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WORLD 8

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MONEY 10

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Kejriwal in full throttle as ED retains his custody

Delhi CM to defend his own case against national probe agencies

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday questioned the locus standi of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for arresting him in the multi-crore liquor gate scam merely on the basis of statements of some, including his former Cabinet colleague Manish Sisodia's secretary. Kejriwal asked the court whether these four statements are enough to arrest a sitting Chief Minister. "I am named by four witnesses in the excise policy case. Are four statements enough to arrest a sitting CM?", alleged Kejriwal. He was produced in a special court on Thursday where his ED custody was extended by four days till April 1. The probe agency had sought seven-day custody of the AAP chief. Kejriwal was supposed to do an "expose" on Friday as per his wife's, Sunita, statement a day earlier. Kejriwal submitted in the open court during the proceedings that statements of witnesses recorded by the investigating agency do not in any manner connect him with the alleged offences and questioned his arrest in the matter. Furthermore, the Chief

Minister said Sarath Reddy, an approver in the case, got bail after he made a statement against him who himself donated ₹55 crore to the BJP. "I have evidence of this. Money trail is established as he donated the funds after being arrested," the Chief Minister said. Kejriwal's submissions were strongly objected to by ED counsel Additional Solicitor General SV Raju, who also questioned why attempts were being made to link the BJP with the excise policy case. Raju had argued that Kejriwal's statements to the ED's questioning have been evasive. "He (Kejriwal) wants to play to the gallery. How does he know how many documents are with ED? This is all figment of imagination ... AAP received the kickbacks which they used in Goa elections. There is a clear cut chain ... The money that they say came to BJP has nothing to do with the liquor scam. There is no quid pro quo... The CM is not above law. He is an ordinary man. We have material to show that this very person demanded 100 crore kickback," Raju contended. In its remand application, the ED said during Kejriwal's custodial interrogation, his statements were recorded over



Delhi Chief Minister and AAP convenor Arvind Kejriwal comes out of the Rouse Avenue Court after he was produced by the Enforcement Directorate in the excise policy-linked money laundering case, in New Delhi, on Thursday

five days but he was "giving evasive replies". Kejriwal alleged that the ED investigation had two objectives — one, to create a smokescreen in front of the

country that Aam Aadmi Party was corrupt and did the scam and two, to do an "extortion racket" for collecting money. Reddy is the director of

Aurobindo Pharma Limited and one of the co-accused-turned-approvers in the case. The AAP national convener personally addressed the Delhi court today and made the

submissions in Hindi after taking permission from the court despite his lawyers being present and he did not oppose the ED's remand extension request.

"Ham ED ki remand oppose nahi kar rahe. Jitne din chaahе wo mujhe custody m rakh le. Par ye ghotala hai (loose translation: I am not opposing the ED's plea for remand. They can keep me in custody for as long as they want. But this is all a scam)," Kejriwal told the court. "So far, the CBI has filed 31,000 pages in this case in the court and 294 witnesses have been examined in this case. The ED has investigated 162 people and filed a 25,000-page report so far. By combining all these documents and reports, why have I been arrested? My name figures only in four statements," he said in a jam-packed courtroom. Elaborating on the four statements mentioning his name, Kejriwal said C Arvind, former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia's secretary gave a statement. According to it, Sisodia handed over some excise policy-related documents to C Arvind in his (Kejriwal's) presence, in the Chief Minister's official residence. "He has only stated that Sisodia gave some documents to C Arvind. Madam, several MLAs, Ministers and dignitaries come with their secretaries to my house. "They do side-talks and hand over documents to each other.

How do I know who is giving what to whom? Is this statement a sufficient reason to arrest the sitting chief minister?" Kejriwal said. Giving details of the second statement in which his name appeared, Kejriwal said Magunta Srinivas Reddy is an MP from (Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister) Jagan Mohan Reddy's party (YSRCP). "Magunta Srinivas Reddy came to my office at 4.30 pm on March 16, 2021. He had sent an e-mail to my office that he is an MP and wanted to meet me. My office gave him an appointment to meet me after 10 days. He came over and said I want to open my family's charitable trust in Delhi. I told him that the land does not come under us, it comes under the Lieutenant Governor (LG)," Kejriwal said. The Delhi Chief Minister further said Magunta Srinivas Reddy gave three statements to the agency but only one was considered. "Why the only statement that is against Kejriwal has been included in the 25,000 pages of ED report and the other two statements were not considered? All the three statements should have been brought to the notice of the court, so that it could decide the truth in the case," he said.

Erode MP kills self over denial of ticket

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI

A 76-year-old Member of Parliament (MP) belonging to the MDMK who was representing Erode in the Lok Sabha, committed suicide over denial of ticket. Ganeshamurthi, three-time MP representing Erode, was shattered when he was told by party founder Vaiko that he would not figure in the party's list as a candidate for the upcoming election. Instead, MDMK chief Vaiko nominated his son Durai Vaiko as the candidate from Erode. Persons close to Ganeshamurthy said though the latter pleaded with Vaiko for one more term, the party founder remained intransigent and this upset the sitting MP.



According to police, Ganeshamurthi had allegedly tried to kill himself after consuming some poisonous tablets on March 24 at his home. He was rushed to a hospital here and later referred to another private institute in Coimbatore. Hospital authorities said Ganeshamurthy died of cardiac arrest. Vaiko who rushed to Coimbatore said, "He met me twice. We never expected him to make such a decision. He was in a good mood. I cannot believe that he took such a step and passed away. We pay our deep homage." Expressing shock over the sudden demise of Ganeshamurthi, noted film actress in Tamil and Malayalam Lalitha Sree said, "Political parties should be careful while not granting chances to sitting MPs because some of them are so obsessed with serving the people that they may not be able to withstand the snubbing they receive from the mother parties."

Mukhtar Ansari Chapter Closed

PREETAM SRIVASTAVA ■ LUCKNOW

Mukhtar Ansari, a mafia-turned lawmaker, passed away on Thursday after suffering a heart attack while in custody at Banda jail. A senior police official confirmed that Mukhtar collapsed in his barrack within the jail premises due to a heart attack. He was swiftly transported to a hospital in Banda, where medical personnel attempted to revive him. However, Mukhtar ultimately succumbed to cardiac arrest, as reported by a medical bulletin issued by Rani Durgawati Medical College. Following Mukhtar's demise, authorities have heightened security measures across various regions, including Lucknow, Mau, Ghazipur, and Varanasi. State-wide enforcement of Section 144 has been initiated in response to the situation. This tragic incident occurred amidst concerns over Mukhtar's declining



Security personnel stand guard at Government Medical College where gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari was admitted, in Banda, on Thursday

health, with Thursday marking the second instance in two days where his condition worsened. Earlier in the week, the 63-year-old was hospitalised in Banda for approximately 14 hours after complaining of abdominal pain. Despite being discharged, apprehensions persisted regarding his well-being, particularly in light of allegations made by his brother and Ghazipur MP, Afzal Ansari. Afzal Ansari asserted that Mukhtar had been poisoned while in jail, citing instances where his health had deteriorated due to alleged ingestion of harmful substances. Mukhtar, a former five-

time MLA from the Mau Sadar constituency, had a controversial political career overshadowed by legal troubles. With over 60 criminal cases pending against him, Mukhtar had been incarcerated in both Uttar Pradesh and Punjab since 2005, facing convictions in eight cases since September 2022. At the time of his passing, Mukhtar was held in Banda jail. Concerns regarding Mukhtar's health had been raised earlier during a virtual court hearing in Barabanki on March 21, where his lawyer alleged that his client was being subjected to "slow poison".

Bhartruhari joins BJP, may contest from Cuttack

Siddhant Mohapatra, Damayanti Besra also in saffron party fold

NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR

As anticipated, six-time MP Bhartruhari Mahtab on Thursday joined the BJP at the party headquarters in New Delhi in the presence of BJP national vice-president Baijayant Jay Panda, Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, party Odisha election in-charge Vijayapal Singh Tomar and State president Manmohan Samal.

Mahatab had on March 22 resigned from the BJD alleging that he felt neglected in



the regional party. He was a founding member of the BJD, which was born in 1997.

Besides Mahtab, former Brahmapur BJD MP Siddhant Mohapatra and noted litterateur Padma Shri Damayanti Besra also joined the BJP at party headquarters in Delhi.

Sources said the BJP is contemplating to field Bhartruhari from the Cuttack Lok Sabha seat. Bhartruhari has been representing the Cuttack Parliamentary constituency since 1998.

Bhartruhari's resignation from the BJD came a day

after the Special Court for MP/MLAs framed charges against him in connection with the alleged assault on a police officer in Cuttack.

Damayanti Besra said winds of change are blowing in Odisha.

Siddhant Mohapatra thanked the BJP and said, "It was in 2009 when I went to Gujarat and Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister there. I noticed certain things there. He was thinking of the people and I was inspired by him. I want to see the transformation that the Prime Minister has been bringing about in the country in Odisha too."

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Offence of taking selfie with wild animals Monalisa, hubby surrender before forest officials

PNS ■ JAJPUR

Popular YouTuber Monalisa Bhadra and her husband Badrinarayan on Wednesday night surrendered before Forest Department officials in Jajpur district, four days after the department raided their house. They were then arrested.

A team of forest personnel led by Ranger Jyoti Ranjan Mohapatra had raided their house on March 24. However, Monalisa and her husband absconded before the raid team reached their residence at Jahala village of Beruda panchayat under the Sadar police limits.

Again, on the morning of March 25, the team raided the Bhadra couple's house but to no avail. A monkey kept in



captivity was alone seized from the house during the raid. Later, acting on the directives of ACP Anil Kumar Ray, two special teams were formed to

arrest the accused couple. Meanwhile, a case has been registered against the couple and a detailed probe initiated, which is underway.

Taking selfie with wild animals and posting them on social media platforms is a criminal offence.

According to a source, Monalisa and her husband were previously warned not to post photos and videos taken with wild animals and to refrain from such illegal activity. Allegedly, the couple has domesticated a few Langurs (a species of monkey) at their residence.

Domesticating wild animals is also a serious offence, the senior forest official told mediapersons.

"Bhadra couple had given a written undertaking in 2022 to refrain from such illegal activities. However, they did not abstain from doing so. Action will be taken against them," the Ranger said.

Sons at poles apart; loudmouth Sura in a fix

SRIKANTA K TRIPATHY
BHUBANESWAR

Senior Congress leader and Jatni MLA Suresh Routray resigned as member from various committees of the party related to the 2024 elections. Talking to reporters he said he took the step as he was let down by his younger son Manmath Routray joining the BJD against his will. But he ensured that he would not quit Congress.

Hours after joining the BJD, Sura's son Manmath was declared as the party's nominee for the Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha seat. The favour showered on Manmath, who would be locking horns against BJP's high-profile nominee and seating Bhubaneswar MP Aparajita Sarangi, was something out of the blue, as the regional party did it for the



first time in its history for a newbie.

Sura, who claimed him to be a dedicated Congress man and a staunch critic of BJD, better popular in the political circle for his antics, had earlier declared that he would not be contesting elections in 2024 and instead, his two sons, Manmath and Sidharth (elder) would be in poll fray. Toeing the line of his father, Sidharth has applied for Congress ticket to contest from Nimapara.

Sura often takes great pride in his two sons, greater for his elder son for sticking to his principles. Sidharth also has

taken to social media to hit out at the BJD and BJP Governments at the State and Centre, highlighting various issues, including corruption and scams by them. Sidharth himself deplored the decision of his brother Manmath, saying that he was misled.

It may be noted that the father-son trio remained in the headlines ever since Sura announced his two sons' plan to join politics by quitting alluring corporate jobs. He said his two sons, the elder a director in a multinational company in the US and the younger, an Air India pilot, are highly learned globetrotters, who gained enough experience in their respective professions and money as well, and want to serve people like him by joining politics. Over a period of time, the Sura's family was in news over political alle-

giances of the two brothers allegedly creating fissures in the family. While earlier Manmath had joined Congress at the instance of his father, he looked to be inconsistent with the party and was praising CM Naveen Patnaik and VK Pandian which led to his suspension from the party.

Now, when his two sons are at poles apart, Sura and his supporters are in a fix as supporting one would go against the other. The senior leader, who has been quite vocal against the Naveen Government, has said that he would not campaign for his younger son openly though he would bless his son to win the election. This means Sura will openly campaign for his elder son and lend tacit support to his younger son. Only time will say how he fares in performing this double role.

GST official held taking bribe in Puri

PNS ■ CUTTACK

The Vigilance police on Thursday caught Manas Ranjan Behera, Commercial Tax and Goods and Services Tax (GST) Officer, red-handed while he was accepting a bribe of Rs 30,000 from a person in Puri district.

Behera is presently working in the Enforcement Unit of the Commercial Tax and GST Department.

Behera was apprehended by Vigilance officials in front of

the Zilla School in Puri while demanding and accepting the bribe from a vehicle owner to release his detained vehicle.

The complainant had paid a GST penalty amount of Rs 79,200 on March 19 as per the government provisions. However, Behera did not release his vehicle and demanded the bribe. Following the trap, simultaneous searches were underway at three different locations associated with Behera from the disproportionate assets (DA) angle.

Ex-Min Singh Bhoi quits Cong

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Former Minister and former Titilagarh MLA Surendra Singh Bhoi resigned from the Congress party on Thursday.

He also resigned as the president of Balangir District Congress Committee and a member of All India Congress Committee (AICC).

Bhoi sent his resignation letter to AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge. He cited person reason behind his resignation from the Congress.



Bhoi was associated with the Congress for around 38 years. His resignation from the party assumes significance as he belongs to Balangir, the home district of Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) president Sarat Pattanayak.

CYSD Foundation Day lecture

'Let environ-friendly agro practices be incentivised'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

As India stands committed to reduce emissions intensity of its GDP by 45 percent by 2030 according to its Nationally Determined Contribution, it is high time Odisha Government incentivised the farmers for adopting environment-friendly practices, which can help mitigate the effects of climate change, said development economist Satya S Tripathy at the 43rd Foundation Day lecture of the Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD) titled, "Odisha @2036 - Leveraging Pathways to a Green Economy Transition" here.

The agriculture sector has the potential to both emit and sequester carbon- the process of storing carbon in soil, added Tripathy, who is also the secretary general of Global Alliance for Sustainable Planet.

Citing at the Andhra Pradesh Model, he said that the farmers of Andhra Pradesh are paid Rs 40,000 per hectare of land for their contribution to checking emission and in-



creasing soil fertility and thus help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

He said, "We should learn from the tribals who are the most intuitive, conscious and earth-bound people. Their agricultural practices have a lot of significance not only to check the carbon footprints, but to ensure food security and sustainable livelihoods."

"As we explore challenges and opportunities for Odisha in leveraging investments in nature-based solutions, CYSD has spearheaded a comprehensive Climate-Resilient Agriculture (CRA) initiative in Odisha, impacting over 600,000 individuals across 1,133 villages in 27 blocks of 10 districts," said

CYSD's co-founder Jagadananda. "Our CRA initiatives are an extension of our commitment to empowering communities and building resilience against climate change impacts. By integrating traditional wisdom with modern innovations, our efforts aim at promoting sustainable livelihoods and food security for vulnerable communities in Odisha and contributing to creating a resilient Earth," he added.

CYSD's approach to CRA focuses on empowering small and marginalised farmers in tribal-dominated areas of Odisha, covering 1.06 lakh small and marginal farmers, out of which, 83% are women

and 72% belong to indigenous communities. Around 1,600 champion farmers are models for the entire farming community. The initiative has witnessed remarkable success, with 15,638 farmers embracing natural farming practices, covering an expansive 6,326 hectares of land. Moreover, climate-resilient agricultural practices have been implemented on 62,500 acres of land by 58,000 households, he informed.

Key components of CYSD's CRA initiative include promotion of mixed and intercropping, sustainable agronomic practices and soil conservation, crop diversification and local seed production, promotion of green manure and bio inputs, renewable energy and irrigation, livestock promotion and ethno-veterinary practices. Chandra Sagaria from Kundura, Kaberi Durua and Raimati Durua of Kerimity under Kundura block in Koraput district were felicitated by Tripathy for their contribution to conservation of soil and forest.

Everybody unhappy under BJD rule: Congress

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In Odisha, the BJD government is being run by non-Odias. The 24-year-old Naveen Patnaik government has cheated the people. Nobody is happy here. Everybody from the student, women and farmers are in distress, said the Congress here on Thursday.

Acute unemployment has become a severe headache. Odia youths are forced to work as migrant labourers in other States. The quality of education in the State has decreased.

