawing a pledge from Biden to keep working to stop civilian deaths, particularly of children. But he added, "Israel's existence is at stake." Hundreds more protested outside in the drizzling rain, many demanding a cease-fire

and waving Palestinian flags. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., was up first to warm up the crowd of about 5,000 supporters. Entertainers, too, lined up to make the case for Biden. Lizzo belted out her hit "About Damn Time" and emcee Mindy Kaling joked that it was nice to be in a room with "so many rich people," adding that

she loved that they were supporting a president who openly promises to "raise your taxes." Obama laid out the choice for the audience, saying that "at the end of the day, you do have to make a choice about who sees you and cares about you. I'm pretty confident the other guy doesn't." At one point, Colbert said he

suspected some Americans had forgotten some of the more concerning aspects of Trump's presidency, including January 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters violently stormed the US Capitol in a failed effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election results. Biden said concerns over the riot reverberated outside the US, with foreign leaders questioning the stability of the US democracy. That democracy is still fragile, he said. The fundraiser had different tiers of access depending on a donor's generosity. Other participating celebrities included Queen Latifah, Ben Platt, Cynthia Erivo and Lea Michele. Tickets sold for as low as USD 225. More money got donors more intimate time with the presidents. A photo with all three was USD 100,000. A donation of USD 250,000 earned donors access to one reception, and USD 500,000 got them into an even more exclusive gathering. First lady Jill Biden and DJ D-Nice hosted an afterparty at the music hall with 500 guests, the campaign said. Obama and Clinton were helping Biden expand his already significant cash advantage over Trump. Biden had USD 155 million in cash on hand through the end of February, compared with

USD 37 million for Trump and his Save America political action committee. The more than USD 26 million tally for the New York City event includes money from supporters who handed over cash in the weeks before the fundraiser for a chance to attend. It raised USD 6 million more than Trump raised during February. "This historic raise is a show of strong enthusiasm for President Biden and Vice President Harris and a testament to the unprecedented fundraising machine we've built," said campaign co-chair Jeffrey Katzenberg. "Unlike our opponent, every dollar we're raising is going to reach the voters who will decide this election — communicating the president's historic record, his vision for the future and laying plain the stakes of this election." Trump's campaign is expecting to bring in USD 33 million at a big fundraiser next week in Palm Beach, Florida, according to a person familiar with the details who spoke on condition of anonymity to confirm a number first reported by the Financial Times. Trump has kept a low profile in recent weeks, partially because of courtroom appearances for various legal cases, the bills for which he's paying with funds from donors. His next political rallies are scheduled for Tuesday

in Michigan and Wisconsin. Some Republican leaders have become concerned that his campaign doesn't have the infrastructure ready for a general election battle with Biden. Trump was in the New York area on Thursday, attending the Long Island wake of a New York City police officer who was shot and killed during a traffic stop in Queens. Republican Party Chairman Michael Whitley tried to framed the two candidates' whereabouts on Thursday as a demonstration of a "contrast in leadership." On the same day President Trump attended the wake of slain New York Police Department officer Jonathan Diller, Joe Biden wines and dines with celebrities at a fundraiser with Barack Obama and Bill Clinton," he said in a statement. The facts, said White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, show that violent crime rose during Trump's tenure while Biden's administration has "done the polar opposite, taking decisive action from the very beginning to fund the police and achieving a historic reduction in crime." The setting was an unusual opportunity for the two past presidents to talk frankly about how they did the job, helping explain Biden and his presidency.

Burned bodies of Easter pilgrims remain in crashed S African bus

AP ■ MMATLAKALA

Emergency workers in South Africa were searching Friday for the bodies of victims after a bus carrying pilgrims to an Easter gathering plunged off a bridge and caught fire. An 8-year-old child was the only survivor of the crash that killed at least 45.

Hours after the Thursday afternoon crash, smoke seeped from the mangled, burned wreck underneath the concrete bridge. Authorities said it appeared that the driver lost control and the bus ploughed into the barriers along the side of the bridge and then over the edge. The driver was among the dead. The crash happened in a mountainous region near the town of Mokopane, which is about 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of the South African capital, Pretoria. The Limpopo provincial government said the bus, which was carrying pilgrims from Botswana, veered off the Mmamatlakala bridge and



The wreckage of a bus lies in a ravine a day after it plunged off a bridge on the Mmamatlakala mountain pass between Mokopane and Marken, around 300km (190 miles) north of Johannesburg, South Africa on Friday.

AP/PTI

plunged 50 metres (164 feet) into a ravine. It said many bodies were burned beyond recognition and trapped inside the vehicle, while other victims had been thrown from the bus. "We were at the scene," said local

resident Simone Mayema, who said he was one of the first to arrive. "We tried to help (but) there was nothing we could do because there was flames." Forensic investigators worked through the wreckage early Friday, but while some

bodies had been recovered, others were believed to be still inside what was left of the bus, which was almost crushed flat.

There was no new information on the status of the child who somehow survived the horrific crash. Officials at the hospital where the child was taken declined to give an update.

Government officials were expected to hold a press conference later Friday. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said the victims appeared to be all from Botswana and had been on their way to the town of Moria in Limpopo for a popular Easter weekend pilgrimage that attracts hundreds of thousands of worshippers from South Africa and neighbouring countries who follow the Zion Christian Church.

Ramaphosa had phoned Botswana President Mokgweetsi Masisi to offer his condolences and said the South African government would do all it can to help, according to a statement from Ramaphosa's office.

UK's Labour Party uses Holi message to connect with Indian diaspora

PTI ■ LONDON

The UK's Opposition Labour Party used Holi to reach out to the Indian diaspora, with party leader Keir Starmer tapping into the spring festival's message of ushering in the new in an election year.

During an event organised by British-Indian think-tank 1928 Institute in London this week, Starmer was joined by London Mayor Sadiq Khan and members of his Shadow Cabinet to celebrate the festival of colours. Leader of the Opposition Starmer said the occasion offered the ideal opportunity for the party to highlight its message of "national renewal" as the country prepares for a general election, expected later this year.

"As we welcome the incoming spring, it's a time to celebrate new beginnings; to put the old to bed and welcome in the new. And, I have to say, in election year, that message has a real particular resonance with me," said Starmer, whose Labour

Party is leading in most pre-election opinion polls.

"It's a time for us to give thanks for the rich contribution of Hindus across this country, to the tapestry of our national life and recognise the strength of our shared values and our commitment to one another... the enduring themes of Holi of inclusiveness and hard work, of renewal, of reform, of celebration and compassion, are so important in a world where frankly there is such great uncertainty at the moment. It gives us not just joy together but hope for the future; hope that good prevails over evil, that light overcomes darkness," he said. Wes Streeting, Starmer's shadow secretary of state for health and social care, echoed the message of renewal as he reached out to the British-Indian diaspora electorate, highlighting the India-UK collaboration in the health sector. "I'm incredibly proud of the immense contribution that people of Indian heritage have

made to our National Health Service (NHS)," he said. "As we look to the future, just as we celebrate so much of its past, we know that the contribution of our British-Indian community will be vital in the future of the NHS," he said. The Holi celebration attracted diaspora representatives from diverse fields, including medicine, business and the arts. Dr Nikita Ved, co-chair of the 1928 Institute, said, "Our research shows that more than half of British-Indians face barriers in accessing physical health care, with 76 per cent facing barriers in accessing mental health care. Many people here are healthcare professionals, inspired by 'sewa' (service), and choose to work in underserved communities to help address these inequities, which is truly inspiring." She further said, "Whilst the journey hasn't always been easy, we are reminded of the legacy between the Indian community and our treasured healthcare system."

Cranes arrive to remove bridge wreckage

Baltimore (AP) The largest crane on the Eastern Seaboard was being transported to Baltimore so crews on Friday can begin removing the wreckage of a collapsed highway bridge that has halted a search for four workers still missing days after the disaster and blocked the city's vital port from operating. As the sun rose Friday, a crane could be seen at the site. Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said the large crane, which was to arrive by barge and can lift up to 1,000 tons, will be one of at least two used to clear the channel of the twisted metal and concrete remains of the Francis Scott Key Bridge, and the cargo ship that hit it this week. "The best minds in the world" are working on the plans for removal, Moore said. The US Army Corps of Engineers for the Baltimore District told the governor that it and the Navy were mobilizing major resources from around the country at record speed to clear the channel. "This is not just about Maryland," Moore said. "This is about the nation's economy. The port handles more cars and more farm equipment than any other port in America." He warned of a long road to recovery but said he was grateful to the Biden administration for approving \$60 million in immediate aid. President Joe Biden has said the federal government will pay the full cost of rebuilding the bridge. "This work is not going to take hours. This work is not going to take days. This work is not going to take weeks," Moore said. "We have a very long road ahead of us." Thirty-two members of the Army Corps of Engineers were surveying the scene of the collapse and 38 Navy contractors were working on the salvage operation, officials said Thursday.