In the name of 5Ts schools, old schools are being painted due to which contractors are earning profits worth crores. Thousands of schools are being shut

down. There are no teachers in schools and colleges. But the government is giving Rs 10 lakh to Rs 15 lakhs to every college in the name of 'Nua-O' for its own publicity, said PCC publicity committee chairman Bhakta Charan Das at a Press meet.

The monthly income of farmers in Odisha is Rs 5,012, which is the lowest in the country. The four crore people of the State would vote for the Congress and ensure that it comes to power, said Das.

Among others, PCC spokesperson Prasant Satpathy, Manoranjan Das, Padmakar Guru and Bhubaneswar district president Biswajit Das were present.

Ex-Chitrakonda MLA Sisa quits BJD

PNS ■ MALKANGIRI

Dambaru Sisa, a Bonda tribal youth leader and former MLA from Chitrakonda of Malkangiri district, resigned from the primary membership of BJD on Thursday.

Dambaru had been elected to the Assembly in 2014 on a BJD ticket. He sent his resigna-

tion to party supremo Naveen Patnaik.

Dambaru was allegedly neglected in the 2019 elections and was not given a ticket to contest. He would

make a fresh beginning soon, the tribal leader mentioned in his letter. He was an aspirant for a BJD ticket for the 2024 elections.



SOCIAL CANVAS

India should adopt state funding of elections

Representation in democracy should be inclusive of class, caste and gender and it is more challenging in a multi-cultural and multi-religious country like India. The aspirations of people from different socio-economic status should be represented through their leaders in governance. The 17th Lok Sabha has only 14 per cent women and 4.5 per cent Muslim and other minorities. The majority of members across ruling and opposition mostly belong to the rich class. There should be a basic change in our present electoral system to strengthen democracy and make it more inclusive.

The composition and character of the governing bodies taking decisions on behalf of the people should be changed as per the demand of the present scenario. In the context of electoral reforms, State funding of elections features as one of the most important aspects to ensure participation of all sections in the election. Equally important is the proportional representation (PR) system in place of the present first past the post (FPTP) system of election. The election system in practice has been pro-rich, where candidates play a bigger role than parties, and candidates from poor economic backgrounds and small parties and fi-



MANAS JENA

nancially weaker parties have little chance to win, because they cannot compete in campaigning with financially powerful parties supported by upper class of India. The corporate sector decides winners, while corruption, violence and bribing influence the election results. The upper class influences the policy making process of governance in their favour and prevents genuine representation of the candidates by encouraging unfair competition.

The elections in our country for Lok Sabha, State Assembly and local self-government witness huge spending of money on campaigning, road shows, public meetings by

parties and candidates. Mostly, voters are bribed to vote, though a law is there to prevent the practice. Many parties use helicopters and helipads for high-profile campaigning all over the country with special help of film stars and celebrities.

Print and electronic media is used day and night to propagate in support of the parties. All these run into a spending of some thousand crores. Campaigns by ruling parties create problems for local administration and the public by disturbing their normal life. Many party leaders spend a huge amount on building their public image through advertising. Though there is provision for a ceiling on candidates' expenses in elections, there is no ceiling imposed on the political parties' spending during elections.

The ADR sources say that majority of the candidates from ruling parties and elected members are croropaties. It seems the socially and economically backward classes are reasserting their power in democracy. It is discussed in the media that ruling party's bosses sell out tickets to those who have paid huge bribes to them. The mining and industrial lobbies play a substantial role in the selection of candidates. It has been proven now, as we see huge donations in form of electoral bonds purchased by corporates for

the political parties.

The criminal background of the candidates almost is ignored, while candidates with money and backing from industrial, mining and corporate houses are chosen as nominees by the political parties. Their educational background and experience in public life do not matter much. Many of the parties lack internal party democracy and are mostly ruled by a family, an individual and a dominant group. In order to change the situation, there has been a growing demand for State funding of elections, ensuring equal opportunity to all candidates irrespective of their financial background.

Though the matter was discussed in the Constituent Assembly by Prof KT Shah, who moved an amendment that election expenses should be borne by the State, the issue was avoided by the ruling parties. The Dinesh Goswami Committee (Former law Minister) on electoral reforms in 1990, Indrajit Gupta Committee on State funding of elections in 1998, Second Administrative Reform Commission, 2008, and Law Commission report on reforms of the electoral laws 1999 etc have extensively referred to the issue. Former Chief Election Commissioner of India SY Quraishi had argued in favour of

State funding and said it could help end political corruption. The committee's recommendation suggested for State funding to registered State and national parties with restrictions and further said that the Election Commission had to work out modalities on this. It is argued that this can start with partial funding and the funding should be preferable in kind like rent-free accommodation, rent-free telephone, free time on Doordarshan and AIR, fuel for vehicles engaged in elections, paper for printing, loud speaker, free telephone and support for counting agents etc.

There are parties and individuals who oppose State funding, taking the plea that taxpayers are indirectly forced to pay for election expenses of all political parties. Rather, they want to limit their contributions to the parties whom they support. With State funding, the political parties become part of the State rather than the representative of their supporters in particular and people in general. It will affect the ultimate accountability to people. The party candidates may depend more on the State than on their leaders and the role of elites in the party will be reduced. That may affect the performance of parties dominated by individuals and families. Many Left parties supporting

State funding are of the opinion that the parties should not be controlled by the State in the name of funding because it will downsize the political role of a party in holding the State accountable.

However, many argue that the State funding of elections is a necessary cost of democracy and governance and not a huge burden on the State. This process will contribute to reducing the dependency of political parties on the corporate sector. The State funding of elections with strict legal measures will contribute to limiting the role of dominant class, private corporate, communal, casteist and extremist bodies in election. It is further argued that in poor societies, ordinary members of the party cannot support the party's election fund. There are countries like Germany, France, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Brazil, Japan, Spain, Italy and many others who have already adopted State funding for political parties. The IDEA of Sweden, working with the Election Commission of India on electoral reforms and strengthening democracy, says out of a total of 180 countries, 71 countries have facilities of giving State funds based on votes obtained and 86 per cent of the countries in Europe and 58 per cent in Asia have adopted this. In a democracy, there

should be fair access to representation which includes fair election and participation. State funding will pave the way for building genuine party representation and the feudal and hegemonic rule in parties will come to an end, which is very much required for a healthier democracy. The process may encourage parties by marginalized groups such as working class, labourers, peasants, Dalits, Adivasis, STs, OBCs, religious and ethnic minorities, women and small parties to improve their participation in elections.

The political parties must follow internal party democracy and must have a transparent candidate selection process based on principles and policy of the parties rather than leaving it to local influential people to decide on behalf of the party. The high command culture must be replaced with a democratic decision making process. The political parties must be the models of democratic reform for inclusive democracy to be followed by the voters. The Government must invest in political education, citizenship, voter awareness and build a sense of political responsibilities with voters to elect the right candidate without fear and influence.

(manasbbsr15@gmail.com)

Sambalpur bombing

ITI student held; personal enmity motive

PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

Police on Thursday claimed to have cracked the bombing case that had taken place on Tuesday evening near Peerbaba Chhak in Sambalpur. Three persons were injured and a bike was damaged in the bomb explosion.

Police arrested a youth identified as Abhilash Mishra of Sunaripada in Khetarajpur in the town. Police said the bombing was fallout of a past enmity.

According to police, a youth had attacked Abhilash's father earlier and the latter hurled a bomb at the youth as an act of revenge.

Abhilash is an ITI student and allegedly assembled the bomb on his own which he hurled from a flyover.

Northern range IGP Himanshu Lal said, "There is only one accused in this case. Police arrested him and he has been identified as Abhilash Mishra. He had assembled the bomb. His mo-

tive was to take revenge on a person named Sushil. This has happened due to criminal intention. The incident has no communal angle."

Sambalpur SP Mukesh Bhamoo said, "We have seized some material from his house and he had technical knowledge about bomb-making. He used a bicycle in the crime. We have seized his bicycle and cell phone. The phone will be sent for forensic test for data recovery."

In Balangir

Fake notes of Rs 1.36L face value seized

PNS ■ BALANGIR

Police on Thursday seized counterfeit currency notes having face value of Rs 1.36 lakh at Bhainsa village in the Patnagarh area and arrested two persons in this connection. The accused were identified as Rohit Bastia and Varun Parwa. A team of Patnagarh police seized 272 fake currency notes in denomination of Rs 500. A computer and printing materials used in the crime were also seized by the cops.

Reports indicated that the accused tried to pass off some



fake currency notes to a singer participating in a local religious event on Wednesday. However, the singer recognised the counterfeit notes and alerted the committee members. Villagers then informed the Patnagarh police about the matter.

Acting on the information,

police conducted raids at the residences of the accused and apprehended them.

"Further investigation into this organized racket is ongoing. Additional details about the racket will be revealed after questioning the arrested persons," said Patnagarh SDPO Sadanand Pujari.

In Cuttack dist

Accused escapes from custody in court

PNS ■ CUTTACK

A man, who was held in connection with a criminal case, escaped from police custody before being produced in a court in Narasinghpur of Cuttack district.

As per reports, the fugitive, identified as 30-year-old Bapuji Rout of Paika Barabati village, fled from the custody of Kanpur police on Wednesday while being taken for production before the Executive Magistrate in Narasinghpur.

Rout and another accused

were taken to the Magistrate-cum-Tehsildar's court. Rout fled from of the Magistrate's office room.

A police team had to wait at the court for four hours and there was an unusual delay in the process for producing the accused before the court. Taking advantage of this, Rout escaped due to alleged security lapses. Following the incident, a joint team of Kanpur and Narasinghpur police launched a hunt to nab the fugitive. But the accused was yet to be traced.

BBSR Marwari Society celebrates Holi



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Bhubaneswar Marwari Society celebrated the Holi festival with pomp and splendour at the Exhibition Ground here on Tuesday.

Many colourful cultural programmes were organised on the occasion for entertainment of the revellers. The 'Madhab Rock Band' from Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh was the centre of attraction in the evening. Hundreds of Marwai community members of the city participated along

with the families and enjoyed the food and music.

The programme was organised on the supervision of organising chairman Sanjay Lath, vice chairman Chetan Tikriwal, secretaries Siib Kumar Agarwal, Jitendra Mohan Gupta, Suresh Agarwal and treasurer Suresh Kumar Agarwal and the cooperation of all senior members of the Marwari Society.

On the first day, the flag was planted and on the second day the Holika Dahan rituals were held.

In Jagatsinghpur

College student drowns in Mahanadi

PNS ■ JAGATSINGHPUR

A body of a college student, Snehansu Prusty (16), who had been missing since Wednesday while bathing in river Mahanadi near Kotakana village under Raghunathpur block in Jagatsinghpur district, was recovered by ODRAF personnel on Thursday.

The deceased along with a few of his friends had gone to the river at Rathipur Ghat to take bath. Suddenly, Snehansu

slipped into deep water and went missing.

Fire Service personnel from Kujanga and Tirtol rushed to the spot and started a search operation but could not trace him till evening.

The search was again launched on Thursday morning and his body was traced. Police seized the body and sent it for postmortem after registering an UD case. The deceased was a Plus Two student of the Sarala Mahavidyalaya in Tirtol.

Tuberculosis Day by SAHAYOG

'TB is curable; together we can fight it'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

It was a small but powerful and moving gathering at the Bhusandpur Health and Wellness Centre as SAHAYOG NGO commemorated World TB Day. The message echoed by its secretary, Bijayalaxmi Rautaray, resonated with hope and determination. As she addressed the community, emphasising that TB is a curable yet deadly disease, she reminded everyone present that they were warriors

in the battle against tuberculosis. The focus shifted from being victims of the disease to actively fighting against it.

The importance of spreading awareness about the availability of free, high-quality medication, diagnostics, and Government support programmes like the Nikshaya Poshan scheme was highlighted. The stigma surrounding TB patients was acknowledged, but there was a shared sentiment that it was diminishing over time. The chal-



lenges faced in treating TB in children were discussed, with

cases of even the youngest patients battling complex

Annual Meet of Netaji Nursing College held

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The annual meet of Netaji College of Nursing was held with much pomp here on March 24. Inaugurating the event, Justice Dr DP Choudhury lauded the role of nurses and their immense contribution to the medical system. Justice Choudhury exhorted the students of the college to take a vow in serving the patients as their own kith and kin.

The chief guest on the oc-



casion former Director of AIIMS Prof Dr Ashok Mahapatra maintained that it is only the nurses who provide pulsating rhythm to the medical establishments all over the world. He, however, advised the nurses to bridge the gap between the doctors and the patient by correctly following the advice of the doctors for

medical aids and bring back the mentally ill patients to the mainstream of social life.

It was unanimously decided that the 3rd BIIPBSAR Annual Oration Award will go to the noted psychiatrist of the country Prof Dr Nilamadhab Rath. Dr Rath was presented with a plaque of honour by noted social reformer, thinker Prof B Ramachandra and former administrator Suresh Mantri. Dr Rath's great contribution in delivering dedicated services to the mental ill patients would

be remembered by the future generation of psychiatrists, it was cited.

At the outset, convener of the meet Prof Dr Jayaprakash Russell Ravan produced a report on the developmental works undertaken by BIIPBSAR and OHFO. Dr Ravan hoped that the pressure of mental patients upon the society would be lessened if a proper coordination could be achieved by various NGOs, governmental organisations, media along with the members of the family of the mentally sick ones. Finally, chief guest Dr Rath felicitated the psychiatrists Kumari Sushree, Rachita and Amruta for their selfless and dedicated services to the mentally-retarded children.

In Nabarangpur

Eggs thrown at BJP MP candidate's car



PNS ■ NABARANGPUR

After the announcement of candidates for the Lok Sabha elections by the BJP, the internal feud in the party in Nabarangpur constituency has come to the fore.

Unidentified people hurled eggs at Nabarangpur BJP MP candidate Balabhadra Majhi's car on Wednesday afternoon near Maidapur while he was returning from Jharigam on the Maidapur road.

At that time, Majhi was

present in the vehicle along with some of his associates. It was yet to be ascertained who hurled the eggs.

After the BJP announced former MP and State BJP vice-president Balabhadra Majhi as MP candidate for Nabarangpur, the supporters of former MP Parshuram Majhi gathered in Maidapur and opposed the former's candidature.

However, no reaction has been received regarding this incident from Balabhadra.

Techno fest Utkarsh2.0 held at JRGET, Khordha



PNS ■ KHORDHA

The techno annual cultural fest 'Utkarsh2.0' was inaugurated at JRGET campus near Industrial area Khordha with its chairman Vineet Mohan Gupta inaugurating the event.

Registrar of NISER, Bhubaneswar Dr Abhay Kumar Nayak, OUHS Director Dr Santosh Mohapatra and popular comic writer and poet Gyana Hota graced the occasion as chief guest, guest of honour and chief speaker respectively. Other dignitaries, Principal RITE Dr Subash Ranjan

Kabat, Principal KHSSDr Rebecca Bhattacharya, Principal JRG College of Pharmacy Dr Ashish Dev were present on the inaugural session. All the speakers gave emphasis on the mother tongue to be the medium of communication for the holistic development of the students to augment the skills and upgrading the technical knowledge.

Captain Nabin Chandra Sarma gave the welcome speech. The programme was hosted by Dr Tapan Panda and Prof Archana Swain while Prof Bimal Pattnaik coordinated. Monali Padhi gave vote of thanks.

INBRIEF

MAN HELD FOR ASSAULTING WIFE IN BALESWAR

Baleswar: The Town police in Baleswar arrested a man on the charge of assaulting his wife and attempting to kill her. The accused was identified as Mukti Rana, a resident of Barabati



village. He was forwarded to court after being booked under the relevant sections of IPC and the Wildlife Act. Police had raided the house of the accused based on the complaint of his wife. They seized five air-guns and two hides of deer from his house during the raid, said Town police station IIC Barani Das.

MAN GETS 20-YEAR JAIL FOR RAPING MINOR IN G'PATI

Parlakhemundi: A court in Parlakhemundi has sentenced a person to 20 years' imprisonment for raping a minor girl on the pretext of marriage in Gajapati district. The convict Kala Mahindra of Haripur village under the Kashinagar police station was in a relationship with the girl by promising to marry her. Later, the girl became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. But the accused refused to marry her. The girl's family lodged a complaint at the Kashinagar police station on March 13, 2021. Police arrested the accused under the relevant sections of IPC and the POCSO Act.