Jacob Zuma barred from running in elections

Johannesburg (AP) Former South African President Jacob Zuma is not eligible to run in upcoming elections, the Independent Electoral Commission has ruled. The commission said at a media briefing on Thursday that it had upheld an objection against Zuma's candidacy in the May 29 elections. In July 2021, Zuma was sentenced to 15 months in prison for defying a court order to appear before a judicial commission that was investigating corruption allegations during his 2009-2018 presidency. He was granted medical parole after two months and allowed to serve the rest of the sentence under house arrest. South Africa's Constitution bars people convicted and sentenced to more than 12 months' imprisonment, without an option of a fine, from holding public office.

Zuma and his legal team stormed out of the judicial proceedings when he was asked about wide-ranging allegations of corruption during his rule, including the role of an Indian family, the Guptas, who allegedly had influence over his Cabinet appointments. Zuma, 81, has until April 2 to appeal the commission's ruling. He is now the face of a new political party, uMkhonto weSizwe Party, abbreviated as MK, that has emerged as a potentially significant player in South Africa's upcoming elections after he denounced the governing African National Congress, which he had previously led. The new party is named after the former military wing of the ANC which was disbanded at the end of white minority rule and racial segregation policies under the former apartheid regime.

Oscar winner Louis Gossett Jr, dies at 87

AP ■ LOS ANGELES

Louis Gossett Jr., the first Black man to win a supporting actor Oscar and an Emmy winner for his role in the seminal TV miniseries "Roots," has died. He was 87. Gossett's nephew told The Associated Press that the actor died Thursday night in Santa Monica, California. No cause of death was revealed. Gossett always thought of his early career as a reverse Cinderella story, with success finding him from an early age and propelling him forward, toward his Academy Award for "An Officer and a Gentleman." He earned his first acting credit in his Brooklyn high school's production of "You Can't Take It with You" while he was sidelined from the basketball team with an injury. "I was hooked — and so was my audience," he wrote in his



2010 memoir "An Actor and a Gentleman." His English teacher urged him to go into Manhattan to try out for "Take a Giant Step." He got the part and made his Broadway debut in 1953 at age 16. "I knew too

little to be nervous," Gossett wrote. "In retrospect, I should have been scared to death as I walked onto that stage, but I wasn't." Gossett attended New York University on a basketball and drama scholarship. He was soon acting and singing on TV shows hosted by David Susskind, Ed Sullivan, Red Buttons, Merv Griffin, Jack Paar and Steve Allen. Gossett became friendly with James Dean and studied acting with Marilyn Monroe, Martin Landau and Steve McQueen at an offshoot of the Actors Studio taught by Frank Silvera. In 1959, Gossett received critical acclaim for his role in the Broadway production of "A Raisin in the Sun" along with Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee and Diana Sands. He went on to become a star on Broadway, replacing Billy Daniels in "Golden Boy" with

Sammy Davis Jr. in 1964. Gossett went to Hollywood for the first time in 1961 to make the film version of "A Raisin in the Sun." He had bitter memories of that trip, staying in a cockroach-infested motel that was one of the few places to allow Black people. In 1968, he returned to Hollywood for a major role in "Companions in Nightmare," NBC's first made-for-TV movie that starred Melvyn Douglas, Anne Baxter and Patrick O'Neal. This time, Gossett was booked into the Beverly Hills Hotel and Universal Studios had rented him a convertible. Driving back to the hotel after picking up the car, he was stopped by a Los Angeles County sheriff's officer who ordered him to turn down the radio and put up the car's roof before letting him go. Within minutes, he was stopped by eight sheriff's offi-

cers, who had him lean against the car and made him open the trunk while they called the car rental agency before letting him go. "Though I understood that I had no choice but to put up with this abuse, it was a terrible way to be treated, a humiliating way to feel," Gossett wrote in his memoir. "I realized this was happening because I was Black and had been showing off with a fancy car — which, in their view, I had no right to be driving." After dinner at the hotel, he went for a walk and was stopped a block away by a police officer, who told him he broke a law prohibiting walking around residential Beverly Hills after 9 p.m. Two other officers arrived and Gossett said he was chained to a tree and handcuffed for three hours. He was eventually freed when the original police car returned.



Lava erupt near the town of Grindavik, Iceland on Thursday.

AP/PTI

Filipino villager will be nailed to cross for 35th time to pray for world peace

AP ■ MANILA

A Filipino villager plans to be nailed to a wooden cross for the 35th time to reenact Jesus Christ's suffering in a brutal Good Friday tradition he said he would devote to pray for peace in Ukraine, Gaza and the disputed South China Sea. Ruben Enaje, a 63-year-old carpenter and sign painter, said he and seven other villagers have registered for the real-life crucifixions, which have become an annual religious spectacle that draws hundreds of tourists in three rural communities in Pampanga province north of Manila. The gory ritual resumed last

year after a three-year pause due to the coronavirus pandemic. It has turned Enaje into a village celebrity for his role as the "Christ" in the Lenten reenactment of the Way of the Cross. Ahead of the crucifixions, Enaje told The Associated Press by telephone Thursday night that he has considered ending his annual religious penitence due to his age but said he could not turn down requests from villagers for him to pray for sick relatives and all other kinds of maladies. The need for prayers has also deepened in an alarming period of wars and conflicts worldwide, he said. "If these wars worsen and

spread, more people, especially the young and old, would be affected. These are innocent people who have totally nothing to do with these wars," Enaje said. Despite the distance, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have helped send the prices of oil, gas and food soaring elsewhere, including in the Philippines, making it harder for poor people to stretch their meagre income, he said. Closer to home, the escalating territorial dispute between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea has also sparked worries because it's obviously a lopsided conflict, Enaje said. "China has many big ships.

Can you imagine what they could do?" he asked. "This is why I always pray for peace in the world," he said and added he would also seek relief for people in southern Philippine provinces, which have been hit recently by flooding and earthquakes. In the 1980s, Enaje survived nearly unscathed when he accidentally fell from a three-story building, prompting him to undergo the crucifixion as thanksgiving for what he considered a miracle. He extended the ritual after loved ones recovered from serious illnesses, one after another, and he landed more carpentry and sign-painting job contracts.

Russia launches drones, missiles on Ukraine’s energy system

AP ■ KYIV

Moscow launched a large-scale attack on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure on Friday, with a mass barrage of 99 drones and missiles hitting regions across the country, Ukraine’s armed forces said. Air raid warnings rang out across the country, with 10 Ukrainian regions coming under fire, the country’s Interior Minister, Ihor Klymenko, said. Russia has escalated its attacks on Ukraine in recent days, launching several missile barages on the capital, Kyiv, and hitting energy infrastructure across the country in apparent retaliation for recent Ukrainian aerial attacks on the Russian border region of Belgorod. Such sporadic attacks, however, have been common throughout the war. Large-scale blackouts have already affected Ukraine’s eastern city of Kharkiv, where 700,000 people lost power after the city’s thermal power plant was hit in a drone and missile attack on March 22. In the winter of 2022-23, Russia targeted Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, causing frequent blackouts across the country.



Many in Ukraine and the West expected that Russia might repeat this strategy this winter, but Russia instead focused its strikes on Ukraine’s defence industries. Ukraine’s state-owned grid operator, Ukrenergo, said that Friday’s attack deliberately targeted thermal and hydroelectric power plants across central and western regions. DTEK, Ukraine’s largest private electricity operator, also said that three of its thermal power plants had been damaged in the attack. It announced emergency power shutdowns in the city of Odesa, leaving several

neighbourhoods without power. Five people, including a 5-year-old girl, were wounded during the attack in Ukraine’s Dnipropetrovsk region, said local governor Serhii Lysak. He later said that another man had been killed and one more injured in a separate drone attack on Friday. Elsewhere, Ukrainian police said that rescuers had recovered the body of a 66-year-old woman from a building in the Mykolaiv region that was hit by a Russian missile on Thursday night. The bombardment in the west

of Ukraine caused the Polish Armed Forces to scramble its own aircraft, the country’s operational command said on social media. Last week Warsaw demanded an explanation from Moscow, after one of its missiles strayed briefly into Polish airspace during a major missile attack on Ukraine, prompting the NATO member to activate F-16 fighter jets. Romania’s defence ministry also said on Friday that an investigation has been launched after fragments that appear to be from a drone were identified on its territory Thursday evening in an agricultural area of Braila county, close to the border with Ukraine. It did not provide additional details, although since the start of the full-scale invasion of neighbouring Ukraine, NATO member Romania has confirmed drone fragments on its territory on several occasions. Belgorod also came under fire on Friday, Russia’s Ministry of Defence wrote on social media. It said that it shot down 15 Ukrainian shells, with falling debris damaging a number of residential buildings. No casualties were reported.

Nine detained in Tajikistan in relation to Moscow attack

AP ■ MOSCOW

Nine people have been detained by Tajikistan’s state security service over suspected contact with the perpetrators of last week’s attack by gunmen on a suburban Moscow concert hall that killed 144 people, Russian state news agency RIA Novosti said Friday. “Nine residents of the Vakhdat district were detained for contact with the persons who committed the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall on March 22,” the agency reported, citing information from an unnamed source in Tajikistan’s special services, who said that Russian security forces were also involved in the operation to detain the suspects. Those detained are also suspected of having connections with the Islamic State group, according to RIA Novosti. Russia’s Investigative Committee said Thursday it had detained another suspect in relation to the raid on Crocus City Hall, on suspicion of being involved in financing the attack. It did not give further details of the suspect’s identity or alleged actions. Russian officials previously said that 11 suspects had been arrested, including four who allegedly carried out the attack. Those four, identified as Tajik nationals, appeared in a Moscow court on Sunday on terrorism charges and showed signs of severe beatings. One appeared to be barely conscious during the hearing. A faction of the Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the massacre. But Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have persistently claimed, without presenting evidence, that Ukraine and the West had a role in the attack. The Investigative Committee statement said it has “confirmed data that the perpetrators of the terrorist attack received significant amounts of money and cryptocurrency from Ukraine, which were used in preparing the crime.” Ukraine denies involvement and its officials claim that Moscow is pushing the allegation as a pretext to intensify its fighting in Ukraine.



Members of “Muy Antigua Hermandad del Señor de la Humildad y María Santísima de los Dolores” Catholic brotherhood walk during a Holy Week procession in the southern city of Alcalá la Real, Spain, on Thursday

AP/PTI

Chinese cos suspend work on many dams days after terror attack killed 5

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Two more Chinese companies have stopped work on hydropower projects three days after five Chinese nationals were killed in a suicide attack in Pakistan’s restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, according to a media report on Friday. The development comes a day after Power Construction Corporation of China (PCCC) suspended civil works at the Tarbela 5th Extension Hydropower Project in the Swabi district of KP province and laid off over 2,000 workers. The Chinese were working on the Dasu hydropower project, which is about 300 km to the north of Islamabad. The 4,320 MW project is being constructed by China Gezhouba with funding from the World

Bank. Tuesday’s attack was the second suicide attack on the personnel working on the China-backed hydropower project since 2021. After the Tarbela project, the Chinese companies have now suspended civil work at the Dasu and Diamer-Bhasha dams due to security concerns and about 1,000 Chinese engineers working on both the projects have stopped operations. The local staff for both the projects has been directed to stay home till further orders, The News International reported. An official working on the Dasu dam project confirmed that the Chinese company stopped work and local staff was asked to stay at home. The project employed around 741 Chinese and 6,000 locals. Similarly, General Manager of the 4,800 MW Diamer-Bhasha

Dam (DBD) Nazakat Hussain also confirmed that the Chinese company had stopped work and said around 500 Chinese nationals were engaged in DBD but the Frontier Works Organisation staff, of about 6,000 locals, continues to work. However, 250 Chinese engineers are still working on the Mohmand Dam in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the newspaper said quoting Asim Rauf, the general manager of the dam. “The Chinese have shown satisfaction over the security situation in the project area and they are working on the site,” he told The News International. Thousands of Chinese personnel are working in Pakistan on several projects under the aegis of the USD 60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Sri Lanka on high alert

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lanka was put on high alert on Friday and security beefed up in major cities across the country, with special surveillance around the Churches having Good Friday services, according to a senior police official. Police spokesman Nihal Thaldewa said that over that 6,000 police personnel, over 3,000 military soldiers and over 400 elite special task force members have been deployed across the country on the occasion of Good Friday. “We have identified 2,268 churches having Good Friday services to provide special security,” Thaldewa said. Police have also set up a special hotline to report any suspicious movements near the churches.

Muizzu alleges his predecessor operated on orders from ‘foreign ambassador’

Male (PTI): Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu has alleged that his predecessor, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, operated on orders from “a foreign ambassador.” Muizzu, however, neither named any country nor any diplomat. The president made the allegation when he was asked about criticism from the opposition regarding the recent procurement of military drones during an interview with the Public Service Media (PSM). The interview was aired on Thursday night local time. Ahead of the parliamentary elections, the main opposition, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), has scaled up the attacks on Muizzu on various

issues. Earlier in the month, it was announced that Maldives has, for the first time, acquired surveillance drones from Turkey for patrolling its vast exclusive economic zone and efforts have begun by the state to establish a drone base in Noonu atoll Maafaru to operate the military drones. Responding to the question about criticism about drones, President Muizzu noted that the main opposition MDP, when it held office from 2018-2023, also held a supermajority in the Parliament. “However, the party failed to protect Maldives’ independence, leaving it in the hands of a foreign country,” Muizzu was quoted as saying by Sun.mv, a

news portal. Muizzu further said that President Solih “had operated on orders from a foreign ambassador, which resulted in extensive damage,” according to the news portal. However, he did not specify which foreign country he was referring to, it said. “We had lost independence in all senses of the word, including economically. After having done all this, they would naturally not accept our efforts to remedy all this and put the country on a track that the Maldivian people want, towards a ‘Dhiveheenge Raajje,’” he said. Dhivehi Raajje in Dhivehi, the language of the people of Maldives, means ‘Kingdom of the Dhivehi people.’

Growing number of Americans end up in Russian jails; prospects for release unclear

AP ■ TALLINN

A journalist on a reporting trip in a Ural Mountains city. A corporate security executive traveling to Moscow for a wedding. A dual national returning to her hometown in Tatarstan to visit her family. All of them are U.S. citizens, and all are behind bars in Russia on charges of varying severity. Arrests of Americans in Russia have become increasingly common as relations between Moscow and Washington sink to Cold War lows. Washington accuses Moscow of targeting its citizens and using them as political bargaining chips, but Russian officials insist they all broke the law. Some have been exchanged for Russians held in the US, while for others, the prospects of being released in a swap are less clear. “It seems that since Moscow itself has cut off most of the communication channels and does not know how to restore

them properly without losing face, they are trying to use the hostages. ... At least that’s what it looks like,” said Boris Bondarev, a former Russian diplomat who quit after Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022.

WHO ARE AMERICANS IN CUSTODY?

Friday marks a year since the arrest of Evan Gershkovich, a 32-year-old reporter for The Wall Street Journal who is awaiting trial in Moscow’s notorious Lefortovo Prison on espionage charges. Gershkovich was detained while on a reporting trip to the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg and accused of spying for the U.S. Russian authorities haven’t revealed any details of the accusations or evidence to back up the charges, which he, his employer and the US government all deny. Another American accused of espionage is Paul Whelan, a corporate security executive

from Michigan. He was arrested in 2018 in Russia and sentenced to 16 years in prison two years later. Whelan, who said he traveled to Moscow to attend a friend’s wedding, has maintained his innocence and said the charges against him were fabricated.

The US government has declared both Gershkovich and Whelan to be wrongfully detained and has been advocating for their release. Others detained include Travis Leake, a musician who had been living in Russia for years and was arrested last year on drug-related charges; Marc Fogel, a teacher in Moscow, who was sentenced to 14 years in prison, also on drug charges; and dual nationals Alsu Kurmasheva and Ksenia Khavana. Kurmasheva, a Prague-based editor for the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Tatar-Bashkir service, was arrested October 2023 in her hometown of Kazan, where she traveled to

see her ailing elderly mother. She has faced multiple charges, including not self-reporting as a “foreign agent” and spreading false information about the army. Khavana, of Los Angeles, returned to Russia to visit family and was arrested on treason charges. According to Pervy Otdel, a rights group that specializes in treason cases, the charges against her stem from a \$51 donation to a U.S. charity that helps Ukraine.

A PATH TO FREEDOM VIA PRISONER SWAPS

The precise number of Americans jailed in Russia is unclear, but the cases of Gershkovich and Whelan have received the most attention. Gershkovich was designated as wrongfully detained by the State Department less than two weeks after his arrest, unusually fast action by the US government. The designation is applied to only a small subsection of Americans jailed by foreign countries.