NALCO LAUNCHES NEW PRODUCT AL-59

Bhubaneswar: The NALCO launched a new product, AL-59, in the form of aluminium alloy ingot on Thursday. AL59 has come into foray primarily in producing conductors for electrical transmission and Ddistribution especially after the launch



of the Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS) of Government of India. This alloy will provide special characteristics to the conductors creating a niche market for the company. The product was launched by Director (Commercial) Sadshiv Samantray in the presence of the first customer. CMD Sridhar Patra congratulated the Smelter and Marketing team for launching of the new product.

FLEET MANAGEMENT AT TATA JODA EAST IRON MINE

Keonjhar: Tata Steel's Joda East Iron Mine (JEIM) celebrated the successful implementation of the revolutionary Wenco Mine Fleet Management System (FMS), marking a significant milestone in the mining industry. This state-of-the-art technology has ushered in a new era for fleet operations at



JEIM, driving remarkable advancements in productivity, sustainability and optimised resource utilisation. The introduction of the Fleet Management System at JEIM represents a paradigm shift in the way fleet operations are managed.

NITA FOOTBALL ACADEMY VICTORIOUS IN IWL-2 ENCOUNTER

Bhubaneswar: In a thrilling showdown at Amal Dutta Kridangan, Kolkata on Thursday, NITA Football Academy, Odisha clinched a 3-2 victory against Pune Krida Prabhodhini Academy, Maharashtra. Priya Rui Das opened the scoring with an early strike. Nibedita Nayak added to the excitement with a well-taken goal. However, it was Priya who sealed the win with her second goal. With this impressive display, NITA inches closer to the IWL-2 Championship. Chairman Subrat Das and all members of the academy congratulated the team for their exceptional performance.

ORANGE WHEELS OPENS HEARING AND SPEECH CLINIC IN BBSR

Bhubaneswar: Orange Wheels India Private Limited, a leading name in the hearing healthcare industry and authorised distributors of Signia hearing aids, has announced the opening of its new Hearing and Speech Clinic in Bhubaneswar recently. Located at Chandrasekharpur, Bhubaneswar, the clinic



is equipped with cutting-edge technology and staffed by highly-trained professionals dedicated to providing comprehensive hearing care services.

POCO LAUNCHES POCO C61 AT JUST 6,999

Bhubaneswar: Committed to striving for excellence in technological innovation, POCO, a leading technology brand has announced the launch of its latest device, POCO C61. Designed to deliver exceptional performance, design and display, POCO C61 embodies POCO's vision of offering exciting features at a compelling price to enhance the overall smartphone experience.



IESA SIGNS MOU FOR CLEAN-TECH AND ENERGY SECTOR

Bhubaneswar: Leading industry body IESA has signed a MoU with BCKIC to jointly work in the critical minerals for energy, energy transition, and green hydrogen space. The purpose of the MoU is to work collaboratively for the upgradation of scientific, technological and innovative infrastructure in the clean-tech and energy sector.

NEW CITROËN BASALT VISION: SUV COUPE WITH BOLD DESIGN AND SPACE

Bhubaneswar: Citroën has unveiled the first images of the Citroën Basalt Vision, a new SUV Coupé concept that will join the brand's range in India and South America in the second half of 2024. Powerful and stylish, this new model blends several automotive codes to offer customers the very best.

US comments on Kejriwal unwarranted, says MEA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Thursday said the US State Department's recent remarks on the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is "unwarranted" and asserted the country is "proud of its independent and robust democratic institutions" and committed to protect them from any form of undue external influences.

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said this in response to a query during his weekly press briefing on New Delhi's stand on the remarks made by Washington on the arrest.

"Yesterday India lodged its strong objection and protest with the senior official from the US embassy with regard to the comments made by the US State Department," he said.

The recent remarks by the State Department are "unwarranted," the MEA Spokesperson said. Any such external imputation on "our electoral and legal processes is completely unacceptable," he said.

"India is proud of its independent and robust democratic institutions. We are committed to protect them from any forms



of undue external influences," he added.

Taking strong objection to certain remarks by a US official regarding the issue of Arvind Kejriwal's arrest, India on Wednesday here summoned a senior US diplomat and lodged a strong protest against Washington's remarks.

On March 23, German diplomat was summoned by New Delhi for certain remarks German foreign ministry on the same issue.

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) officials on Wednesday summoned the Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Gloria Berbena of US at its office in South Block here. The meeting lasted for more than 30 minutes.

Reports had said a US state department official had said Washington "encouraged a fair, transparent and timely legal

process for Chief Minister Kejriwal".

The MEA later in a statement said, "We take strong objection to the remarks of the US State Department about certain legal proceedings in India".

"In diplomacy, states are expected to be respectful of the sovereignty and internal affairs of others. This responsibility is even more so in case of fellow democracies. It could otherwise end up setting unhealthy precedents," the statement said.

India's legal processes are based on "an independent judiciary which is committed to objective and timely outcomes," the MEA said in the statement while underlining that "casting aspersions on that is unwarranted".

The development comes days after India on March 23 had summoned the German deputy chief of mission here and lodged a strong protest against that country's foreign ministry's remarks on the arrest of the Delhi chief minister. A German Foreign Ministry spokesperson had "taken note" of Kejriwal's arrest.

"We see such remarks as interfering in our judicial process and undermining the independence of our judiciary," the MEA had said.

In a blow to BJD, its founding member and Cuttack MP joins BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

BJD founding member and six-time Cuttack Lok Sabha MP Bhartruhari Mahtab joined the BJP here on Thursday, dealing a big blow to the Odisha's ruling party ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

Mahtab, 67, joined the BJP in the presence of senior leaders at the party headquarters here. Along with him, former BJD MP Sidhant Mohapatra and noted Santali language litterateur Damayanti Beshra, who was conferred the Padma Shri in 2020, also joined the BJP in the presence of Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, party national vice president Bajajant Jay Panda, party's Odisha unit president Mannohan Samal and other senior leaders.

Addressing a joint press conference here after joining the BJP, Mahtab, son of former chief minister Harekrushna Mahtab, said he will now get the opportunity to work for the development and progress of Odisha.

"Prime Minister Modi's 'shakti (strength); Home Minister's 'vishwas (trust)' and (BJP chief) JP Nadda ji's 'prerna (inspiration)' will help us move forward," he said.

Odisha is going to witness a change due to Prime Minister Modi's leadership. This change is going to be steered by Home



Minister Amit Shah and other senior leaders of the BJP, Mahtab said. "I am going to start a new innings with a new team."

Welcoming them into the party fold, BJP national general secretary Vinod Tawde said they have joined as they are "impressed" by Prime Minister Modi's leadership and his government work in various sectors.

They have joined the BJP at a time when Odisha is witnessing a change in the political scenario, Tawde said. "And I am confident that the party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, will succeed in bringing the change that people of Odisha want to see in the state."

Addressing the press conference, Mohapatra expressed gratitude towards Nadda and other senior BJP leaders for his

induction into the party and said India has transformed under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi. "I want to see the same transformation happening in Odisha as well."

Beshra said she will work for the welfare of the people of Odisha and also contribute in taking forward Prime Minister Modi's 'sabka saath, sabka vikas (together with all, development for all)' slogan.

"A wind of change is certainly blowing in Odisha this time. People's faith in the BJP's ideals has further strengthened," she said. "I will work for the empowerment and progress of women. I want to assure that I will fulfil any responsibility that the party would give to me."

Mahtab, a six-time MP from the Cuttack Lok Sabha constituency, had resigned from the primary membership of the BJP last Friday.

MEA: India continues to push dialogue to end Ukraine conflict



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Thursday said it continues to encourage a peaceful resolution of the Russia-Ukraine conflict through "dialogue and diplomacy".

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said this in response to a query during a press meet on India's stand on the inaugural Peace Summit in Switzerland. "We continue to encourage peaceful resolution of Russian-Ukraine conflict through dialogue and diplomacy," he said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 20 had separate conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian

President Volodymyr 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.

Indian borders totally secure, says Rajnath

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

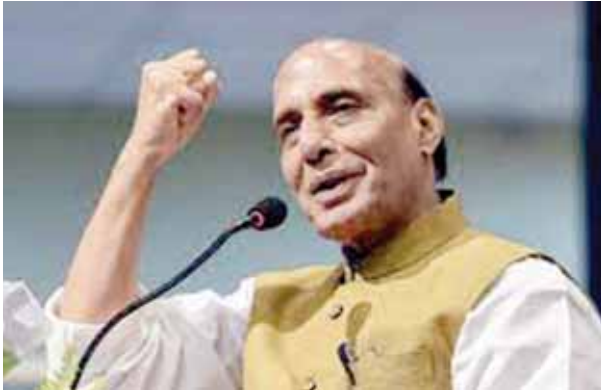
Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday assured the citizens that India and its borders are "totally secure" and the people of the country should have full faith in the armed forces.

During a fireside chat on the concluding day of a private television channel's summit here, while responding to a question on the criticism of the Agniveer scheme, the minister said such questions have "no standing" and underlined that everyone will accept that the armed forces should have a young profile.

During the event, the defence minister also shared anecdotes from his nearly 50-year-long political journey.

Asked how he reacted to questions raised by many, including members of the opposition, on the India-China border issue, Rajnath said they never made him uncomfortable.

"In keeping with the country's



interests, I tell them (opposition) whatever I can. But in defence, there are many things which have strategic importance and we cannot tell them publicly. We try to steer clear of telling those things, whether it is (about) northern, western or eastern sector," he said. "I want to assure the people of the country... They should have full faith in our Army and security personnel," the defence minister said.

Indian and Chinese troops are locked in an over three-and-

half-year-long confrontation at certain friction points in eastern Ladakh even as the two sides completed disengagement from several areas following extensive diplomatic and military talks.

"Having been the defence minister for five years and home minister before that, I want to assure the people of the country based on what I have seen, understood and assessed that our borders and our country are totally secure," he added.

The eastern Ladakh border

standoff erupted on May 5, 2020, following a violent clash in the Pangong lake area. The ties between India and China nosedived significantly following the fierce clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 that marked the most serious military conflict between the two sides in decades. As a result of a series of military and diplomatic talks, the two sides completed the disengagement process in 2021 on the north and south banks of the Pangong lake and in the Gogra area.

Rajnath defended the Agniveer scheme, saying recruiting youths would result in an increased risk-taking spirit and more tech-savvy armed forces.

"Everyone will accept the fact that there should be youthfulness in the armed forces. Normally, 30-50 years has been the age range of our jawans. But when jawans aged 18-20 will join as Agniveers, then the risk-taking spirit will be a bit higher," he said.

Senior jawans are discharging

their responsibilities well, there is no two ways about it, he said. Today is the age of technology and the Indian youth should also be tech-savvy. Such youths are being recruited under this scheme as Agniveers, he added.

The future of these youths will not be impacted by the scheme. Steps have been taken to secure their future, including making provisions for reservation for Agniveers in paramilitary forces, Rajnath said.

"And if we see any drawbacks, then we are ready to rectify them," he said.

In June 2022, the Centre rolled out the Agnipath recruitment scheme for short-term induction of personnel into the armed forces with an aim to bring down the age profile of the three services.

The scheme provides for recruiting youngsters in the age bracket of 17 years and a half to 21 years for a four-year period with a provision to retain 25 per cent of them for 15 more years.

Government revises wages under MGNREGS

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Government has revised wages under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for unskilled workers, with hikes ranging from four to ten per cent across different states.

Though Haryana tops in terms of wage rate at Rs 374 per day, the increase is only around four per cent.

Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have the lowest at Rs 234 per day, according to the notification.

However, the Opposition Congress has criticised the dismal wage rate increase, with party's leader Rahul Gandhi taking to social media to express his discontent. He sarcastically congratulated MGNREGA workers on what he termed as a meager increase of Rs 7 in their daily wages. Gandhi also slammed



the government, suggesting that instead of significantly improving the livelihoods of the workers, they might allocate a substantial amount towards a campaign thanking Modi for the negligible raise.

The wage rate in three panchayats of Sikkim — Gnathang, Lachung and Lachen — is Rs 374 a day. The wage revision under the scheme was notified by the Union Rural Development Ministry on March 27 after

clearance from the Election Commission as the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is in force for the Lok Sabha polls.

The increases have been made on the 2023 wage rates under a scheme that is aimed at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

AFSPA extended in Arunachal, Nagaland for six more months

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, under which an area is declared as "disturbed" for the convenience of security forces, has been extended in three districts of Arunachal Pradesh, eight districts of Nagaland and some other areas for six more months after a review of the law and order situation in these two northeastern states.

The AFSPA gives armed forces personnel, operating in disturbed areas, sweeping powers to search, arrest and to open fire if they deem it necessary for "the maintenance of public order". An area or district is notified as a disturbed area under the AFSPA to facilitate the operations of the armed forces.

In a notification, the Union home ministry said the central government in exercise of the powers conferred by Section 3 of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 had declared the Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts in Arunachal Pradesh and the areas falling within the jurisdiction of Namsai, Mahadevpur and Chowkham police stations in Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering the State of Assam, as declared as 'disturbed area' under Section 3 of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 for a period of six months with effect from 01.04.2024, unless withdrawn earlier," the notification said.

In a separate notification, the home ministry also said that the central government in exercise of the powers conferred by AFSPA had declared eight districts and 21 police stations in five other districts of Nagaland as 'disturbed area' for a period of six months with effect from October 1, 2023. The home ministry said a further review of the law-and-order situation in Nagaland has been undertaken and after that a decision has been taken to declare as 'disturbed area' under the AFSPA for six more months in eight districts of the state and areas falling under 21 police stations.

The districts where the imposition of 'disturbed area' under the AFSPA will continue are Dimapur, Niuland,



Mahadevpur and Chowkham police stations in Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering the State of Assam, as declared as 'disturbed area' under Section 3 of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 for a period of six months with effect from October 1, 2023. The home ministry said a further review of the law-and-order situation in Nagaland has been undertaken and after that a decision has been taken to declare as 'disturbed area' under the AFSPA for six more months in eight districts of the state and areas falling under 21 police stations.

The districts where the imposition of 'disturbed area' under the AFSPA will continue are Dimapur, Niuland,

Chumoukedima, Mon, Kiphire, Noklak, Phek and Peren districts. The police stations where the law will be applicable are: Khuzama, Kohima North, Kohima South, Zubza and Kezocha police stations in Kohima district; Mangkolemba, Mokokchung-I, Longtho, Tuli, Longchem and Anaki 'C' police stations in Mokokchung district; Yanglok police station in Longleng district; Bhandari, Champang and Ralan police stations in Wokha district; and Ghatashi, Pughoboto, Satahka, Suruhoto, Zunheboto and Aghunato police stations in Zunheboto district.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah had earlier said the AFSPA has been removed in 70 per cent areas in the north-eastern states even though it is in force in Jammu and Kashmir. On March 26, Shah had said the central government would consider revoking AFSPA in Jammu and Kashmir. There have been demands from various organisations and individuals in Jammu and Kashmir and northeastern states to revoke the AFSPA.

NET scores to be used for PhD admissions from 2024-25: UGC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Eligibility Test (NET) scores will be used for PhD admissions from 2024-25 eliminating the need for separate entrance tests conducted by universities and higher education institutions, according to the University Grants Commission. The NET is conducted twice a year -- June and December. Its scores are currently used to award Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and as eligibility for appointment as an assistant professor for those with a Master's degree.

According to University Grants Commission (UGC) officials, the commission had constituted an expert committee to review the provisions of the exam and based on the panel's recommendations, it has decided that from the academic session 2024-25, the score can be used for admission to PhD programmes.

"Starting from the academic session 2024-2025, universities nationwide will have the opportunity to utilise NET scores for admissions to PhD programmes, replacing the need for separate entrance tests conducted by individual universities and higher education institutions (HEIs). This marks an important step in streamlining the admission process and enhancing accessibility for aspiring doctoral candidates.

"By leveraging the NET, which is conducted biannually, universities can offer greater flexibility to students, allowing them to utilise their scores from either session to apply for PhD programmes across vari-



ous institutions," UGC Chairman Jagadesh Kumar said.

Kumar explained that the initiative is poised to benefit students in numerous ways. "Firstly, it eliminates the need for students to prepare and appear for multiple entrance tests conducted by different universities, thereby reducing the burden of exam logistics and expenses. Additionally, the biannual administration of the NET provides students with increased opportunities to secure admission to their desired PhD programmes.

"We strongly encourage all universities to adopt NET exam scores for PhD admissions starting from the 2024-2025 academic session. This will undoubtedly contribute to fostering a more conducive environment for academic pursuit and scholarly advancement in our nation," he said.

In an official notification, the UGC said that from June 2024 onwards, the NET candidates will be declared eligible in three categories -- for admission to PhD with JRF and appointment as assistant professor; for admission to PhD

without JRF and appointment as assistant professor; for admission to PhD programme only and not for the award of JRF or appointment as assistant professor.

"Result of UGC NET would be declared in percentile along with the marks obtained by a candidate to utilise the marks for admission to PhD. The JRF-qualified students are admitted into the PhD programme based on an interview as per the UGC (Minimum Standards and Procedures for Award of PhD Degree) Regulations, 2022.

"For students who qualify in categories 2 and 3, 70 per cent weightage will be given for test scores and 30 per cent for the interview for admission to PhD programmes. The PhD admission will be based on the combined merit of NET marks and the marks obtained in the interview or viva voce," the notification said. The marks obtained in the NET by the candidates in categories 2 and 3 will be valid for one year for admission to PhD.

The registration process for UGC NET June 2024 is expected to begin next week.

Households wasted 1 billion meals daily in 2022: UN report

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In 2022, every day, households worldwide wasted over 1 billion meals, while a heart-breaking 783 million people struggled with hunger, and a third of the global population faced food insecurity, as per a UN report published just ahead of the International Day of Zero Waste marked on March 30.

The economic toll due to waste food is estimated at roughly USD 1 trillion, highlighting the urgent need for action, said the UNEP Food Waste Index Report 2024, prepared by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), in collaboration with the environmental charity WRAP, which has brought to attention the grave consequences of food waste while underscoring the glaring disparity between abundance and deprivation that persists worldwide.

The report has also highlighted how this issue not only hurts the global economy but also fuels climate change, loss of biodiversity, and pollution. A detailed analysis of the data reveals an alarming scenario: In 2022, a staggering 1.05 billion tons of food waste were generated, equivalent to 132 kilograms per person and nearly one-fifth of all available food. Surprisingly, a significant portion of this waste, 60 per cent, occurred at the household level, with food services responsible for 28 per cent and retail contributing 12 per cent.

Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UNEP said, "Food waste is a global tragedy. Millions go hungry as food is wasted across the world. Not only is this a major develop-

ment issue, but the impacts of such unnecessary waste are causing substantial costs to the climate and nature. If countries prioritise this issue, they can significantly reverse food loss and waste, reduce climate impacts and economic losses, and accelerate progress on global goals."

At the same time, Harriet Lamb, CEO of WRAP called for more G20 countries to measure food waste and work towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goal. Public-private partnerships were highlighted as a key tool in addressing the complex challenges of food waste.

The report notes that despite efforts to track food waste, many low- and middle-income countries lack adequate systems to monitor progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 12.3, which aims to halve food waste by 2030. Only a few G20 countries, along with the European Union, have suitable estimates to track progress.

Interestingly, the report debunked the notion that food waste is only a problem in wealthy nations. Household food waste levels varied only slightly among high-income, upper-middle, and lower-middle-income countries. Hotter countries appeared to generate more food waste per person, possibly due to higher consumption of fresh foods with inedible parts and limited cold chain infrastructure.

The environmental impact of food waste is substantial, contributing 8-10 per cent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions and causing significant biodiversity loss.

UPPL files complaint against Congress

Over photo of suspended member sleeping with money

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

BJP ally United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) has lodged a complaint with the Election Commission against Congress' Kerala unit and its media platform INC TV for allegedly spreading false news over the viral photo of its one suspended member sleeping with currency notes.

A viral picture purportedly of a suspended UPPL member sleeping with currency notes triggered a controversy in Assam on Wednesday. The opposition grabbed the opportunity and slammed the BJP-led alliance, saying the ruling bloc is "wallowing in the quagmire of corruption".

UPPL filed two identical complaints -- one against Kerala Congress with the Election Commission of India and the other against INC TV with the Chief Electoral Officer of Assam -- and referred to the posts on X of the two entities.

"The tweet in question falsely claimed that 'Assam BJP's alliance partner UPPL led by BTR's Pramod Boro was found sleeping

on stacks of Rs 500 currency notes'. Such misinformation has the potential to manipulate public opinion, deceive voters and disrupt the integrity of the electoral process," UPPL chief Pramod Boro said in the complaint.

He claimed that the news in question is "absolutely false, fabricated and manufactured", which is circulated with the intent to "malign the image" of the president of the UPPL and the party as well.

"The dissemination of such fake news not only violates the ethical standards of journalism but also undermines the fundamental principles of democracy," said Boro, the Chief Executive Member of Bodoland Territorial Council.

He appealed to the Election Commission to investigate the matter promptly and take necessary actions to address the spread of the "fake news" by Kerala Congress and INC TV.

"It is imperative to uphold the principles of free and fair elections and prevent the dissemination of false information that could influence



electoral outcomes. Safeguarding the truth and ensuring transparency in the electoral process are essential for the credibility of our democratic system," Boro said.

He also urged the Election Department of Assam to conduct a thorough investigation into the matter to ascertain the extent of the misinformation spread by Kerala Congress and INC TV, and to take necessary steps to

mitigate its impact on the upcoming elections.

Sharing screenshots of the posts of Kerala Congress and INC TV, Boro said his name was mentioned in those without verification.

In a post on X, Boro said, "In its penchant to spread lies and fake news, Congress has stooped so low that they have become a fake news factory and will malign anyone. The people will not be

misled by their fake news and false promises and will give them a fitting reply. Congress will be zero in Assam this time."

"In these screenshots, CONgress and @RahulGandhi's Fake News Factory have used my name without even verifying. Have lodged official complaint with Election Commission of Assam and request @ECISVEEP to take strict action against Congress and their fake news social media pages," he added.

Boro said an FIR will also be lodged with Kokrajhar police station over the matter. In the image, Benjamin Basumatary, identified in the photograph as a Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) member of UPPL, is seen sleeping on a bed wearing only a traditional towel with a heap of Rs 500 denomination notes.

"The photo that has gone viral is five years old. It has been made viral due to political conspiracy. We will find out who has done this," Basumatary told reporters when asked about the picture. He admitted that the photograph was authentic, but claimed that some people had blackmailed

him at that time after he was clicked in that pose.

"Five years ago, I had taken a loan of Rs 3 lakh for some work from my sister. That particular night, some of us were having a party and my partner clicked the photo with the money I had borrowed in a fun moment," he added. The UPPL sought to distance itself from the image, stating that Basumatary has been suspended and removed from the VCDC post.

Boro on Wednesday claimed that the Harisingha Block Committee of the party had recommended disciplinary action against Basumatary on January 5 this year and accordingly, he was suspended on January 10 over the photograph. "Additionally, the BTC Government suspended and removed him from the post of VCDC Chairman on 10th February, 2024. I urge all media outlets and social media users to refrain from linking Mr Basumatary with UPPL," he said in a post on X.

Boro further said that Basumatary's actions are solely his own responsibility and the party is not accountable for any of his personal acts.



JMM has deviated from its principle, indulged in graft: Sita

PTI ■ RANCHI

Sita Soren sister-in-law of former Chief minister Hemant Soren on Thursday said development of Jharkhand is possible through the ideology of PM Narendra Modi, as the JMM has "deviated from its principle and indulged in corruption".

She claimed that BJP will win all 14 Lok Sabha seats in Jharkhand and fulfil its target of 'Apki Baar 400 Paar'.

After joining the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on March 19, the former Jama MLA arrived in Jharkhand on Thursday and spoke to media persons at the BJP headquarters in Ranchi.

"JMM was in the right direction till my late husband Durga Soren was in the party. But now, it has deviated from its principles and policies. JMM is now in the hands of brokers and indulged in corruption," she said.

She claimed that her late husband played a significant role in the Jharkhand movement but he was not given due respect. "The death of my husband is still a mystery. I repeatedly demanded a probe into his death but it was not heard," she said.

Sita, a three-term MLA and elder daughter-in-law of party patriarch Shibu Soren on March 20 joined the BJP in New Delhi citing "isolation" and "neglect" by JMM since the death of her husband Durga Soren in 2009. The BJP has also announced her name as candidate for the Dumka Lok Sabha constituency on March 24. Sita claimed that she was also not given the due respect in the party.

War of words in Kerala between Congress, BJP Over Easter being working day in Manipur

PTI ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM



The Manipur government's decision to declare Easter as a working day there on Thursday led to a war of words between the Congress and the BJP in Kerala which has a significant Christian population.

In the morning, Congress Working Committee member Shashi Tharoor and Leader of Opposition in the state assembly V D Satheesan condemned the Manipur government's decision by terming it as "disrespectful" and "divisive". Satheesan also called the BJP "wolves in sheep's clothing" for their act of bringing cakes to Christian homes in Kerala when on the other hand their government in Manipur was taking such decisions. He also pointed out that Prime Minister Narendra Modi who makes frequent visits to Kerala was yet to go to Manipur even once after violence broke out there.

Hitting back at the Congress, after the Manipur government retracted its controversial order, senior BJP leader Prakash Javadekar alleged that the grand old party was "raking up falsehoods" as it has no issues to raise. "The Manipur government has issued notification that tomorrow 29th Good Friday and 31 Easter Sunday will be a holiday. Congress has no issues. Therefore they are

raking up falsehoods. Congress and Communist should now tell when they will condemn Hamas attack and terror attack in Russia," Javadekar, who is also the party's Kerala in-charge, said in a post on social media platform X.

The war of words between the two national parties comes ahead of LS polls where the Manipur violence is being used by the Congress and the Left to target the BJP which is striving to woo Christians in the southern state with cakes to end their electoral drought in Kerala.

While BJP state president and the party's candidate from Wayanad constituency K Surendran also spoke along similar lines as Javadekar, Union Minister of State for Information Technology and Electronics Rajeev Chandrasekhar said that he "strongly opposes" any such order that declared Easter as a working day.

Addressing reporters, Chandrasekhar, who is the BJP candidate from Thiruvananthapuram constituency, said that he came to know about the order from news reports and immediately sent a request to the Manipur government to reconsider it.

Kriti files nomination for Tripura East LS constituency

PTI ■ AGARTALA

Kriti Devi Debbarman, the 'joint candidate' of Tipra Motha and BJP on Thursday submitted her nomination papers for Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency.

Accompanied by Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha, Tipra Motha chief Pradyot Kishore Debbarma and other senior BJP and Tipra Motha leaders she filed her nomination papers at the Office of the Returning Officer of Tripura East Lok

Sabha constituency.

Kriti Devi, sister of Pradyot Kishore Debbarma is married to Yogeshwar Raj Singh of the Rajkot royal family of Chhattisgarh. She changed her surname to Kriti Devi Debbarman by an affidavit before filing her nomination papers as the Tripura East Lok Sabha seat is reserved for Scheduled Tribe candidates.

When contacted, the District Magistrate of Dhalai and Returning Officer (RO), Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency, Sajju Vaheed



said her ST status is valid because it (ST status) is not changed by marriage even after her marriage as per the ruling of Supreme Court.

"The Tipra Motha-BJP candidate submitted her nomination papers for the Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency as Kriti Devi Debbarman and her ST status stands valid", the Returning Officer said.

Chief Minister Manik Saha claimed that the BJP-Tipra Motha-IPFT combine will both the Lok Sabha seats in Tripura.

"Today's huge gathering is the signal that the BJP-Tipra Motha-IPFT combine will win both Lok Sabha seats in Tripura. We are sure of

winning the Tripura East Lok Sabha seat by a huge margin", the chief minister told media persons.

Pradyot Debbarma claimed that Kriti Devi Debbarman will win the Lok Sabha elections with a record margin.

"Not only Tiprasa people, but people from across all communities joined the rally to mark the filing of nomination papers. Our candidate will win the election with a record margin in the elections," the Tipra Moth chief claimed.

Former Haryana Minister Savitri quits Congress, joins BJP

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH



Former Haryana minister Savitri Jindal quit the Congress and joined the BJP in Haryana's Hisar on Thursday, days after her son and industrialist Naveen Jindal switched parties.

The 84-year-old Savitri Jindal joined the BJP along with her daughter Seema in the presence of Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, former chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar and other BJP leaders.

Announcing her decision to quit the Congress in a social media post late on Wednesday night, she said, "I represented the people of Hisar for 10 years as an MLA and have served Haryana state selflessly as a minister. The people of Hisar are my family and on the advice of my family, I am resigning from the primary membership of the Congress today."

Savitri Jindal was listed as the richest woman in the country by Forbes India this year.

According to the Forbes list of the 10 richest women in India, Savitri Jindal, the wife of the late industrialist and former minister O P Jindal, has a net worth of USD 29.1 billion (one billion = Rs 100 crore).

In a post on X, Saini said, "We

welcome into the BJP family veteran Congress leader, former minister in Haryana government, famous social worker Smt. Savitri Jindal ji and her daughter Smt. Seema Jindal ji." Savitri Jindal was a minister in the previous Bhupinder Singh Hooda-led Congress government in Haryana.

In 2014, she lost to BJP's

Kamal Gupta from Hisar. Gupta is currently a minister in the Saini-led government.

Naveen Jindal, who represented Kurukshetra in the Lok Sabha from 2004-14 as a Congress MP, quit the party on Sunday. He has been named as the BJP candidate from Kurukshetra.

After being welcomed into the party fold by Saini and

Khattar, Savitri Jindal said, "We will work together to form a strong government at the Centre under (Prime Minister Narendra) Modi's leadership once again."

"I express gratitude to every office-bearer and worker of the BJP for making us a member of the 'Modi Parivar'. We will live up to the party's expectations," she said.

Haryana witnessed unprecedented development under the previous Khattar government, she added.

Savitri Jindal further said, "I am impressed by the prime minister's vision of making India a developed nation by 2047."

Speaking about her husband O P Jindal, who died in a helicopter crash in 2005, she said he was of the view that India can become a great nation with the upliftment of the downtrodden and economically weaker sections.

"He entered politics with this pledge in 1991. After his demise in March 2005, I entered politics to realise his dreams," she said.

"Hisar is my janam and karam bhoomi. People of Hisar have always showered their love and I also treated them as part of my family," she said.

Savitri Jindal said the country needs the BJP and Modi today. Speaking on the occasion, Saini said the BJP's double-engine government did a lot of development work in the past 10 years.

Party leaders Kamal Gupta, Bhavya Bishnoi, and former governor Ganeshi Lal were also present on the occasion.

Meanwhile, party leaders also inaugurated the election office of Ranjit Singh Chautala, who has been fielded by the BJP from Hisar Lok Sabha seat.

Polling for 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana will be held in the sixth phase on May 25.

Himachal BJP workers welcome Congress rebel Rana

PTI ■ HAMIRPUR/SHIMLA

Congress rebel Rajinder Rana, now the BJP candidate for the Sujanpur assembly seat in Himachal Pradesh's Hamirpur district, faced black flags from the NSUI activists but he also received a grand welcome from his supporters on visiting his constituency Thursday.

Rana, a three-time legislator hogged the limelight by defeating former chief minister Prem Kumar Dhumal in the 2017 assembly polls. He is one of the six disqualified Congress MLAs who, along with three Independent legislators, had voted in favour of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nominee Harsh Mahajan in the Rajya Sabha polls on February 27.

All the MLAs switched to the BJP on March 23 following which the six rebels including Rana, were given tickets from their respective assembly seats. Rana returned to his constituency after a month.



The National Students' Union of India (NSUI), the student wing of the Congress, raised slogans and displayed black flags at the Anu Chowk in Hamirpur as Rana's vehicle passed by to reach the Kot Village in Sujanpur to attend a welcome ceremony.

Rana was accompanied by

former BJP minister Bikram Thakur and was welcomed by the supporters at Kot Village in Sujanpur where the BJP workers raised slogans in his support.

The former Congress MLA noted that the workers were enthusiastic and claimed that the BJP would win all the

assembly seats going to the bypolls and the Lok Sabha seats of the state.

Referring to the resentment among the BJP leaders after the six rebels were given the tickets, he said small resentments are part of democracy. They will sit and talk with those who are protesting.

He slammed Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu and said, "The CM has betrayed and humiliated me and discriminated against the development of Sujanpur."

He reiterated that the Sukhu government is on a ventilator. The six Congress rebels were disqualified for defying a party whip to be present in the House and vote in favour of the government during the cut motions and the budget.

Meanwhile, sensing fissures in the BJP after the Congress rebels were fielded from their respective assembly seats on the BJP ticket, the party formed coordination in Hamirpur district to ensure unity among its ranks ahead

of the upcoming elections on Wednesday.