Pak prez reconstitutes Council of Common Interests to tackle eco

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

President Asif Ali Zardari on Friday reconstituted the Council of Common Interests, a top constitutional body, with the foreign minister replacing the finance minister. According to an official notification, the Council of Common Interests (CCI) will be headed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif while chief ministers of all four provinces apart from Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, and States and Frontier Regions Minister Amir Muqam will be members of the Council. It is the first time that a foreign minister has become part of the CCI, replacing the finance minister who traditionally has been a key member due to involvement in financial matters. Sharif, after approving the reconstitution of the CCI, sent the recommendation to the president, who following the premier’s advice reconstituted the eight-member council

under Article 153 of the Constitution. The CCI is the largest decision-making forum in the country which decides all the matters, including the distribution of natural resources, upon which there is a disagreement between the Centre and provinces. The development comes as reportedly Dar, who had always been undisputed head of the finance ministry of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, was not given the portfolio and instead, a banker, Muhammad Aurangzeb, was tasked with the job of leading the economy of the cash-strapped country. According to sources, Dar was given the boot due to his lacklustre performance during the 16-month duration of the previous tenure of the PML-N. It is also said that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was uncomfortable with him. However, due to matrimonial links with the Sharif

family — Dar’s son is married to a daughter of Shehbaz’s elder brother and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif — he enjoys the blind confidence of the former three-time premier and wields enormous influence in the party. Though Dar has been adjusted and given the key ministry of foreign affairs, it is believed that he is trying to call the shots in the financial affairs and trying to take charge of some key bodies. Last week, the Prime Minister set up six cabinet committees, including on economic coordination, energy, Chinese investment projects, privatisation, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and disposal of legislative cases. The premier appointed Dar as head of the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation and appointed himself as head of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) even though all these influential bodies were traditionally headed by the finance minister.

Pak FM says meeting with IMF scheduled for April 14-15

Karachi (PTI): Pakistan’s Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb on Friday said the government will hold a meeting with the IMF on April 14 and 15 in Washington to discuss the features of the new bailout programme which the cash-strapped country is seeking, according to a media report. The minister for finance and revenue in the Shehbaz Sharif government, while addressing journalists during his visit to the Pakistan Stock Exchange here, reiterated that the government plans to enter a major programme with the International Monetary Fund which will ensure microeconomic stability, Geo News reported. Aurangzeb said the features of the new programme would be discussed during the meeting, while detailed talks would be held in Pakistan, the report said. Prime Minister Shehbaz on March 21 signalled that the new IMF programme was likely to be continued for three years.

As host of high-profile global events, S’pore attracts cyberespionage

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Cyberespionage is taking place all over the world and Singapore — being one of the hubs for hosting high-profile trade exhibitions and conferences — “inevitably” attracts intelligence operations, a report said on Friday. “Cyberespionage is happening all over the world because we are more connected than ever before,” said Dr Alan Chong, senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Chong’s comments came after Russian media earlier this month leaked a recording of a German military phone call that Berlin said was due to a participant dialling in through an “unauthorised connection” from a Singapore hotel during the February Singapore Airshow. “In terms of the geopolitical

location of Singapore, to me it’s no surprise. Since the Cold War, long before the digital age, we were already a base of operations for both the Communist and the Western powers,” Channel News Asia quoted Chong as saying. Intelligence operations around the world will happen more frequently as cyberespionage makes remote spy activity possible even without an agent on site, he said. The report said event organisers and hotels have confirmed providing security support — ranging from coordinating with telcos to conducting sweeps for surveillance devices. The German participant was in Singapore to attend the Singapore Airshow. The February event would have been a “field day” for Russian intelligence and hotels where the attendees stayed would have been targeted by

“widespread wiretapping efforts”, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said. In the leaked call, discussions were held on support for Ukraine against Russia’s invasion, including the possible delivery of the long-range Taurus cruise missiles to Kyiv. Singapore “inevitably” attracts intelligence operations given high-level events hosted in the country amid geopolitical tensions, according to international security experts. But Singapore’s reputation is unlikely to take a hit, they said. Stephane Duguin, CEO of CyberPeace Institute, said high-profile events taking place amid political tensions carry risks. “Singapore is one of the leading hubs when it comes to cyber,” he said. “It is, therefore, not a surprise that this alters the risk profile,” Channel News Asia quoted Duguin as saying.

Benjamin Ang, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies senior fellow and head of the its Centre of Excellence for National Security, echoed Duguin. “Spying is as old as history but current geopolitical tensions make it especially useful for governments to leak sensitive information that they have uncovered,” he added. Dr Shashi Jayakumar, executive director of SJK Geostrategic Advisory, agreed that events in Singapore attended by prominent officials would be “tempting” targets for intelligence services to try and surveil for high-value information. Singapore intelligence officers open up as it seeks to recruit more diverse talent. Recurring high-level international meetings in Singapore include the biennial Airshow and the annual Shangri-La Dialogue defence summit.

Singapore has also been entrusted with hosting historic talks such as the 2018 Donald Trump-Kim Jong Un summit between the US and the North Korean leaders, and the 2015 meeting between the Chinese and the Taiwanese presidents. None of the experts thought that the German defence call leak would have a lasting, adverse effect on Singapore’s international reputation as host of such high-level gatherings. “There will be short-term risks but then people will just shrug and move on. It can’t be helped. It can happen anywhere,” said Chong. Jayakumar conceded, “We have to accept that these sorts of things may happen from time to time in Singapore, given our role not just as a host of reputed Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) events but also as a

premier convening hub for defence and security related events.” “One must presume that episodes like these are also scrutinised closely by our own security services,” he added. “But any follow-up would necessarily be behind the scenes. This is in the nature of how these agencies work.” Intelligence operations in Singapore pre-date the country’s independence and have been carried out at high-level events to this day. In 1960, the US Central Intelligence Agency offered the then-prime minister Lee Kuan Yew USD 3.3 million to cover up an unsuccessful intelligence operation. The US confirmed the attempted bribery after Lee revealed it in 1965. During the Trump-Kim summit, Singapore became the top cyberattack target in the world. Out of 40,000 cyberattacks

during the two-day event, 88 per cent were launched from Russia and 97 per cent of those were targeted at Singapore, according to data collected by a US technology company. During that same month, a cyberattack on the SingHealth group’s database stole the information of patients, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Singapore’s government said the attack was “the work of an advanced persistent threat group” and that such groups are “usually state-linked”. In 2022, the Shangri-La Group suffered a data breach of guests’ information across eight of its hotels in Asia. This happened between May and July, and coincided with the Shangri-La Dialogue held at the eponymous Singapore hotel that June. The latest leaked German defence call was made over public videoconferencing plat-

form WebEx, though Berlin has defended its use in this instance as legitimate. Instead, Germany’s defence minister blamed the intercepted call on “individual user error” and described it as a “random hit in the scope of a broad-based approach”. Jayakumar noted similar suggestions that the call was intercepted by chance in the course of larger-scale operations. “Although there are many theories, we do not know and will probably never know, as the Germans have been keen to draw a veil over this (save to say that their own systems have not been compromised),” he said. “We do not in fact know how targeted this compromise was. Russian intelligence services, like the services of all major powers, would have resources and capability to attempt to put the event under surveillance of a fairly large scale,” he added.

FPIs make remarkable comeback

Infuse ₹2 lakh crore in equities in FY24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign investors made a strong return by injecting more than Rs 2 lakh crore into Indian equities in 2023-24, driven by optimism surrounding the country's robust economic fundamentals amidst a challenging global environment. Looking forward to 2025, Bharat Dhawan, Managing Partner at Mazars in India, said that the outlook is cautiously optimistic and anticipates sustained FPI inflows supported by progressive policy reforms, economic stability, and attractive investment avenues. "However, we remain mindful of global geopolitical influences that may introduce intermittent volatility, emphasising the importance of strategic planning and agility in navigating market fluctuations," he added.

The outlook for FY25 from an FPI perspective, continues to remain strong, Naveen KR, smallcase Manager and Senior Director at Windmill Capital, said.

In the current fiscal 2023-24, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) have made a net investment of around Rs 2.08 lakh crore in the Indian equity markets and Rs 1.2 lakh crore in the debt market. Collectively, they pumped Rs 3.4 lakh crore into the capital market, as per data available with the depositories.

The dazzling resurgence came following an outflow from equities in the preceding two financial years.

In 2022-23, Indian equities witnessed a net outflow of Rs 37,632 crore by FPIs on



aggressive rate hikes by the central banks globally.

Before this, they pulled out a massive Rs 1.4 lakh crore. However, in 2020-2021, FPIs made a record investment of Rs 2.74 lakh crore.

The flows from foreign investors were largely driven by factors such as inflation and interest rate scenarios in developed markets such as the US and UK, currency movement, the trajectory of crude oil prices, geopolitical scenario, and the health of the domestic economy among others, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director - Manager Research, Morningstar

Investment Research India, said.

"Investors increasingly favoured Indian equities, drawn by the market's demonstrated resilience during uncertain periods. Compared to other similar markets, India's economy stood out as more robust and stable amidst global economic turbulence, further attracting foreign investment," he said.

Smallcase's Naveen said that economies like the UK and Japan have fallen into recession, Russia and Ukraine are still at war, the USA's inflation is running hot and the debate of soft versus hard landing still persists, while China has become the global anti-hero.

Therefore, India has stolen the spotlight and is delivering numbers with strong GDP growth even amidst a tough business environment.

After withdrawing funds in the preceding fiscal, FPIs poured a staggering Rs 1.2 lakh crore into the debt market too, marking a noteworthy shift in their capital flow. They took out funds to the tune of Rs 8,938 crore in FY23.