BJP leader Ranjit Singh, who contested the assembly polls in 2022 from Sujanpur, announced that he will contest the byelections as an Independent candidate against the party's nominee, Rana, a Congress turncoat.

Singh insisted that he will work to support the party's candidate, Union Minister Anurag Singh Thakur, for the Lok Sabha polls in Hamirpur.

In the 2022 assembly polls, Singh lost to Rana, who was a Congress leader then, by a margin of 399 votes.

With the disqualification of the six Congress MLAs, the strength of the ruling party came down from 40 to 34, including the Speaker who can vote only in the case of a tie during a floor test, in the 68-member Assembly. The BJP has 25 members.

The three Independents have resigned and joined the BJP but their resignation is yet to be accepted by the Speaker.

Residents of remote Uttarakhand village to boycott LS polls over non construction of road

PTI ■ GOPESHWAR (U'KHAND)

The villagers of Dumak in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district have decided to boycott the upcoming Lok Sabha polls over the non-construction of a vital road linking the village with the district headquarters for which they have been agitating for four decades.

Whenever elections are round the corner, the villagers renew their poll boycott call in the hope of getting their long-standing demand fulfilled.

Construction agencies rush equipment to the village raising their hopes, but those are withdrawn as soon as the elections are over.

Dumak hosts one of the remotest polling stations in Chamoli district.

The residents of several villages of the area have formed a joint struggle committee for the construction of the road from Syund to Dumak and Kalgot.

The convenor of the committee and former head of Dumak village, Prem Singh Sanwal, said the people of



Dasholi and Pankhanda areas have boycotted elections twice since the 1990s to demand the construction of the road.

The residents of Dumak had even decided to boycott the 2019 Lok Sabha election, he said, adding that on the district administration's initiative, the road construction department sent machines to the village about a week before the polling day, which led to the withdrawal of the poll boycott call.

However, as soon as the polling process was over, the department took back the machines.

It has been five years since but

the fate of the road is still uncertain, Sanwal said.

The angry villagers had launched a long protest in January.

The agitation was postponed after the intervention and assurance of Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami but the construction work has still not started, prompting the villagers to take a collective decision to boycott the upcoming election, Sanwal said.

A memorandum was submitted to the district magistrate on March 15 regarding the people's intention to boycott the polls, he said, adding that the DM is yet to respond to it.

In June 2022, the present chief election commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, trekked to the remote village of Dumak to inspect the polling booth there, Sanwal said.

He spoke to locals about the problems they face in daily commutation and assured them that the DM would soon visit the village and address the issue within a month, Sanwal said.

Truth travels freely

Kejriwal’s arrest gets international attention; vendetta politics may boomerang on ED

Brought to the Rouse Avenue Court amid high drama, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has described his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate in the excise policy case as a “political conspiracy.” Himself making submissions in the court after taking the special judge’s permission, he expressed confidence that the public will give a “fitting reply to this injustice”. Seeking to establish a link between the Electoral Bond donations received by the ruling party and his arrest, the Delhi Chief Minister said that people were being turned ‘approver’ in the case and being forced to change their statements. “My arrest by the ED is a political conspiracy ... the approver gave the BJP Rs 55 crore,” he said. As a precursor to this setting, Kejriwal’s wife, Sunita, broke her silence and hinted at the impending revelation of this crucial piece of information. Kejriwal, known for his anti-corruption stance and vocal criticism of the Centre, was arrested last week on charges of being embroiled in a multi-crore liquor scam. The arrest sparked widespread outcry and protests, with supporters of Kejriwal alleging political vendetta and the BJP’s bid to settle political scores with the AAP upon losing the MCD elections after 15 years. Apart from being charged with soliciting kickbacks from liquor traders in exchange for favours, the Delhi Chief Minister is also accused of being the “kingpin and key conspirator” in the now-scrapped policy. The agency has already arrested at least 14 top AAP leaders, including Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia and Minister Sanjay Singh, in connection with the case.



Meanwhile, the international community has also been drawn into the fray, with the US making remarks regarding Kejriwal’s arrest that have drawn the ire of Indian officials. The US State Department expressed concern over what it termed as “the apparent suppression of dissent” in India, calling for due process and respect for human rights. However, Indian authorities swiftly responded, asserting that the comments were unwarranted interference in the country’s internal affairs. Germany was the first country to speak against Kejriwal’s arrest. Whenever a politician is put behind bars, there are consequences to it. The Union Government should be doubly sure that it has a watertight case against the accused person, else there are high chances that it will boomerang. Due to the lack of information on the case in public domain, we shall assume that the authorities have a strong case against the Delhi CM and that due process of law would be followed. But if it is an exercise in haste, Kejriwal’s words might prove prophetic as elections are just around the corner. The citizens are discerning enough to read any signs of political vendetta. The outcome of this legal battle and its broader implications remain uncertain, but one thing is clear – the events unfolding around Kejriwal have captured the attention of the nation and the world, highlighting the enduring struggle for transparency, accountability and justice in the corridors of power.

PICTALK



A shepherd with his sheep near a mustard field on the outskirts of Srinagar

PTI

Dandi March: Salt, soul and satyagraha

The Dandi March serves as a reminder that peaceful protest can be a potent weapon against injustice and oppression

The 1980s film ‘Mard’ immortalised a poignant scene that encapsulates the essence of patriotism, rebellion, and sacrifice in Indian cinematic history. In this scene, the protagonist, amidst relentless flogging by the heroine armed with chains, whispers with unyielding spirit, “For this salt, our Mahatma led a revolution.” This homage vividly captures the spirit of the Salt Satyagraha of 1930, a pivotal moment in India’s quest for independence, led by Mahatma Gandhi. The Salt Satyagraha, which took place from March 12 to April 6, 1930, galvanised a nation against British colonial rule. Gandhi’s symbolic act of picking up salt at Dandi defiantly challenged the salt taxes imposed by the British, symbolising defiance and resilience in India’s freedom struggle. Over 90,000 brave souls willingly embraced brutality in their pledge for non-violence, standing as a beacon of hope against tyranny. The genesis of the Dandi March was rooted in the momentum established by the Bardoli Satyagraha in 1928, led by Sardar



Vallabhbhai Patel. This successful movement unified farmers and nationalists against oppressive British taxation, revitalising the spirit of the freedom struggle. By 1930, the Indian National Congress boldly articulated its aspiration for independence, setting the stage for Gandhi’s Salt Satyagraha. Gandhi’s letter to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, articulated the grievances of millions and announced his intention to lead a nonviolent protest against British atrocities. Despite Gandhi’s emphasis on dialogue and peaceful resolution, the Viceroy’s inadequate response led to the commencement of the Dandi March on March 12, 1930. Accompanied by 78 dedicated followers, Gandhi embarked on a significant march covering nearly 241 miles from Sabarmati

Ashram to Dandi. This symbolic journey aimed at challenging the oppressive salt tax and British monopolistic control over salt production. The disciplined resolve of the satyagrahis exemplified unity amidst diversity, embodying the nation’s aspirations for liberation. On April 6, 1930, Gandhi’s defiance of the Salt Laws at Dandi marked a pivotal moment in India’s struggle for independence. His call to civil disobedience catalysed a mass boycott of British goods, prompting a harsh crackdown from British authorities. Despite brutal repression, the spirit of nonviolent resistance persisted, revealing the resilience of the Indian populace. The Salt Satyagraha showcased resolute collective action, with over 60,000 willingly imprisoned and thou-

sands more participating in peaceful protests. Despite Government reprisals, the ‘satyagrahis’ maintained remarkable restraint and non-violent discipline. This non-violent resistance ultimately led to negotiations with Congress leadership and Gandhi’s release after a year of imprisonment. The Dandi March culminated in the historic breaking of the salt laws, a symbolic act of defiance that reverberated globally. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. drew inspiration from Gandhi’s example, recognising the power of nonviolent resistance in confronting injustice. The Dandi March was not just a chapter in history but a transformative moment in India’s fight for independence, marking Gandhi’s emergence as a spiritual force. Through unwavering dedication to love and nonviolence, Gandhi wielded a potent weapon against oppression, demonstrating the profound impact of spirituality in challenging times.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



RAJDEEP PATHAK

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A tribute to the two great saints of India

The lives of Swami Atmasthananda ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission ‘Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha’



NARENDRA MODI

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the grand festival of Lok Sabha elections, the news of the demise of Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj brought my mind to a standstill for a few moments. Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj was a pioneer of India’s spiritual consciousness and his demise is like a personal loss. A few years ago, the demise of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and now the departure of Swami Smaranananda Ji on his eternal journey has left many people bereaved. My heart, like that of crores of devotees, saints and followers of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, is deeply saddened. During my visit to Kolkata earlier this month, I had gone to the hospital to enquire about Swami Smaranananda Ji’s health. Just like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji too dedicated his entire life for spreading the ideas of Acharya Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mata Sharada Devi and Swami Vivekananda across the world. While writing this article, the memories of meetings and conversations with him are getting refreshed in my mind. In January 2020, during my stay at Belur Math, I meditated in the room of Swami

Vivekananda. During that visit, I had a long conversation about Swami Atmasthananda Ji with Swami Smaranananda Ji. It is widely known that I had a close relationship with Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math. As a seeker of spirituality, I have met different saints and mahatmas and been to many places over the period of more than five decades. Even in Ramakrishna Math, I got to know about the saints who dedicated their lives to spirituality, among whom personalities like Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji were prominent. Their sacred thoughts and knowledge provided contentment to my mind. In the most important period of my life, such saints taught me the true principle of *Jan Seva hi Prabhu Seva*. The lives of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission ‘Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha’. We all are inspired by the work being done by Ramakrishna Mission for the promotion of education and

THEIR SACRED THOUGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE PROVIDED CONTENTMENT TO MY MIND. IN THE MOST IMPORTANT PERIOD OF MY LIFE, SUCH SAINTS TAUGHT ME THE TRUE PRINCIPLE OF JAN SEVA HI PRABHU SEVA

rural development. Ramakrishna Mission is working on India’s spiritual enlightenment, educational empowerment and humanitarian service. In 1978, when the disastrous flood struck Bengal, Ramakrishna Mission won the hearts of everyone with its selfless service. I remember, when an earthquake ravaged Kutch in 2001, Swami Atmasthananda Ji was among the first people to call me and offer all possible assistance for disaster management on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission. Under his direction, Ramakrishna Mission helped many people who were affected by the earthquake. Over the past years, while holding various positions, Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji laid great emphasis on social empowerment. Those who know the lives of these great personalities will definitely remember how serious these saints were towards modern education, skilling and women empowerment. Among his many inspiring traits, one thing that impressed me the most was Swami Atmasthananda Ji’s love and respect for every culture and every tradition.

The reason for this was that he used to travel continuously and had spent a long time in different parts of India. He learned to speak Gujarati while living in Gujarat. He used to even speak with me in the language and I loved listening to his Gujarati! At different points in India’s development journey, our motherland has been blessed by many saints and seers like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji who have ignited the spark of societal change. They have motivated us to work with a collective spirit and address all the challenges our society faces. These principles are eternal and will act as our source of strength as we embark on developing a Viksit Bharat during the Amrit Kaal. Once again, on behalf of the entire nation, I pay homage to such saintly souls. I am confident that all the people associated with the Ramakrishna Mission will further move ahead on the path shown by them. Om Shanti.

(This is a tribute to Smaranananda ji Maharaj and Swami Atmasthananda Ji by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICIANS HITTING BELOW THE BELT

Madam — Apropos editorial “Political zealotry” published on March 28, this is my response. It pains one to note that exchanges amongst political rivals are getting too personal and downright abusive. Recent examples are Supriya Srinate of the GOP and Dilip Ghose of the BJP. Wish our “netas,” spokespersons and candidates were more accommodating and tolerant, instead of hissing at one another like venomous snakes. I cite here a witty remark by MP Piloo Mody that turned the tables on his opponent. Mody, a big roly-poly man, showed his back to a minister because he felt outraged at some point. The minister took strong objection to Mody’s gesture and interpreted it to be an insult to the House itself. Piloo Mody replied - “Mr. Speaker Sir, I have no front, no back, no flanks. I am round all over. So how could I have shown my back to the minister?” The House exploded in loud laughter. Our (generally) ill-tempered politicians should take a leave from the above incident and shun vituperative language while attacking their political opponents. Avinash Godbole | Dewas

INEQUALITY RISES IN INDIA

Madam — Apropos news article “Mumbai surpasses Beijing as billionaire hub” published on March 27, this is my response. Paris-based World Inequality Lab has recently published a report titled, ‘Income and Wealth Inequality in India 1992 - 2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj’. As per the report, inequality in India declined till the early 1980s. Thereafter, it started rising sharply. The rise of top-end inequality gained tremendous momentum during the last 10 years. The top 1 per cent of Indians earn 22.6 per cent of the national income and their wealth share has risen to 40.1 per cent. The income share of the top 1 per cent of Indians is among the very highest in the world. The report says that India is now more unequal than during the time of the British Raj. Thanks to rising inequality, the tentacles

Mechanisation is needed



Apropos news article “Mechanisation needed to tackle farm issues,” published on March 28, this is my response. Recurring drought, and scarcity of water for irrigation, combined with a lack of modern farming equipment, have all contributed to a steep fall in productivity and income, forcing our farmers to take huge loans, without being able to repay them. Farmers’ income has not been able to keep pace, such as to cater to increasing production costs, including rising labour wages. Hence, agricultural machinery

becomes the need of the hour to alleviate farmers’ problems. It is also important to note that in farming several activities are highly time-bound and unless executed as per schedule, a farmer will suffer financial loss. Agriculture mechanisation, is, therefore, an appropriate answer to such challenges faced by farmers. Farm mechanisation and crop productivity have a direct correlation as they save time and labour, reduce drudgery, cut down production costs in the long run, reduce post-harvest losses, and boost crop output and farm income. Mechanisation is crucial in the agriculture sector, as it contributes towards improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the inputs used in crop production. Increasing the rate of farm mechanisation is critical for India to sustainably meet production demand and develop value chains and modernised food systems. Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

of VIP culture are spreading rapidly with each passing day. My local SBI branch has opened a special counter where customers can withdraw or deposit money with ease avoiding long queues at the general counter. Standing at the end of a serpentine queue at the general counter, an old man leaning on his stick asked if the special counter was for differently-abled persons and senior citizens. Immediately, he was provided enlightenment with the information that the counter was only for the VIPs who would transact a minimum amount of Rs 50 thousand! Sujit De | Kolkata

INDIA-SINGAPORE TIES

Madam — Apropos news article “India--Singapore to further deepen bilateral ties,” published on March 26, this is my response. The friendship between India and Singapore has stood the test of time for five decades. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had rightly emphasised the fact that Singapore was India’s “gateway” to the east. The phenomenal rise of Singapore from a small nation to a dream country for oth-

ers to emulate is in itself an achievement of sorts. Both India and Singapore have mutually beneficial cultural exchanges, defence relations, economic cooperation and skill building. Defence, sea and space, commerce and infrastructure, too, are areas of bilateral interest. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar’s recent Singapore visit saw him discussing wide-ranging issues with that country’s ministers including his counterpart Vivian Balakrishnan. Singapore is a destination much sought after by tourists. Besides, terror and security — very significant considering the deadlock over the South China Sea — could not escape the attention of the two leaders. India--Singapore have had a long relationship without a tinge of bitterness. That Modi himself has visited Singapore four times after he took over in 2014, underscores the importance attached by New Delhi to the bilateral relations.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

IMPACT AND DUALITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media often promotes formation of echo chambers and spread of false news



SHAINY SHARMA

Social media, a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary society, has revolutionised the way people communicate, share information and interact with one another. From its humble beginnings as online forums to the expansive platforms of today like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, Snapchat and many more, the term ‘social media’ has reshaped human interaction and societal norms to a large extent. Today, it has become an integral part of everyone’s life, especially Generation Z and the impact is complex and multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. Social media has fundamentally transformed communication dynamics, making it easier for individuals to connect with others globally. It has transcended geographical barriers, enabled real-time interaction and fostered virtual communities based on shared interests, identities and ideologies. Moreover, social media platforms have become instrumental in political discourse, activism and social movements, empowering voices that were previously marginalised and amplifying diverse perspectives. Millennials and Generation Z rely heavily on social media as a primary source of news and information which at times can lead to issues such as the spread of misinformation, echo chambers and filter bubbles, where individuals are only exposed to viewpoints that align with their own beliefs. Various studies have also shown that spending too much time on social media, especially before bedtime, disrupts the sleep pattern. Blue light suppresses the production of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep, making it more difficult to fall asleep and reducing the overall quality of sleep. Studies also reveal that constant exposure to short-form content and distractions on social media platforms can lead to a decrease in attention span and difficulty concentrating on tasks that require sustained focus. Another major role of social media platforms which is responsible for various disruptions is promoting of unrealistic beauty standards through the use of filters, photo editing tools and the prevalence of influencers with idealised appearances, leading to body dissatisfaction and negative body image among Generation Z.