FPIs' debt investments have been extremely robust this fiscal due to attractive yields on Indian sovereign debt relative to the US treasury. This has been supported by strong macros in the form of the robust growth

outlook for the Indian economy, stable inflation and a stable currency, and the stated objective of the Government to improve its fiscal deficit, Nitin Raheja, Executive Director, Julius Baer India, said. Additionally, the upcoming inclusion of Indian bonds in JP Morgan's index has led to an inflow in advance into the Indian debt markets.

Further, the expected global tapering in policy rates should make bond yields in emerging economies look even more attractive to investors making this trend of inflows into Indian debt more sustainable, he added. In September 2023, JP Morgan

Chase & Co. Announced that it would add Indian government bonds to its benchmark emerging market index from June 2024. This landmark inclusion, scheduled for June 2024, is anticipated to benefit India by attracting around USD 20-40 billion in the subsequent 18 to 24 months. This inflow was expected to make Indian bonds more accessible to foreign investors and potentially strengthen the rupee, thereby bolstering the economy, Morningstar's Srivastava said. Overall, FPIs started the year 2023-24 on a positive note in April and incessantly purchased equities till August on the resilience of the Indian economy amid an uncertain global macro backdrop. During these five months, they brought in Rs 1.62 lakh crore. After this, FPIs turned net sellers in September and bearish stance continued in October too with an outflow of over Rs 39,000 crore in these two months.

However, FPIs became net investors in November and the optimism persisted in December too, when they purchased equity to the tune of Rs 66,135 crore. Again, they turned sellers and pulled out Rs 25,743 crore in January.

This could be on account of China opening up after the lockdown. This led FPIs to pull out their investments from other emerging markets like India and divert them toward China.

However, China struggled to sustain investor interest. Moreover, the fiscal year ended on a positive note as FPIs bought shares worth over Rs 35,000 crore in March.



Dalal Street minnows steal show in FY24

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The BSE mid-cap and small-cap stocks have outperformed the benchmark Sensex in 2023-24 with about 62 per cent returns, reflecting buoyant investors' sentiment amid robust macroeconomic conditions in the country and impressive quarterly earnings reported by various firms.

As per an analysis, the BSE mid-cap gauge jumped 15,013.95 points or 62.38 per cent in the 2023-24 fiscal, while the small-cap index climbed 16,068.99 points or 59.60 per cent. In comparison, the 30-share BSE Sensex raked in a gain of 14,659.83 points or 24.85 per cent during the fiscal under review.

"The recent surge in interest towards mid and small-cap stocks among retail investors can be attributed to their remarkable earnings growth and the pursuit of high-growth opportunities. Highlighting this trend, investors have shown a clear preference for mid and small-cap schemes over large-cap ones, as evidenced by the net inflows in equity mutual funds.

"This shift in investor sentiment is bolstered by the robust macroeconomic conditions in India, which traditionally foster accelerated growth in mid and small-cap stocks during periods of economic expansion. Moreover, the impressive quarterly earnings reported by numerous mid and small-cap companies further validate their substantial growth potential, enticing retail investors in search of profitable ventures," said Suman Bannerjee, CIO of hedge fund Hedonova.

The broader market put up an impressive performance in the 2023-24 fiscal. The BSE midcap gauge reached its record peak of 40,282.49 on February 8 after slipping to its 52-week low of 23,881.79 on March 31, 2023. The BSE small-cap index jumped to its all-time high of 46,821.39 on February 7 after hitting its 52-week low of 26,692.09 on March 31 last year.

The 30-share BSE Sensex hit its all-time high of 74,245.17 on March 7 this year. "The outperformance of midcap and small-cap stocks vis-a-vis the Sensex in the current fiscal year reflects the dynamic nature of the Indian equity market and the diverse opportunities it offers to investors," Sunil Nyati, Managing Director, Swastika Investmart Ltd, said.

The BSE small-cap index faced correction in March, falling 4.55 per cent. The midcap index declined marginally this month.

The correction observed in midcap and small-cap stocks during March is consistent with the assessment of heightened exuberance prevailing in the market, Bannerjee said.



Shakti Pumps raises ₹200 crore through QIP

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Shakti Pumps (India) on Friday said that it has raised an amount of Rs 200 crore through qualified institutional placement route.

The Qualified Institutional Placement (QIP) issue garnered significant interest from qualified domestic institutional investors and was fully subscribed by two large Mutual Funds - LIC Mutual Fund and SBI Mutual Fund, the solar pumps manufacturer said in a statement.

"Shakti Pumps (India) announces closure of Rs 200 crore QIP. With this fundraise, our balance sheet is placed well and will give us the opportunity to improve our market presence and consistently deliver strong results in the times ahead," the company's Chairman

Dinesh Patidar said.

As on December 31, the company had an order book of Rs 2,050 crore to be executed in the next two years, he said.

The solar pump industry has huge opportunities ahead as the government's PM-KUSUM scheme aims to install lakhs of solar pumps across the country, Patidar said.

Launched in 2019, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyan (PM-KUSUM) aimed at adding solar capacity of 30,800 MW by 2022 with total central financial support of Rs 34,422 crore, including service charges to the implementing agencies.

In February, the Centre extended PM-KUSUM scheme till March 2026 as its implementation was significantly affected due to the pandemic.

IIM Mumbai, Starburst collaborate to boost aerospace, new space, defence startups

PTI ■ MUMBAI

European accelerator Starburst has formed a strategic collaboration with the Indian Institute of Management-Mumbai for promoting aerospace, new space, and defence (ASD) startups in India.

Aimed at cultivating an ASD ecosystem centred around the prestigious B-School in India's financial capital, the alliance would provide vital support and resources to ASD startups across the nation, a statement said on Friday.

The partnership comes amid India seeing growth and transformation within the

aerospace, new space, and defence sectors, it added.

"This strategic collaboration signifies a crucial step towards nurturing and empowering the burgeoning ASD startup ecosystem in India," IIM Mumbai Director Manoj K Tiwari said.

Starburst founder and CEO Francois Chopard said the partnership aims to catalyse the growth of ASD startups by providing them with access to mentorship, funding opportunities, and international networks.

Starburst is a leading European Aerospace, new Space, and Defence (ASD) accelerator.

TCS says it trained 3.5 lakh employees in generative AI skills

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Country's largest IT services company TCS on Friday said it has trained 3.5 lakh employees in generative AI skills. The company, which had in January announced that 1.5 lakh staffers are trained in the skill sets of what is said to be the biggest opportunity for IT services firm in the future, has now taken the number up to over half its employee base. "With over 350,000 employees trained on foundational skills in GenAI, TCS is well-poised to build one of the largest AI-ready workforces in the world," an official statement said.

In 2023, it had become the first technology company to create a dedicated business unit for AI and cloud to address the growing needs of customers for cloud and AI adoption.

TCS' work till now includes application of GenAI to enhance customer experience for airlines featuring natural



conversations with customers when their flight is delayed or cancelled, and alternative routing options. It has also tapped into GenAI capabilities to streamline and simplify the contract review process including identification and validation of clauses, the statement said.

On Friday, the Tata group company announced that Amazon Web Services (AWS) has recognised it with Generative AI competency partner status.

Banks GNPA's set to improve further to 2.1 per cent by FY25: Report

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The gross non-performing assets (GNPA) of the Indian banking system are set to improve further to up to 2.1 per cent by the end of FY25, a report said on Friday. GNPA's are likely to come at 2.5-2.7 per cent in FY24 and will improve further to 2.1-2.4 per cent by the end of FY25, domestic rating agency Care Ratings said in the report.

It can be noted that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) began the comprehensive exercise in the middle of the last decade by instructing

banks to classify certain stressed assets as NPAs so that the balance sheets represent a true picture.

The rating agency also flagged a list of downside risks, which may result in its estimate not coming true, including a material weakening in asset quality due to the elevated interest rates, the impact of regulatory changes, a tighter liquidity environment and global issues.

It said GNPA's surged to 11.2 per cent in FY18 from 3.8 per cent in FY14 due to the AQR process of 2015-16, which pushed banks to recognise



NPAs and reduce unnecessary restructuring and added that the stress was emanating from the exposure to big-ticket wholesale advances.

Starting from FY19, GNPA's have been seeing an improvement and touched a decadal low of 3.9 per cent in FY23 and were at 3 per cent in the December quarter of

FY24.

The asset quality has improved due to recoveries, higher write-offs by banks and much lower slippages, the report said, adding that selling dud assets to asset reconstruction companies has also helped.

From a sectoral perspective, the agriculture sector's GNPA ratio reduced to 7 per cent in September 2023 compared to 10.1 per cent reported in March 2020, while the industrial sector reported a 4.2 per cent GNPA ratio in September 2023 against 14.1 per cent in March 2020 and 22.8 per cent in March 2018.