Such platforms are designed to be addictive, with features such as likes, comments, and notifications triggering dopamine release in the brain and can lead to compulsive use and dependency which is no less like other forms of addiction. Moreover, the constant exposure to carefully curated images and posts can create unrealistic expectations and foster feelings of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) among users. To mitigate the negative effects of FOMO irrespective of the generation gap, it becomes important to promote digital literacy, encourage healthy social media habits and foster offline connections and experiences such as practicing mindfulness, setting boundaries for screen time and cultivating meaningful relationships and activities that are not dependent on social media validation. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive online community can also help alleviate feelings by emphasising authenticity, empathy and acceptance. There is no denying the fact that social media has brought about numerous benefits for Millennials and Generation Z in terms of connectivity, self-expression, and access to information, but at the same time it also poses challenges and risks that require careful consideration and management. Despite its transformative potential, social media presents a myriad of challenges that warrant attention. The addictive nature of social media and its impact on mental health, particularly among young people, raise concerns about excessive screen time, cyberbullying, and negative self-comparison. Balancing the advantages and drawbacks of social media usage is essential to harness its potential while mitigating its negative impacts on their well-being and society as a whole.

(The writer is an educator, views are personal)

Navigating the legal and ethical implications of AI

In a world increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence, the discourse shifts from its capabilities to the imperative question of its ethical boundaries

In an era increasingly defined by Artificial Intelligence (AI), the pivotal question shifts from what AI is capable of to what it should be allowed to do. This reflection critically examines AI’s potential to reshape our lives within ethical and legal frameworks. As we explore the vast landscapes carved by AI, we must ensure that our technological advancements are matched with an equally profound commitment to ethical responsibility. The advent of AI is a testament to human ingenuity, offering transformative possibilities in virtually every aspect of our existence. Yet, alongside its potential, AI introduces a spectrum of legal complexities that require careful consideration. The evolution of legal



MANEESHA DHIR

jurisprudence in the face of AI’s rapid development is a topic of paramount importance, dealing with issues ranging from privacy and data protection to intellectual property and employment. The Indian Government’s embrace of AI through initiatives like “Digital India” and a National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence reflects a visionary stance on harnessing technology for societal benefit. However, the journey toward realising AI’s full promise is fraught with challenges that demand vigilant oversight and a principled approach to regulation and ethics. On a global scale, AI raises questions that transcend national boundaries, presenting legal and ethical dilemmas that must be addressed comprehensively. The capacity of AI to analyse and utilise vast amounts of personal data has challenged existing privacy laws, sparking a worldwide reassessment of how we protect individual rights in the digital age. Countries are adopting comprehensive data protection regulations, such as the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation and India’s Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, to

Quantifying happiness is perplexing

The World Happiness Report places India at 126th rank, raising legitimate concerns about the methodology and biases inherent in such assessments



Happiness is complex and difficult to define, but this in no way implies that we do not know when we are happy. Happiness cannot be a permanent state of euphoria as the mind constantly changes its contours and shades and, by and large, remains an individual experience. Hence any exercise that seeks to generalise the impressions of a large number of individuals like those living within a country and brand them as happy or unhappy people is bound to be fraught with controversies. It will also inevitably reflect the biases of the measurers. When the definition of a variable cannot be agreed upon, its measurement will raise more controversies, but when such rankings are internationally publicised for branding countries and peoples which may influence the decisions of investors and donors, it is no longer a benign exercise without any accountability. On March 20 every year for the last seven years, which date has been marked by the UN as the International Day of Happiness, a New York-based agency called Sustainable Development Solutions Network has been bringing out an annual World Happiness Report, whose 2024 edition has placed India at 126th rank among 143 countries, much below countries like Saudi Arabia (28), China (60), Russia (72), Venezuela (79), Senegal (99), Iran (100), Palestine (103), Ukraine (105), Pakistan (108) even Myanmar (118). These countries are either strife-torn or war-ravaged, where the basic security of human life is not guaranteed, or ruled by autocrats and dictators who ruthlessly suppress the civil liberties of their people, especially of women, countries which are reeling under relentless crises in their democracy, polity and economy. This raises legitimate questions about the methodology used in the exercise that can produce such weird results. Finland has topped the ranking in each year so far, and the top 10 countries have also remained more or less the same, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Luxemburg, Switzerland and Australia. A common thread runs through all of them - high per capita income. Other higher-capita income countries also rank higher in the list, like New Zealand (21), UK



WE DO NOT NEED TO FEEL DEPRESSED AT OUR 126TH RANKING. INSTEAD, WE SHOULD IGNORE SUCH A PHONEY INDEX AND GO ABOUT OUR LIVES AND BUSINESS AS USUAL

(20), USA (23), Germany (24), or France (27). This is no surprise, because to the materialistic West hung on a culture of conspicuous overconsumption, money remains the primary and often the only source of happiness, unlike in Asian and other continental cultures. The only Asian country to feature in the list is Kuwait at 13th position, and the next one is Saudi Arabia at 28th. While Singapore features in 30th position, Japan, which has the largest concentration of longest-living people in the world, at 51st position, below Uzbekistan (47) and Kazakhstan (49). This raises natural questions about whether the index also reflects the inherent civilizational bias of the West against Asia, most of which used to be their colonies once—to treat them as superior or even equal would be an anathema to the West. Bhutan which reckons happiness as a core responsibility of Government and has adopted its Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index as a development indicator in its 2008 Constitution, was ranked 95th in 2019 and has not been ranked this year. GNH was the first such index and is far broader - having nine parameters, all non-income. Trying to measure the immeasurable will have its inherent contradictions. Happiness is a state of being, rather than a fixed state like a goal to be achieved that can be quantified and measured. Such measures therefore confuse happiness with “well-being” which is produced by the interplay of numerous extraneous factors like income, health, education, liberties, choices, relationships, physical and social security, etc. But even then, it is a subjective sense of well-being, which is neither measurable nor quantifiable. The rankings used in the World Happiness Report are based on six parameters of “subjective well-being”: (1) per capita income, (2) healthy life expectancy at birth, (3) social support, (4) freedom to make

life choices, (5) generosity, and (6) perceptions of corruption. The happiness rankings are based on what the authors say are “life evaluations”, on which Gallup World Poll (GWP) provides the data by asking respondents to evaluate their current life on a scale of 0 to 10 (happiest), using a typical sample size of 1000 for each country regardless of its population, and using a three-year average. The sample size is too small for a country like India to represent all its diversity and complexity. Data for per capita GDP on purchasing power parity (PPP) are taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) of the World Bank, and then a natural log that fits the observations better. Data for healthy life expectancy at birth is provided by the WHO Global Health Observatory data repository. Social support is the national average of the binary responses (0=no, 1=yes) to the GWP question: “If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?” Freedom to make life choices is again the national average of binary responses to the GWP question: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?” Generosity is the residual of regressing the national average of GWP responses to the question: “Have you donated money to a charity in the past month?” on log GDP per capita, while perceptions of corruption are the average of binary answers to two GWP questions: “Is corruption widespread throughout the Government or not?” and “Is corruption widespread within businesses or not?” It does not require superlative intelligence to divine that all these parameters are derivatives of a single parameter, i.e., income or wealth of a nation, and hence will always favour rich nations over the poorer ones.

So, the richer you are, the happier you are; in other words, income is synonymous with happiness, an assumption not validated by facts, just as happiness cannot be equated with success in material terms. The mind is influenced by social and cultural factors; hence how we perceive happiness also depends on these factors. It also depends on the questions asked and the way they have been framed: Just ask “How much time you spend with your parents every week”, or “For how long you have been married to your present spouse”, and see how the scales turn against the rich western nations. In collectivist societies in Asia, people reckon happiness more as a shared experience rather than individual satisfaction with life, whereas in individualistic societies, people perceive happiness more in terms of individual satisfaction. Happy people increase the happiness of others around them; hence bonding within social groups and families contributes positively to happiness. Individualistic Western nations would score higher given the way the GWP questions have been framed. As every Indian knows from experience, we are not unhappy people, having been brought up to regard values and relationships as more important than wealth and to be content to live a simple life with few material possessions, with strong bonds with our extended families and the community. Even though perceptions are changing in a growing economy, these basic values have remained intact. We do not need to feel depressed at our 126th ranking. Instead, we should ignore such a phoney index and go about our lives and business as usual.

(The author, an ex-bureaucrat, is currently a Professor at the Arun Jaitley National Institute of Financial Management; views are personal)



safeguard personal information while fostering digital innovation. The implications of AI on the job market also warrant serious consideration. The potential for automation to displace jobs creates a pressing need for legal frameworks that can mitigate adverse effects and prepare the workforce for an AI-driven future. Similarly, the intersection of AI with intellectual property rights challenges

the digital age, ensuring fairness and equity in the application of AI. Internationally, the regulatory approach to AI varies significantly, with entities like the European Union adopting comprehensive frameworks while others pursue more sector-specific guidelines. This diversity reflects the complex interplay of legal, cultural, and societal factors that influence AI governance, emphasising the need for a globally coordinated dialogue on AI ethics and regulation. Integrating AI into the legal profession offers a glimpse into the future, showcasing AI’s potential to enhance legal analysis, predict outcomes, and even assist in judicial decision-making. However, these advancements under-

score the imperative for stringent ethical standards to uphold the integrity of the legal system. As AI continues to evolve rapidly, it becomes crucial for societies, especially within the diverse context of India, to engage in proactive discourse. We must anticipate future developments and craft legal frameworks that are flexible enough to adapt to the unpredictable technological landscape. This includes ensuring that the benefits of AI extend to all and democratising access to services like healthcare and education. In conclusion, as we chart the course of AI within the legal domain, our focus must steadfastly remain on enacting and refining laws that protect human rights and dignity. Achieving harmony between

emerging technology and legal norms requires a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, where laws are designed not just to respond to the challenges posed by AI but to foresee and embrace its vast possibilities. With India at the forefront of AI innovation, buoyed by progressive policies and a wealth of intellectual capital, we stand on the brink of leading the global conversation on ethical AI. As we venture deeper into this new frontier, our collective aim should be a future where technology amplifies the noblest goals of law and justice, and in return, legal frameworks foster the responsible growth of Artificial Intelligence.

(The author is a legal expert. Views expressed are personal)

Palestinian Authority announces new Cabinet

AP ■ RAMALLAH

The Palestinian Authority has announced the formation of a new Cabinet as it faces international pressure to reform. President Mahmoud Abbas, who has led the PA for nearly two decades and remains in overall control, announced the new government in a presidential decree on Thursday. None of the incoming ministers is a well-known figure. Abbas tapped Mohammad Mustafa, a longtime adviser, to be prime minister earlier this month. Mustafa, a politically independent US-educated economist, had vowed to form a technocratic government and create an independent trust fund to help rebuild Gaza. Mustafa will also serve as foreign minister.

Interior Minister Ziad Hab al-Rih is a member of Abbas' secular Fatah movement and held the same portfolio in the previous government.

The Interior Ministry oversees the security forces. The incoming minister for Jerusalem affairs, Ashraf al-Awar, registered to run as a Fatah candidate in elections in 2021 that were indefinitely delayed. At least five of the incoming 23 ministers are from Gaza, but it was not immediately clear if they are still in the territory. The PA administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West

Bank. Its forces were driven from Gaza when Hamas seized power in 2007, and it has no power there. It has little popular support or legitimacy among Palestinians, in part because it has not held elections in 18 years. Its policy of cooperating with Israel on security matters is extremely unpopular and has led many Palestinians to view it as a subcontractor of the occupation. Opinion polls in recent years have consistently found that a vast majority of Palestinians want the 88-year-old Abbas to resign. The United States has called for a revitalised PA to administer postwar Gaza ahead of eventual statehood.

Israel has rejected that idea, saying it will maintain open-ended security control over Gaza and partner with Palestinians who are not affiliated with the PA or Hamas. It's unclear who in Gaza would be willing to take on such a role.

Hamas has rejected the formation of the new government as illegitimate, calling instead for all Palestinian factions, including Fatah, to form a power-sharing government ahead of national elections. It has warned Palestinians in Gaza against cooperating with Israel to administer the territory, saying anyone who does will be treated as a collaborator, which is understood as a death threat.

US SANCTIONS ONLINE MEDIA SITE GAZA NOW

The US on Wednesday imposed sanctions on online media site Gaza Now and its founder Mustafa Ayash for allegedly supporting Hamas. US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control says that after the October 7 attack by Hamas against Israel — the online entity began a fundraising effort in support of the militant organisation. Gaza Now's Arabic channel has more than 300,000 followers on social media channel X, formerly known as Twitter, and a large following on the encrypted chat platform Telegram. Included in the sanctions are firms Al-Qureshi Executives and Aakhirah Ltd., and their director Aozma Sultana, who are alleged to have partnered on multiple fundraising efforts alongside Gaza Now. The sanctions were imposed in collaboration with the UK's Office of Foreign Sanctions Implementation.

Treasury Under Secretary Brian Nelson said in a statement that the US and its partners "will continue to leverage our tools to disrupt Hamas' ability to facilitate further attacks." A representative for Gaza Now and Ayash were not immediately available. The sanctions block access to US property and bank accounts and prevent those designated from doing business with Americans.

Doctors stunned by war's toll on Palestinian children

AP ■ DEIR-AL-BALAH

An international team of doctors visiting a hospital in central Gaza was prepared for the worst. But the gruesome impact Israel's war against Hamas is having on Palestinian children still left them stunned. One toddler died from a brain injury caused by an Israeli strike that fractured his skull. His cousin, an infant, is still fighting for her life with part of her face blown off by the same strike.

An unrelated 10-year-old boy screamed out in pain for his parents, not knowing that they were killed in the strike. Beside him was his sister, but he didn't recognise her because burns covered almost her entire body. These gut-wrenching casualties were described to The Associated Press by Tanya Haj-Hassan, a pediatric intensive-care doctor from Jordan, following a 10-hour overnight shift at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the town of Deir al-Balah.

Haj-Hassan, who has extensive experience in Gaza and regu-



larly speaks out about the war's devastating effects, was part of a team that recently finished a two-week stint there. After nearly six months of war, Gaza's health sector has been decimated. Roughly a dozen of Gaza's 36 hospitals are only partially functioning. The rest have either shut down or are barely functioning after they ran out of fuel and medicine, were surrounded and raided by Israeli troops, or were damaged in fighting.

That leaves hospitals such as Al-Aqsa Martyrs caring for an

overwhelming number of patients with limited supplies and staff. The majority of its intensive care unit beds are occupied by children, including infants wrapped in bandages and wearing oxygen masks.

"I spend most of my time here resuscitating children," Haj-Hassan said after a recent shift. "What does that tell you about every other hospital in the Gaza Strip?"

A different team of international doctors working at Al-Aqsa Martyrs in January stayed at a nearby guesthouse.

4 killed, 7 hurt in Illinois stabbings, suspect in custody

Rockford (Illinois) (AP) Four people were killed and seven hurt in stabbings in northern Illinois on Wednesday, authorities said. A 22-year-old man is in police custody and was being questioned Wednesday afternoon, according to Rockford Police Chief Carla Redd. She said one of the people who was wounded remained in critical condition. "My heart goes out to the families right now that are suffering a loss," Redd told reporters.

She said the Rockford Police received a medical call at 1:14 p.m., followed by additional calls for police and paramedics. "We don't believe there's any other suspects that are on the run or at large at this particular time," Redd said. "Right now, we don't have a clear motive as to what caused this individual to commit such a heinous crime."

Not all of the victims found at multiple addresses in the city had stab wounds and none were shot, according to Redd. Rockford Police initially said five people had been injured. Cori Hilliard, a public information officer with the Winnebago County Sheriff's Office, told AP Wednesday evening that two more victims were among those hurt.

Three people died at the scenes. The fourth died at a hospital. Police later identified those victims as a 15-year-old girl, a 63-year-old woman, a 49-year-old man and a 22-year-old man. Their names were not released.

Redd said residents in the area were being asked to review their home surveillance camera footage for anything related to the attacks.

Rockford's population is about 150,000 and it's 144.84 kilometres northwest of Chicago. The violence Wednesday came days after a teenage employee of a Walmart in Rockford was stabbed and killed inside the store.

'Cargo ship underwent maintenance prior collision'

AP ■ BALTIMORE

The cargo ship that lost power and crashed into a bridge in Baltimore underwent "routine engine maintenance" in port beforehand, the US Coast Guard said Wednesday, as divers recovered the bodies of two of six workers who plunged into the water when it collapsed.

The others were presumed dead, and officials said search efforts had been exhausted. Investigators began collecting evidence from the vessel a day after it struck the Francis Scott Key Bridge. The bodies of the two men were located in the morning inside a red pickup submerged in about 25 feet (7.6 metres) of water near the bridge's middle span, Col. Roland L. Butler Jr., superintendent of Maryland State Police, announced at an evening news conference.

He identified the men as Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes, 35, who was from Mexico and living in Baltimore, and Dorian Ronial Castillo Cabrera, 26, who was from Guatemala and living in Dundalk, Maryland. The victims, who were part of a construction crew fixing potholes on the bridge, were from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, Butler said.

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore addressed their families in Spanish during the news conference, saying, "Estamos contigo, ahora y siempre," which means, "we are with you, now and always." All search efforts have been exhausted, and based on sonar scans, authorities "firmly" believe the other vehicles with victims are encased in material from the collapsed bridge, Butler said. Divers are to resume searching once the debris is cleared.

Coast Guard Rear Admiral Shannon Gilreath said at the news conference that authorities were informed that the ship was going to undergo the maintenance. "As far as the engine goes, we were not informed of any problems with the vessel," he said.

The Baltimore region has reeled from the sudden loss of a major transportation link that's part of the highway loop around the city. The disaster also closed the port, which is vital to the city's shipping industry.

National Transportation Safety Board officials boarded the ship to recover information from its electronics and paperwork and to interview the captain and other crew members, NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy said during a separate news conference.

Twenty-three people, including two pilots, were on the ship

when it crashed, she said. The vessel was also carrying 56 containers of hazardous materials including corrosives, flammables and lithium ion batteries, Homendy said. She added that some containers were breached, and that a sheen on the water from those materials would be handled by authorities.

Marcel Muise, NTSB investigator in charge, laid out a preliminary timeline assembled from the voyage data recorder comprising audio from the bridge and VHF radio ahead of the crash, which federal and state officials have said appeared to be an accident.

The vessel, the Dali, left port at 12:39 a.m. Tuesday and, after it entered the channel, signs of trouble came at about 1:25 a.m. when numerous alarms sounded, according to the NTSB. About a minute later, steering commands and rudder

orders were issued, and at 1:26 a.m. and 39 seconds, a pilot made a general radio call for nearby tug boats.

Maryland Transportation Authority data from about the same time shows the pilot association dispatcher called the transportation authority's officer on duty about the black-out, the NTSB said.

Just after 1:27 a.m., the pilot commanded the ship to drop an anchor on the left side of the ship and issued added steering commands. About 20 seconds later, the pilot issued a radio call reporting that the Dali had lost all power approaching the bridge.

At about that time, the state transportation officer on duty radioed two of its units already stationed at each end of the bridge saying to close the bridge to vehicle traffic. They were already there because of the construction.

Airstrip being built on Yemeni island

Dubai (AP): As Yemen's Houthi rebels continue to target ships in a Mideast waterway, satellite pictures analysed by The Associated Press show what appears to be a new airstrip being built at an entrance to that crucial maritime route.

No country has publicly claimed the construction taking place on Abd al-Kuri Island, a stretch of land rising out of the Indian Ocean near the mouth of the Gulf of Aden. However, satellite images shot for the AP appear to show workers have spelled out "I LOVE UAE" with piles of dirt next to the runway, using an abbreviation for the United Arab Emirates.

Both the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea to which it leads have become a battleground between the Houthis and US-led forces in the region as Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip rages — potentially allowing a nation to

project its power into the area. The construction comes as the presence of troops from the Emirates in the Socotra island chain to which Abd al-Kuri belongs — and that of the separatist force it backs in southern Yemen — have sparked clashes in the past.

In response to questions from the AP, the United Arab Emirates said on Thursday that "any presence of the UAE on Socotra island is based on humanitarian grounds that is carried out in cooperation with the Yemeni government and local authorities."

"The UAE remains steadfast in its commitment to all international endeavours aimed at facilitating the resumption of the Yemeni political process, thereby advancing the security, stability, and prosperity sought by the Yemeni populace," it added, without elaborating.

Rishi Sunak shares 'hard balance' of being good dad and UK PM

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has admitted it is a hard balance for him to strike as the father of two young children and holding the top job of leading the country through various crises.

In a friendly podcast interview for "The Times" with former Conservative Party leader William Hague, the 43-year-old British Indian leader was asked about some of the challenges of taking charge at 10 Downing Street in the wake of intense political turmoil.

He shared his concerns about not being able to find as much time as he would like to focus on his daughters Krishna, 12, and Anoushka, 11.

"I've got two young girls who mean the world to me and it's



hard to balance being a good dad and doing the job well," said Sunak.

"You have to prioritise this job because it's an important job and you're doing it on behalf of the whole country. So not being

there for them as much as any dad would like to be is a challenge. There are particular moments where you feel that acutely because there's something very difficult going on. That's tough, but that's the job," he said.

Further, on a personal note about his Indian heritage, Sunak said he would like to "understand a bit more about" his grandparents who migrated from East Africa via India.

"My grandparents largely went from India to east Africa and then my parents and grandparents came from east Africa to the UK as immigrants and when my grandmother made that journey, I think it was probably one of the first times she had been on a plane. I think she didn't know when she was going to see her family again,"

he said.

Southampton-born Sunak pointed out that while his grandmother had come to the UK "not quite knowing how that would all work," within a couple of generations he was sitting in former prime minister Margaret Thatcher's study in Downing Street for the newspaper's "The Story" podcast.

"That is an incredible journey. I'm inspired by that, and that's something that speaks to our country's story of openness and tolerance. I think there are very few countries in the world where my story would be possible... my family's story is one of hard work, loving family and service to a community; those were the values I was raised with and I would like to understand where all that came from," he said.

Pope issues marching orders to priests during Holy Thursday Mass

AP ■ ROME/ NORWEGIA

Pope Francis urged his priests Thursday to avoid "clerical hypocrisy" and treat their flocks with mercy as he delivered a lengthy set of marching orders to Rome-based priests at the start of a busy few days leading to Easter. A strong-looking Francis presided over a Holy Thursday Mass in St Peter's Basilica during which the oils for church services are blessed. Later in the afternoon, he travels to Rome's main women's prison for the annual Holy Week ritual in which he washes the feet of inmates in a symbol of humility and service.

The 87-year-old Francis, who has been hobbled by a long bout of respiratory problems this winter, appeared in good form for the morning Mass. He read aloud a long homily, after skipping his text at the last minute during Palm Sunday Mass last weekend.

In his remarks, Francis warned



priests against "sliding into clerical hypocrisy," or preaching one thing to their flocks but doing differently in their own spiritual lives. Rather, he urged them to always show mercy to the faithful and not judge them,

and weep instead for their own sins. Doing so, he said, "means looking within and repenting of our ingratitude and inconstancy, and acknowledging with sorrow our duplicity, dishonesty and hypocrisy," he said.

The Mass was the first major papal liturgy in St Peter's since Bernini's great columned canopy over the altar, known as a baldacchino, was covered in scaffolding for a months-long

renovation and cleaning. Francis has a busy few days coming up that will test his stamina.

On Friday, he is due to travel at night to the Colosseum for the Way of the Cross procession re-enacting Christ's crucifixion.

On Saturday, he presides over an evening Easter Vigil in St Peter's Basilica followed a few hours later by Easter Sunday Mass in the piazza and his big noontime Urbi et Orbi (to the city and the world) speech highlighting global conflicts and disasters afflicting humanity.

A shortage of eggs in shops during Holy Week has led Norwegians to flock to supermarkets across the border in Sweden and hoard the traditional Easter food.

Norwegian news outlet Nettavisen said on Thursday that the Nordby shopping centre in Sweden, located just off

the border about 100 kilometres (62 miles) south of the capital, Oslo, has been filled by "desperate" Norwegians trying to stock up on eggs.

The centre's Maxi-Mat food store ran out of eggs Tuesday, while the adjacent Nordby Supermarket has had to limit the number of eggs purchased to three 20-packs per household, the news outlet reported. Not only are the Swedish stores better stocked with eggs, a traditional Easter treat needed for many dishes, but the product is also more affordable in Sweden, Nettavisen said.

"It's far cheaper than you get in Norway — if you can get eggs in Norway at all, that is," Stale Lovheim, the head of the Nordby shopping centre, told Nettavisen. "The last time I was in Norway, the store was empty" of eggs.

A pack of 20 eggs in Sweden sells for a price equivalent to 39.90 Norwegian kroner (USD 3.70), about 30 per cent less than the price in Norway.

Concerns about overproduction of eggs in Norway led to farmers being offered compensation to reduce egg production. That and the effects of bird flu have led to a shortage, according to news reports.

Egg prices are at near-historic highs in many parts of the world as Easter approaches, reflecting a market battered by disease, high demand and growing costs for farmers. Ranked consistently among the most expensive countries in the world, Norway is known for its substantially high cost of living, especially in regards to food products and alcohol, which are heavily taxed even when compared to well-to-do Nordic neighbours.

Many residents living in southern Norway regularly make shopping trips across the border to Sweden, where products and services enjoy a lower value-added tax, a phenomenon that has evolved into a lucrative business for Swedish store owners.

Hunter Biden's lawyers push judge to toss out tax case charges

AP ■ LOS ANGELES

Attorneys for Hunter Biden asked a judge Wednesday to toss out the tax case accusing him of a four-year scheme to avoid paying USD 1.4 million in taxes while living an extravagant lifestyle. President Joe Biden's son has pleaded not guilty to the nine felony and misdemeanour tax offences. His attorneys argued the prosecution is politically motivated, was tainted by leaks from IRS agents who claimed publicly the case was mishandled and includes some allegations from before he moved to California.

Prosecutors framed the claims as far-fetched during the three-hour hearing. Prosecutor Leo Wise scoffed at the idea that the case was tainted by the IRS agents "who I couldn't have picked out of a lineup".

Defence attorney Abbe Lowell, on the other hand, maintained the case was hopelessly contaminated by partisan politics, calling it "the least ordinary prosecution a person could imagine".

US District Judge Mark C Scarsi appeared to be sceptical, telling Lowell the hard evidence for some of his claims was lacking. "You cite to a lot of things on the internet," he said.

Scarsi said he would likely rule on motions to dismiss by April 17.

Hunter Biden has also been charged in Delaware with lying on a federal form to buy a gun in 2018 by saying he wasn't using or addicted to illegal drugs, even though he has acknowledged being addicted to crack cocaine at the time. He has pleaded not guilty in that case, which also accuses him of possessing the gun illegally.

Both cases are overseen by special counsel David Weiss and now have tentative trials scheduled for June, though defence attorneys are also trying to get the Delaware gun charges tossed out.

The two sets of charges come from a yearslong federal investigation that had been expected to wrap up over the summer with a plea deal in which Hunter Biden would have gotten two years of probation after pleading guilty to misde-

meanour tax charges. The president's son, who has since repaid the back taxes with a loan, also would have avoided prosecution on the gun charge if he stayed out of trouble.

Defence attorneys argue that immunity provisions in the deal were signed by a prosecutor and are still in effect, though prosecutors disagree. But the deal that could have spared Hunter Biden the spectacle of a criminal trial during the 2024 presidential campaign unravelled after a federal judge in Delaware began to question it. Now, the tax and gun cases are moving ahead as part of an unprecedented confluence of political and legal drama: As the November election draws closer, the Justice Department is actively prosecuting both the Democratic president's son and the presumptive Republican nominee, Donald Trump.

Hunter Biden's original proposed plea deal with prosecutors had been pilloried as a "sweetheart deal" by Republicans, including Trump. The former president is facing his own criminal problems — 91 charges across four cases, including that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election, which he lost to Joe Biden.

Hunter Biden's criminal proceedings are also happening in parallel to so-far unsuccessful efforts by congressional Republicans to link his business dealings to his father. Republicans are pursuing an impeachment inquiry into President Biden, claiming he was engaged in an influence-peddling scheme with his son. No evidence has emerged to prove that Joe Biden, as president or previously as vice-president, abused his role or accepted bribes, though questions have arisen about the ethics surrounding the Biden family's international business dealings. In launching their Biden impeachment inquiry last year, the House Republicans relied in large part on unverified claims from an FBI informant released by Senate Republicans suggesting that payments totalling USD 10 million from Ukrainian energy company Burisma to the Bidens were discussed.

'King Charles III continuing to serve whole-heartedly'

London (PTI): A pre-recorded audio message by Britain's King Charles III was broadcast on Thursday for a traditional Easter service at Worcester Cathedral in central England, in which the 75-year-old monarch undergoing cancer treatment spoke of continuing to serve the nation with his "whole heart".

The King, who has taken a back seat from large-scale public-facing duties since his cancer diagnosis was made public last month, spoke of saying a "special prayer" this Easter as he expressed "great sadness" at being unable to attend the annual Royal Maundy Service in person.

Buckingham Palace said the audio was recorded in mid-March and included a reading from the 'Bible' from the 'Gospel according to John'.

"The Maundy Service has a very special place in my heart. It has its origin in the life of Our Lord who knelt before his disciples and, to their great surprise, washed their travel-weary feet," said King Charles in his message. "In this country we are blessed by all the different services that exist for our welfare. But over and above these organisations and their selfless staff, we need and benefit greatly from those who extend the hand of friendship to us, especially in a time of need," he said.

The monarch added: "This act of worship, here in Worcester Cathedral, reminds me of the pledge I made at the beginning of the Coronation Service — to follow Christ's example 'not to be served but to serve'. That I have always tried to do and continue to do, with my whole heart.

"It is my special prayer today that Our Lord's example of serving one another might continue to inspire us and to strengthen all our communities."

Won't start war with NATO: Putin

'But Western bases hosting Ukraine F-16s would be targets'

AP ■ KYIV

Russian President Vladimir Putin scoffed at the possibility of his country launching an attack on a NATO member, calling it "sheer nonsense," but warned that any Western air base hosting US-made F-16 fighter jets that are slated for deployment in Ukraine would be a "legitimate target" for the Kremlin's forces.

"Their statements about our alleged intention to attack Europe after Ukraine is sheer nonsense," Putin said late Wednesday, referring to warnings in the US and Western Europe that Russia could turn its sights on other countries unless it is stopped.

He noted that the US defence budget is more than 10 times higher than Russia's. "In view of that, are we going to wage a war against NATO? Its ravings," he told military pilots during a visit to an air base.

Ukraine is awaiting the delivery of F-16s, which will increase military pressure on Russia, from its Western partners. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said last year that 42 F-16s had been promised. Ukrainian pilots have been training in the West for months on how to fly the warplanes.

The F-16s require a high standard of runways and reinforced hangars to protect them from bombing attacks when they are on the ground. It is not clear how many Ukrainian air bases can meet those requirements, and Russia would be certain to quickly target a few that could accommodate them once the jets arrive.

Putin warned Ukraine's Western allies against providing air bases in their countries from where the F-16s could launch sorties against the Kremlin's forces. Those bases would become a "legitimate target," he said. "F-16s are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, and we will also need to take that into account while organizing our combat operations," Putin added.

Military analysts have said the arrival of F-16s won't be a game-changer in view of Russia's massive air force and sophisticated air defence systems, though Ukrainian offi-



cials have welcomed them as an opportunity to hit back at Russia's air dominance. Putin insisted the F-16s "won't change the situation on the battlefield."

"We will destroy their warplanes just as we destroy their tanks, armored vehicles and other equipment, including multiple rocket launchers," he said. F-16s can be used to bolster Ukraine's capability to target Russian facilities with long-range missile strikes. Ukraine's counteroffensive last year came up short in part because it took place without air cover, placing its troops at the mercy of Russian aviation and artillery. Russia has maintained air dominance in the war with Ukraine, though the provision of sophisticated Western air defence systems has forced Russian warplanes to avoid Ukrainian skies and launch attacks while remaining over Russian-controlled territory.

The Kremlin currently has a battlefield edge in weapons and troops, yielding recent incremental gains at points on the around 1,000-kilometer front line, as Kyiv awaits more promised Western military support and mulls a broader mobilization.