The industrial GNPA's were down on corporate deleveraging, resolutions, and write-offs. However, it continues to remain elevated in gems and jewellery and construction sub-sectors.

The retail loan GNPA was 1.3 per cent in September 2023 against 2 per cent in March 2020, the agency said, adding that a bulk of the stress is due to unsecured loans, credit card receivables and education loans.

"The performance of unsecured personal loans and restructured accounts continues to be monitorable," the agency said.

Procurement through Government online marketplace GeM crosses ₹4 lakh crore so far this fiscal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The procurement of goods and services through government's portal GeM has crossed Rs 4 lakh crore so far this fiscal due to higher buying activities by various ministries and departments, a senior government official said on Friday.

The Government e-Market (GeM) portal was launched on August 9, 2016, for online purchases of goods and services by all central government ministries and departments.

"As of March 28, the procurement has crossed Rs 4 lakh crore. It is historic," GeM CEO P K Singh told reporters here.

In 2021-22 the procurement value stood at Rs 1.06 lakh crore and it crossed Rs 2 lakh crore last financial year.

He said that procurement of services from the portal has jumped from Rs 66,000 crore in 2022-23 to Rs 2.05 lakh crore so far this fiscal.

Similarly, goods worth Rs 1.95 lakh crore have been bought from the platform till March 28 this fiscal. GeM has over 63,000



government organisations and over 62 lakh sellers and service providers offering a wide range of products and services.

Currently, government departments, ministries, public sector units, state governments, and central armed police forces are allowed to carry out transactions through this portal.

The portal provides a wide range of products from office stationery to vehicles. Automobiles, computers and office furniture are some of

the major product categories. Services, including transportation, logistics, waste management, webcasting and analytical, are listed on the portal.

South Korea's KONEPS is the largest such platform in the world. GeM stands at the third position after Singapore's GeBIZ. States/Union Territories such as Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Odisha, Bihar, Assam, and Uttarakhand have placed significant procurement orders in the current fiscal.

ICICI Securities retail distribution head quits

NEW DELHI, MAR 29 (PTI)

ICICI Securities on Friday said Kedar Deshpande, head of retail distribution, has resigned from the brokerage firm to pursue alternate career opportunities.

The resignation will take effect from the close of business hours on April 12, 2024.

"Kedar Deshpande, Head - Retail Distribution (within the category of senior management in the Company), vide letter dated March 28, 2024, has tendered his resignation from the services of the company,"

ICICI Securities said in a regulatory filing.

In his letter to ICICI Securities Managing Director and CEO Vijay Chandok, Deshpande said: "I wish to resign from the company to pursue alternate career opportunities outside the ICICI Group".

ICICI Securities is currently in the process of delisting itself from the stock exchanges. The brokerage firm would be merged with its promoter ICICI Bank after successful delisting.

ICICI Bank currently holds a 74.77 per cent stake in ICICI Securities.

Amidst culinary delights like Varanasi chaat and Malaiyyo, the city's gastronomic offerings add flavours to the sensory tapestry of Kashi. Yet, as Varanasi embraces modernity, a call for collective responsibility echoes, urging all to preserve the city's pristine charm amidst its eternal embrace of divinity and tranquillity. **SHARMILA CHAND** experiences the city firsthand and captures its spirit

KASHI REVELS IN RIOT OF COLOURS AND ASH

I am standing at a height in one corner overlooking HarishChandra ghat and the day is Ekadashi. The site is eclectic with hundreds of devotees and tourists dancing to the tunes of the huge DJ set up. As the music pauses for a few seconds, the sound of damrus fills the air. Young boys are playing drums and damrus while sadhus and babas, dressed in various fancy ensemble, are lost in the revelries. And soon I see clouds of gular and bhasm in the air. Traditionally, as the legend goes, it was on the day of 'Rang Bhari Ekadashi', Lord Mahadev brought Goddess Parvati to Kashi after performing Gauna (marriage ceremony) and played with gular. From that day till Holi, the festival is celebrated with full gusto. On the second day of Rang Bhari Ekadashi, it is said, Mahadev played Holi with pyre ashes and that's how the tradition of 'Bhasm' or 'Masan' Holi has been going on which holds significant cultural and religious importance. I realise how the festival is deeply rooted in local traditions, it is indeed the celebration of culture, tradition and spirituality.

SHRI KASHI VISHWANATH TEMPLE
Early morning I went for darshan. The entry is well organised and I was happy to be there for my sojourn. Situated on the western bank of the Ganges, Kashi Vishwanath Temple is one of the 12

Jyotirlingas or temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. The main deity of Kashi Vishwanath Temple is Lord Shiva, also known as Vishwanatha or Vishweshwarar.

SANKAT MOCHAN HANUMAN TEMPLE
The Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple is situated by the River Assi and was built in the 1900s by the freedom fighter Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya. It is dedicated to Lord Rama and Hanuman.

DURGA TEMPLE
Durga Temple dedicated to Goddess Durga is renowned for its vivid red color and intricate architecture. It houses an imposing idol of Goddess Durga and is one of the main temples in Varanasi. Close to the temple is a huge Durga Kund.

SUBAH E BANARAS
Early morning programme at Assi Ghat is my favorite of the immersive experience. As the first rays of the sun glow on the Ganges, there is chanting of mantras followed by Arati, Surya Namaskar and then Hindustani classical music. That's not all, there is one hour yoga after the music where tourists and the locals perform seriously. I thought that was the final event of the morning rituals but no, the moment yoga ends, a group of locals start bhajans and kirtan which goes on for another one hour. While all this is going on, tea vendors are busy making tea and

boatmen are busy at their job, tempting tourists for Ganges boat ride.

EVENINGS AT THE GHATS
Evenings are very eventful again. There is famous Ganga arati at different ghats. Then there is also Cultural programme at Assi Ghat. As dusk descends, the ghats of Varanasi come alive with the vibrant Ganga Aarti. Priests, clad in traditional attire, choreograph the ritual with synchronised movements, accompanied by the rhythmic ringing of bells and chanting of hymns. The magnificent ritual looks resplendent with huge brass lamps lit with oil and the priests chant the holy mantras that reverberate in the entire location.

KASHI FOOD TRAIL
One thing you cannot miss about Varanasi is its food. Every city has its own style of preparation and flavours. Varanasi chaat and Kachoris are no exception. Gol gappas taste totally different with lot of matra filling. Aloo tikki and samosa chaat comes loaded with curd, matra and chutneys. Tamatar chaat is of course unique to this city. There are several joints for kachoris. I tried at 'Chachi ki Kachori'- kachoris-sabzi and jalebis. It is situated on the mall road in front of Banaras Hindu University gate. As per the locals, the shop was run by an old aunty chachi, who passed away handing over her legacy to her

sons, who now run the shop. Tamatar Chaat is a local version of aloo chaat and is made from a mashed mixture of boiled potatoes, tomatoes, onions, green chillies and fresh coriander leaves. Spices like pounded ginger, red chilli powder and garam masala are splashed into the dish making it deliciously fiery. It is served in a dona, a bowl made



authentic pizzas, pastas and yes, delightful coffee with a delightful view of the Ganges. Keshav Tambul, Ravidas Gate How can you not have paan ? Want to try the famous Banarasi paan? Keshav Taambul near Ravidas Gate offers one of the best paans in Banaras.

TEA IS NO MEAN DRINK!
Tea in kulhad is a special item in Kashi. You ask locals where to have tea, and you will get a whole lot of different tea stall names in which Pappu Chai wala will many votes. I found my favourite at Assi Ghat who would brew and boil the tea for good 15 minutes, after mixing a whole lot of ingredients. If you are in a hurry, you can move on because this fellow will not change his pace or style. For a tea finicky person like me, it was the best I've ever had and I thanked my stars for the extreme fulfillment I got. One day he didn't show up, I missed him (his tea, of course), the only reason he didn't put up his stall was "I didn't feel like making tea, so did something else." Well, what could I say, he was so right. To conclude, while the ghats have been given a face-lift, facilities (like Sulabh toilets) have been provided and there is regular cleaning done, it is the responsibility of visitors to maintain some civic sense. Unless the local communities, tourists, cafes and clubs come forward to adopt areas and maintain the aesthetics, it is not possible for the administration alone to do the needful. Conscientious efforts are needed to keep the ghats clean, that's the least we can do for such a spectacular city that reverberates divinity, calm and peace — forever embracing one and all!

FROM CONCEPT TO CREATION

India Design ID 2024, the most anticipated decor and design event of the year, came alive in the capital, showcasing the best in design. The four-day extravaganza was all about the fusion of creativity, innovation and trendsetting designs, captivating attendees from all walks of life. **PANKAJ KUMAR** captured the fine artworks with finesse



India Design ID is held once a year in the capital. Having completed 11 successful years, India Design brings together the best of Indian and international names from the design field under one place. It is an Ogaan Media initiative which brings a multitude of everything new in the fields of art, craft, design, decor, interiors and architecture. A treasure trove of luxury products and rare finds with over hundred exhibitors, ID Exhibit is a curated showcase of India's top luxury design brands. The exhibits also include display spaces by Indian architecture and interior firms as well as contemporary emerging talents.





Rahul led LSG eye all round effort against PBKS

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Lucknow Super Giants will aim for an improved all-round effort when they take on Punjab Kings in their second Indian Premier League match here on Saturday. K L Rahul-led LSG faltered in the opening game against Rajasthan Royals, losing by 20 runs in Chandigarh. Barring Krunal Pandya, all the LSG bowlers leaked runs and also looked ineffective. In the absence of Mark Wood and David Willey, LSG's pace battery looks thin with the likes of Mohsin Khan, Naveen-ul-Haq, and Yash Thakur expected to do the heavy lifting. Fighting for a place in the upcoming T20 World Cup squad, Ravi Bishnoi too looked ordinary in the team's tournament opener. Skipper Rahul, who has decided to play the wicketkeeper-batter's role keeping the T20 World Cup in mind, made 58 in his comeback game and would be looking to build on that. He would be hoping his opening partner Quinton de Kock returns to his belligerent best against Punjab after missing out against Royals. The team is also banking on the likes of Devdutt Padikkal Ayush Badoni, Deepak Hooda, and Krunal to deliver



down the order. LSG's success will also depend on the form of Australian all-rounder Marcus Stoinis, who was the leading run-getter for the team last year with 408 runs. PBKS, on the other hand, have a 50-50 record so far, winning one and losing one.

The Shikhar Dhawan-led side needs more fluency in the powerplay and that is bound to come if Jonny Bairstow gets going after failing in the first two games. Dhawan, who only plays IPL to IPL, needs to up his strike rate going forward. He himself admitted to batting a bit "slowly" against RCB.

Prabhsimran Singh, who came of age last season, has not been able to capitalise on his starts yet. While all-rounder Sam Curran has shown his prowess with the bat in the two matches, the left-arm seamer has been wayward with the ball. Vice-captain Jitesh Sharma, who is in the running for a World Cup berth,

needs to have a stellar season to convince the national selectors. In the pace bowling department, Kagiso Rabada will look for more support from Curran, Arshdeep Singh and Harshal Patel. Left-arm spinner Harpreet Brar has been impressive while leg-spinner Rahul Chahar needs to up his game.

TEAMS(FROM):

Lucknow Super Giants: KL Rahul (c), Quinton de Kock, Nicholas Pooran, Ayush Badoni, Kyle Mayers, Marcus Stoinis, Deepak Hooda, Devdutt Padikkal, Ravi Bishnoi, Naveen-ul-Haq, Krunal Pandya, Yuvraj Singh, Prerak Mankad, Yash Thakur, Amit Mishra, Shamar Joseph, Mayank Yadav, Mohsin Khan, G. Gowtham, Shivam Mavi, Arshin Kulkarni, M Siddharth, Ashton Turner, David Willey, Mohd. Arshad Khan.

Punjab Kings: Shikhar Dhawan (captain), Matthew Short, Prabhsimran Singh, Jitesh Sharma, Sikandar Raza, Rishi Dhawan, Liam Livingstone, Atharva Taide, Arshdeep Singh, Nathan Ellis, Sam Curran, Kagiso Rabada, Harpreet Brar, Rahul Chahar, Harpreet Bhatia, Vidwath Kaverappa, Shivam Singh, Harshal Patel, Chris Woakes, Ashutosh Sharma, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Shashank Singh, Tanay Thyagarajan, Prince Choudhary, Rilee Rossouw.



Last 3 days I was in bed, I was on painkillers: Parag

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Architect of Rajasthan Royals' win over Delhi Capitals, young batter Riyan Parag on Thursday revealed that he was not well for the last three days and had to take painkillers to recover in time for their IPL match here. Considered a precocious talent, the 22-year-old from Assam finally came off age as he slammed a blistering 84 net out off 45 balls to set up a 12-run win for Rajasthan Royals against Delhi Capitals.

"I have worked very hard, the last 3 days I was in bed, I was on painkillers, I just got up today and I'm very happy," said Parag, who was adjudged the Player of the Match, during the post-match presentation. Despite his talent, Parag struggled to live up to the expectations and had underwhelming numbers to show in the last few seasons but his hard work paid off as he hit his highest IPL score to lift RR to 185 for 5 here.

"(Emotions) They are settled, mom is here, she has seen the struggle, the last 3-4 years," he said. "I know what my opinion is about myself. That does not change regardless of whether I get a zero or not." He played as a finisher in the earlier editions but this time, the team management gave him an extended role at No. 4. Parag was also coming into the season after scoring loads of runs at the Deodhar trophy and Syed Mushtaq Ali T20s.

"That's a lot to do with the type of season as well, I had a great domestic season and that helps," he said. "Someone in the top four has to play the 20 overs, the wicket was keeping low and stopping, in the first game Sanju bhayya did it." Parag's performance also impressed his captain Sanju Samson. "Riyan Parag has been a big name in the last few years.

Wherever I go, people ask me about him. There is something very special he can give to Indian cricket," Samson said. RR had a disastrous start as they were 36 for 3 in the eighth over but Parag slowly constructed his innings before accelerating in the end to lift them to a good total. "The way we started, the first ten overs, we were like Rovman, be ready you might have to bat! The IPL is changing and we all have to be flexible," Samson said. RR's decision to bring in Nandre Burger as an impact player, replacing Shimron Hetmyer also reaped dividends as the South African pacer struck twice in the fourth over. "Earlier it was about 11 players, now it is about all 15 players. Me and Sanga had a lot of chat between 15th and 17th over before deciding the Impact Player. It's all about gauging in which zone they are. You have to look at that and take your decision. "I saw Sandy (Sandeep Sharma) was calm and Avesh (Khan) was also looking good, so I went with that," he added referring to the brilliant death bowling by the two pacers." Talking about his strategy going into the final over, Avesh, who defended 17 runs in the final over, said: "My plan is always clear. One side was longer, so my plan was to bowl wide yorkers. "I was giving myself five seconds and only thought about executing them. My focus is always on the execution and back my yorkers. "Enjoying myself here because we have Sandeep, Boult, Burger, all of whom have different skills. Samson gives me freedom to execute and only steps in if he sees I am struggling. "I try to improve myself everytime. In T20s I try to reinvent myself. I never think about selection and only practice what I want to bowl."

Nortje will take time to get better after injury layoff: Hopes

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Delhi Capitals bowling coach James Hopes feels that the team's under-fire pace spearhead Anrich Nortje will get better with time having recently made a comeback to competitive cricket after six months. Nortje was taken to the cleaners by Rajasthan Royals' Riyan Parag at the death as he went for 48 in his four overs on Thursday night. RR won the IPL match by 12 runs while defending 185 for 5. Nortje had been out of cricket since September and came into IPL having played just three domestic T20 games earlier this month and failed to nail the yorkers or bowl the hard lengths that he is known for. "I won't say too much bad about the bowlers. They just tried to execute. It was a good first half with the ball but got away from us a little bit in the last five overs," Hopes said after his team's 12-run loss to RR, where the complexion changed during the last part of their bowling innings.



"It's the first time that Nortje has been at this level in a while. He had a fair time out of the game, but if you look at all the numbers, he is one of the premier death bowlers in the game. We trust that he is going to keep getting better," Hopes, a former Australia medium pacer said defending the

Proteas pacer. Hopes also felt that just like bowling, the team's batting also came apart in the back-10 after a positive start. "With the bat, we started really well, we were in front of the game, and then fell away a little bit in the middle. They bowled 10 overs of death bowling

pretty much at us, and executed it well." Hopes assessed that the end game is a problem in both departments after the first two defeats. "We need to tidy up at what we do at the end of the game. It's one game, I don't even count the first game because we had to take a bowler out to get an extra batter in and then Ishant (Sharma) went down, so I'm not going to judge us too harshly on one game." The batting in the middle overs will largely depend on how comeback man Rishabh Pant fares. "We need to tidy up our middle over batting too. We tend to get stuck a little bit in phases there. We know the fix for that is Rishabh Pant," Hopes said. "He has played two games after a long lay-off and I think you're going to see some pretty special things from him in the next few weeks," he concluded. DC will take on Chennai Super Kings in their next game at the ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium in Visakhapatnam on Sunday.

Execution wise, it was probably my best last over: Avesh

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Rajasthan Royals pacer Avesh Khan feels the last over he bowled against Delhi Capitals in the ongoing IPL was probably his best effort in the death overs. The India pacer had to defend 17 runs in the last over on Thursday night and he was able to do that rather comfortably, landing one yorker after the other. Delhi could only get four runs from that over, ensuring a 12-run win for the home team. Going into the season, Lucknow Super Giants had traded Avesh to Royals. "It is not the first time I bowled the last over. Last year I defended against Rajasthan. When I played for Delhi (bowled the last over there also), execution wise this was my best over. All the balls were in the same spot, wide yorkers," said Avesh, who has played eight ODIs and 20 T20s. The 27-year-old also spoke about how his role has changed compared to last season when he turned up for LSG. "In Lucknow and DC, I used to bowl one over upfront or two overs in the powerplay. Here I



bowl two overs after powerplay and in the death as well I get to bowl. Team management and Sanju (Samson) give gull freedom to execute plans and that is helping. Sanju is a bowler's captain. "There was also no dew factor tonight and that helped me being accurate. Dew may impact your execution at times," Avesh said. He gave due credit to Royals' new number four Riyan Parag, who singlehandedly kept his team in the game after an ordinary start, smashing an unbeaten 84 off 45 balls. "It was a match changing innings considering we had lost wickets early and run rate was on the lower side. He helped us post a fighting total. He is in good touch and showed that in this and the last game," Avesh added.

OTHER SPORTS

AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS (US)

Eleventh-seeded Grigor Dimitrov came out strong against top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz and went on to win 6-2, 6-4 in the Miami Open quarterfinals, his first victory over a top-five player in nearly five years. Fourth-seeded Alexander Zverev, who beat unseeded Fabian Marozsan 6-3 7-5 on Thursday night will play Dimitrov in the semifinals on Friday. Second-seeded Jannik Sinner will face No. 3 Daniil Medvedev in the other semifinal, a rematch of last year's final that Medvedev won. Dimitrov said he didn't want to evaluate the quality of his play against Alcaraz "since I have to play again tomorrow. I'm trying to stay on point. This is how our sport is. You appreciate it, of course. You're very happy with the current win. Then you have to quickly move on and start focusing on the next match." Alcaraz, the 2022 champion, entered this tournament off a victory over Medvedev at Indian Wells. But the world's second-ranked player had trouble finding his game against Dimitrov and became visibly frustrated numerous times in the first set. But Alcaraz didn't go away even after falling behind a break at 4-2 in the second set. He broke Dimitrov at love and then held serve to even the set at 4-4. Dimitrov, though, won the final two games, breaking Alcaraz in the clincher. Alcaraz said Dimitrov played "almost perfect." "I have a lot of frustrations right now because he made me feel like I'm 13 years old," the 20-year-old Alcaraz said. "It was crazy. I was talking to my team saying that I don't know what I have to do. I don't know his weakness. I don't know anything." This was Dimitrov's first victory over a top-five player since he beat then-No. 3 Roger Federer in the quarterfinals of the 2019 U.S. Open. On the women's side, fourth-seeded Elena Rybakina once again had to go three sets, pushed to the edge before beating No. 27 Victoria Azarenka 6-4 0-6 7-6(2) in the semifinals. Rybakina, ranked fourth on the WTA

Grigor ousts top seeded Carlos in Miami Open quarterfinals



Tour, will on Saturday face unseeded Danielle Collins, who defeated No. 14 Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-3 6-2. Rybakina also made last year's final, losing in straight sets to Petra Kvitová. "This year, it's much different," Rybakina said. "I was not expecting, honestly, to be in the final because I was not prepared that well for this tournament, but really happy that I managed to battle through all these matches and be in the final again." A day off will likely be welcome for Rybakina, who has been pushed to three sets in all but one match this tournament. Thursday's match lasted 2 hours, 33 minutes, and she told the Tennis Channel that for the first time in her career, she has rested on the days between matches during a tournament. "In the beginning, these long matches were helping me to get back in shape," Rybakina said. "Now I'm not in shape just because I'm tired of all these long matches, but over-

all, it was really successful tournament no matter how I do in the final." Rybakina appeared to take control when she broke Azarenka's serve to take a 3-2 lead in the third set. Azarenka fought off four break points before hitting a two-handed backhand into the net to give Rybakina the game. It was quite a response from the second set when Azarenka lost only two points on her serve, and one came on a double fault. But Azarenka wasn't done. With Rybakina serving for the match, Azarenka broke back to even the final set at 5-5. Both players then held serve to send the match to a tiebreaker, which belonged to Rybakina, who went up 6-1. She wrapped up the victory with a cross-court forehand. Rybakina is seeking her third title this year. She is 4-0 in her career against Azarenka, including two victories this year. Azarenka, 34, was attempting to become

the tournament's oldest winner. She became the second-oldest semifinalist; 36-year-old Venus Williams made the semis in 2017. Bopanna, Ebdn sail into men doubles final of Miami Open Miami, March 29 (PTI) Indian tennis stalwart Rohan Bopanna and his Australian partner Matthew Ebden sailed into the men's doubles final of the Miami Open with a straight-set win over Marcel Granollers and Horacio Zeballos here. Bopanna and Ebden, the Australian Open winners, hardly broke a sweat to get the better of Spain's Granollers and Argentina's Zeballos 6-1 6-4 in the semifinals on Thursday night. Bopanna had slipped to second spot in the doubles rankings after a quarterfinal loss at the Dubai Championships and a round-of-32 exit at the Indian Wells Masters, but the semifinal win here will help the Indian regain the top spot when they are updated on Monday. Following the Australian Open triumph, the 44-year-old Bopanna had climbed to the world No.1 spot in the ATP rankings, becoming the oldest player to do so. In the final, Bopanna and Ebden will take on Ivan Dodig of Croatia and American Austin Krajicek, who beat the German duo of Kevin Krawietz and Tim Putz 6-4 6-7(7) 10-7 in the other semifinal. For Bopanna, this will be his 14th ATP Masters 1000 final and the first in Miami. Overall, this will be his 63rd ATP Tour level final. He has so far won 25 doubles titles. This will also be the fifth appearance in an ATP Masters 1000 final for the Bopanna and Ebden pairing. Bopanna also achieved a rare feat as he became the second Indian after Leander Paes to reach the final of all 9 ATP Masters events.

Nelly fights to win in Southern California

AP ■ GILBERT (US)

Nelly Korda fought through brutal conditions to win in Southern California last week. A solid opening round on a soft course in perfect weather has the world's No. 1 player in position to win her third straight start. Korda shot a 6-under 66 in the first round of the Ford Championship on Thursday, leaving her three shots back in a bid to become the first LPGA Tour player to win three straight starts in eight years. "Completely different today compared to last weekend," Korda said. "The greens are quite soft. I know Arizona has been getting a good bit of rain throughout the winter. I knew there would be low scores out there, so needed to be aggressive." A week after brutal wind outside Los Angeles in the Fir Hills Seri Pak Championship, ideal scoring conditions greeted the players in the inaugural event at Seville Golf and Country Club. Pajaree Anannarukan took advantage with a bogey-free, 9-under 63 after starting on the back nine at the 6,734-yard course in suburban Phoenix. She had a one-shot lead over Lilia Vu, Gabriela Ruffels, Isa Gabsa and former Arizona State players Azahara Munoz and Carlota Ciganda. The top-ranked Korda opened with four birdies in five holes and closed with a two-putt birdie on the par-5 18th as she tries to become the first LPGA Tour player to win three straight starts since Ariya Jutanugarn in 2016. Korda won the Drive On



Championship in her hometown of Bradenton, Florida, before sitting out all of the LPGA Tour's Asian swing. She showed no rust after the long break, winning last week to move back atop the world ranking and is in contention again. "I kept it pretty light at the beginning of the week knowing I needed rest and that was the most important," Korda said. Anannarukan has won twice on the LPGA Tour, including last year's Bank of Hope Match Play at Shadow Creek in Las Vegas. The 24-year-old from Thailand missed the cut last week, but closed with five straight birdies to shoot 6-under 30 on Seville's front nine. "The condition's really similar to Las Vegas," she said. "I feel like if you can get the good number into most of the shots going into the green, that's just really helpful. I think I got a really good number today, just really helped me with the putts as well." Vu fell out of the top spot in the world when Korda won in a

playoff last week at Palos Verdes Golf Club. The two-time major champion sandwiched four birdies around a bogey on the par-3 eighth and had four birdies on the back nine. Ciganda rolled in eight birdies in a bogey-free round that started on the back nine. "I love being here. I feel the support - it just feels very comfortable," she said. "I'm staying at home so that's really nice this week. Sleeping in my own bed. Yeah, eating my own dinners and doing my thing. So that's always very comfortable." Munoz had a wild round that included eight birdies, an eagle and two bogeys in her bid to win for the first time since the 2012 Sybase Match Play Championship. Ruffels had seven birdies and an eagle with a bogey, a week after missing a birdie putt that would have put her in a playoff with Korda and Ryann O'Toole. Gabsa had three birdies on the front nine, then reeled off four straight to shoot 5-under 31 on the back to finish off her bogey-free round.