Russia fired salvoes of drones and missiles overnight at southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, authorities said Thursday, injuring more than a dozen people as the Kremlin's forces persevered with attritional attacks designed to wear down Ukrainian defenses. Air defence systems intercepted 26 out of 28 Shahed drones, Ukraine's air force said. Russian forces also launched five missiles overnight, it said.

Russia perseveres with Ukraine bombardments

AP ■ KYIV

Russia fired salvoes of drones and missiles overnight at southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, authorities said on Thursday, injuring more than a dozen people as the Kremlin's forces persevered with attritional attacks designed to wear down Ukrainian defenses.

Air defence systems intercepted 26 out of 28 Shahed drones, Ukraine's air force said. Russian forces also launched five missiles overnight, it said. The regular bombardment of Ukraine by the Kremlin's forces during the war has recently gained momentum, with missile barrages of the capital Kyiv and strikes on energy facilities across the country.

The attacks also aim to weaken Ukrainian morale and act as retribution for Ukrainian long-range strikes on Russian soil. One of Russia's goals is to "deplete Ukraine's inventory of ground-based air defence," according to a recent military assessment published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

That would erode some of Ukraine's combat ability as it waits on pledged but delayed military support from the West, including ammunition for its artillery and air defenses. "Kyiv is confronted by the threat that an attritional war in the air domain will increasingly favour Russia without adequate support from the US and its allies," the IISS said. "Ukraine's ability to continue to counter Russian air threats and impose costs on the Russian Aerospace Forces remains important to the outcome of the war."

Ukraine is awaiting the delivery of F-16s fighter jets, which will help place pressure on Russia, from its Western partners. Ukrainian pilots have been training in the West for months on how to fly the warplanes. Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Ukraine's Western allies against providing air bases in their countries from where the

F-16s could launch sorties against the Kremlin's forces, saying those bases would be a "legitimate target." The F-16s require a high standard of runways and reinforced hangars to protect them when they are on the ground. Military analysts have said the arrival of potentially dozens of F-16s won't be a game-changer, though Ukrainian officials have welcomed them as an opportunity to hit back at Russia's air dominance. Putin insisted the F-16s "won't change the situation on the battlefield."

"We will destroy their warplanes just as we destroy their tanks, armoured vehicles and other equipment, including multiple rocket launchers," Putin said in comments to military pilots during a visit to an air base late Wednesday.

Even so, Putin said, Russia has no intention of starting a war with NATO. He said it was "sheer nonsense" to think that Russia could attack a NATO member country after the Ukraine war.

Leaders cite progress on regulating Ukrainian food imports to ease farmers' anger

AP ■ WARSAW

The prime ministers of Ukraine and Poland said they made progress on Thursday toward meeting demands of Polish and western European farmers who want restrictions on cheap Ukrainian food imports that they say undermine their livelihoods, but they announced no breakthrough. Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal was in Poland for talks with his counterpart, Donald Tusk, to find ways of addressing the farmers' discontent that has led to violent protests and blockades of Poland's border cross-

ings with Ukraine. The leaders said some proposals were made during the talks but that more work was needed. Both said it would be helpful if the European Union went forward with a proposed 50 per cent tax on Russian and Belarusian food imports.

Farmers in many European countries have been staging vehement protests targeting, among other issues, the cheap imports from Ukraine, and tensions have grown between Kyiv and its staunch ally Warsaw over the tax-free inflow of Ukraine's farm produce. Tusk had suggested that Poland, a NATO member and an EU country bordering

Ukraine, would seek quotas on the imports during the talks. He has also suggested boosting Ukrainian exports to needy countries outside Europe. Shmyhal said that Ukraine has agreed to "certain limitations" but did not specify them.

The EU has opened its doors wide to Ukrainian farm produce to help the country make money from its exports after Russia's 2022 invasion cut many of its traditional trade routes. However, EU lawmakers recently agreed that quotas could be reintroduced on some Ukrainian foods to address the European farmers' complaints.

Pakistan SC allows military courts to announce verdicts

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Thursday conditionally allowed military courts to only announce verdicts of those May 9 suspects who could be released before the upcoming Eid festival. The case is about the trial of 103 civilians for their alleged involvement in the attacks on army installations during the riots that erupted after the arrest of former premier Imran Khan.

A six-member bench of Justice Aminuddin Khan, Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar, Justice Syed Azhar Hasan Rizvi, Justice Shahid Waheed, Justice Musarrat Hilali and Justice Irfan Saadat Khan heard a set of intra-court appeals (ICAs) against its Oct 23, 2023 unanimous ruling nullifying the military trials of civilians.

A five-member SC bench comprising Justices Ijazul Ahsan, Munib Akhtar, Yahya Afridi, Syed Mazahar Ali Akbar Naqvi and Ayesha Malik had unanimously declared that trying the accused civilians in military

courts was against the Constitution of the country. The bench also ruled they should be tried in civilian criminal courts.

A set of ICAs followed and the court on December 13 last year suspended the verdict by a 5-1 majority till the adjudication of the appeals. The appeals were filed by the then-caretaker federal government and provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab as well as by the defence ministry.

During the last hearing on March 25, the court asked authorities to provide details about the military trials of civilians for their alleged involvement in the violent events. It ordered that it be informed about "how many suspects could be acquitted and how many could not be", adding that all details be submitted by March 28.

It also sought information on the suspects who were to be sentenced for shorter periods. "The stay order on the military courts' case will be amended according to the summary," it noted. During today's hearing, the

court after hearing arguments gave conditional permission to military courts to announce the reserved verdicts. "Only verdict in those cases be announced in which the nominated suspects could be released before Eid," the court ruled. The attorney general also informed the court that about 20 suspects may be released after completion of their trial and other formalities, including concession in the sentence by the army chief. The court noted the assurances by Awan that those with lesser sentences would be given legal concessions. The court further said that permission to decide further appeals would be subject to the final decision on the appeals against the Oct 23 ruling. The court also directed the attorney general to submit a report on the issue to the registrar and adjourned the hearing until the last week of April. Hundreds of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf workers and leaders were arrested after the riot but only those allegedly involved in attacks on army installations were selected for trial by the military courts.

Af not taking steps to root out terrorism: Pak def minister

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Afghanistan is not making any progress to root out terrorism from its soil, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has said, urging the Taliban rulers in Kabul to tighten border controls further to mitigate the threat faced by his country.

"In view of the increase in terrorist incidents, there is a need for a fundamental change in the border situation. The source of terrorism in Pakistan is in Afghanistan and despite our efforts, Kabul is not making any progress in this direction," Asif posted on X on Wednesday.

Pakistan, which has witnessed a series of terror attacks in recent months, has openly said it suspects the involvement of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

(TTP), a splinter group of Afghan Taliban. According to the Dawn newspaper, Asif regretted that despite the Taliban administration being aware of the hideouts of terrorism, terrorists were operating freely against Pakistan from their territory. "Cooperation from Kabul (for tackling terrorism threat) is not available," the minister emphasised. Asif's comments came against the backdrop of a string of attacks over the past few days including those on the Gwadar Port Authority complex and naval base in Turbat and the suicide attack on the van carrying Chinese workers in Shangla in the restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The report said that the minister posted these remarks on X after attending a special security meeting convened by

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and added, "His remarks in a way reflected the discussion at the meeting as PMO statement on security meeting had expressed concern over 'sanctuaries available to terrorists across the borders' and had called for 'a regional approach' for countering terrorism."

A video clip that recently went viral on social media showed an Afghan Taliban member, identified as Yahya, assisting Pakistani terrorists based in Afghanistan in planning a cross-border attack on Pakistani troops deployed along the border, the newspaper said.

The defence minister describing the complexity of the border security challenge said the Pak-Afghan border was different from the traditional international borders.

'In Mali, Wagner mercenaries helping army kill civilians'

AP ■ DAKAR (SENEGAL)

The Russian mercenary group known as Wagner is helping government forces in central and northern Mali carry out raids and drone strikes that have killed scores of civilians, including many children, rights groups said in reports published this week that span the period from December to March.

Mali, along with its neighbours Burkina Faso and Niger, has for over a decade battled an insurgency fought by jihadi groups, including some allied with al-Qaida and the Islamic State group.

Following military coups in all three nations in recent years, the ruling juntas have expelled French forces and turned to Russia's mercenary units for security assistance instead.

Violence has escalated in Mali since Russian mercenaries arrived there following a coup in 2021. Its ruling junta has ramped up operations, carrying out deadly drone strikes that have hit gatherings of

civilians, and raids accompanied by Russian mercenaries that have killed civilians.

Residents of the Sahel region that includes Mali say Russia's presence doesn't appear to have changed since Wagner's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, died in a suspicious plane crash last year. "Mali's Russia-backed transitional military government is not only committing horrific abuses, but it is working to eliminate scrutiny into its human rights situation," Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior Sahel researcher at Human Rights Watch, in a statement on Thursday. In an example of a raid carried out by Russian-backed government forces in January, Human Rights Watch said the army entered a village near a military base in central Mali and arrested 25 people, including four children.

Their bodies were found later that day blindfolded and with bullet wounds to the head, the report said. Amnesty International said in separate report earlier this week that two drone strikes in northern Mali

killed at least 13 civilians, including seven children aged 2 to 17. A pregnant woman who was injured in the bombing miscarried days after the attack, it said.

Human Rights Watch has said the Turkish-supplied drones in Mali are capable of delivering precise laser-guided bombs. The group has also documented how drone strikes have killed civilians. In one example, a drone strike in central Mali's Segou region killed at least seven people at a wedding, including two boys, it said. The following day, a second drone strike targeted a funeral held for those killed in the previous day's strike.

The juntas ruling Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso earlier this month announced a joint security force to fight the worsening extremist violence in their Sahel region. This follows steps taken by the juntas to step away from other regional and Western nations that don't agree with their approach and rely on Russia for security support instead.

'Enemies of Pak-China friendship responsible for terror attack'

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan on Thursday said that the "enemies" of its friendship with China were responsible for the "heinous" terrorist attack which killed five Chinese nationals and vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice. At least five Chinese nationals, working on the Dasu hydropower project, and the driver of the vehicle they were travelling in were killed on Tuesday when an explosives-packed vehicle rammed into their bus in Shangla district in the troubled Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, in the second suicide attack on the personnel working on the China-backed hydropower project since 2021.

Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, addressing the weekly press briefing, said that Pakistan was in contact with the Chinese government regarding the "heinous attack." "Pakistan and China are close friends and iron brothers. We have no doubt that the Bisham terror attack was orchestrated by

the enemies of Pakistan-China friendship," she said without identifying the enemies. She said Pakistan is "fully committed to bringing terrorists, and their facilitators and abettors to justice."

"Such despicable attacks further strengthen Pakistan's resolve in combating terrorism in all of its forms and manifestations," the FO spokesperson said. She said that Pakistan and China would together resolutely act against terrorists and defeat them.

"Pakistan will continue to work with our Chinese brothers in ensuring the safety and security of Chinese nationals, projects and institutions in Pakistan," she said. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif ordered a thorough joint investigation into the deadly terrorist attack on Chinese nationals after Beijing pressed Islamabad to speed up the hunt for the perpetrators and take effective steps to protect Chinese personnel working in the country.

SL PM meets Chinese President Xi

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Chinese President Xi Jinping has assured continuous support to Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena for Sri Lanka's efforts for "political and socioeconomic progress" and also said Beijing will stand for safeguarding the island nation's territorial integrity and sovereignty. China and Sri Lanka agreed to continue to act under the friendship, peace, mutual respect and fivefold principle in international affairs that do not interfere in the internal affairs of a country during a meeting between Xi and Gunawardena on Wednesday at Great Hall in Beijing, the prime minister's office said in a statement here on Thursday.

"Chinese President assured continuous support of China to Sri Lanka's efforts for political and socioeconomic progress. The Chinese President said that China will always stand for safeguarding independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka," the statement said. "It was emphasised that bilateral relations should be based on mutual respect and mutual productivity between the countries, and acting according to that policy would set a good example for both countries," it added.

President Xi assured that China will support the schemes necessary for the development of Sri Lanka as soon as they are presented. China is willing to work with Sri Lanka to carry forward the spirit of the Rubber-Rice Pact, which is characterised by "independence, self-reliance, unity and mutual support," to consolidate political mutual trust, enhance exchanges of experience in governance, expand practical cooperation, and advance the high-quality Belt and Road cooperation. Xi was quoted as saying in an official press release in Beijing. Earlier on Tuesday, China and Sri Lanka signed nine new agreements as Prime Minister Gunawardena met his counterpart Chinese Premier Li Qing amid Colombo's efforts to restructure its bankrupt economy but no details about the agreement were made available.

Top Chinese official says green, high tech development key

AP ■ BOAO (CHINA)

China is committed to reforms that will upgrade the technological level of its largely manufacturing-based economy and exploit green technologies expected to drive around USD 1.4 trillion in annual revenues, a senior Communist Party official said on Thursday.

"We sincerely welcome all countries to board the express train of China's development and join hands to realize world modernisation featuring peaceful development, mutually beneficial cooperation and common prosperity," Zhao Leiji, who heads China's rubber stamp congress and sits on the party's all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee, was quoted as telling business people and other leaders attending the Boao Forum for Asia.

The gathering in Boao, held on China's island province of Hainan on the South China Sea, is the latest venue for efforts by Beijing to reassure foreign investors rattled by policies that have raised uncertainties for foreign businesses, geopolitical tensions, and an economic slowdown. Zhao told the forum that China's economy will be good in the long term, the Foreign Ministry cited him as saying. "The fundamentals have not changed," he was quoted as saying. China is the world's second largest economy after the US and has excelled in areas such as electric vehicles, solar and wind power, and high-speed trains. But it remains heavily dependent on highly-polluting coal to power its industries.

The government has set a goal for this year of China's energy consumption per unit of GDP by 2.5 per cent as part of its efforts to reduce carbon emissions and transition to a greener economy. "We are speeding up efforts to promote green and low-carbon economic and social development, and will strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060," said Zhao, who ranks third in the party hierarchy and has a strong background in managing state industries that make up about a quarter of the economy and help maintain the party's overwhelming influence over economic, political and cultural life. China's leaders have set an ambitious target of around 5 per cent economic growth this year despite a slowdown that has been accentuated by troubles in the property sector and the lingering effects of strict anti-virus measures during the pandemic that disrupted travel, logistics, manufacturing and other industries.

That reflects Communist Party leader-for-life Xi Jinping's aspirations to make China a leading player in international affairs by challenging the power and credibility of the US and its Western allies. China has backed Russia in its invasion of Ukraine and threatens various of its neighbours in East Asia, including the self-governing island democracy of Taiwan, a close US ally, that it claims as its own territory to be annexed by force if necessary. But its top leaders have also reiterated China's intention to keep its economy open for business. On Wednesday, Xi met with American business leaders in Beijing and emphasised mutually beneficial economic ties, despite US tariffs on imports from China and efforts to cut off access to advanced and sensitive technologies, especially those with military applications.

"Sino-US relations are one of the most important bilateral relations in the world. Whether China and the United States cooperate or confront each other has a bearing on the well-being of the two peoples and the future and destiny of mankind," Xi was cited as saying by China's official Xinhua News Agency.

US congressional delegation pledges continued defence support for Taiwan

Taipei (AP): A bipartisan US congressional delegation pledged continued support for Taiwan on Thursday, days after Congress approved USD 300 million in military aid for the self-governed island that's claimed by China.

Congress also approved USD 400 million on Saturday to counter the Chinese government's influence in the region, as part of its Defence Appropriations Act.

China regards Taiwan as a breakaway province to be brought under its control, by force if necessary. Beijing sends warships and fighter jets near the island daily, as it ramps up its military pressure. The United States, like

most nations, doesn't recognise Taiwan as a country. However, it is bound by US laws to ensure the island can defend itself and considers all threats to Taiwan as a matter of "grave concern."

The delegation led by Republican Congressman Jack Bergman, who chairs the House Intelligence and Special Operations Subcommittee, sought to reassure Taiwan's leadership of continued support. "We will continue to assure our colleagues that the strategic relationship is key for the future security of the region," Bergman said during a meeting with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen.

Japan leader seeks meeting with N Korea, end to deflation, to boost public support

AP ■ TOKYO

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reiterated on Thursday his determination to work toward a summit with North Korea's Kim Jong Un to realise the return of Japanese people believed abducted by the North Korean agents in the 1970s and 80s.

"I remain committed to realising this for Japan," he told reporters, while declining to directly address the recent comments from North Korea that suggested such a meeting would be possible only if Japan stops pressing the abductions issue. Speaking at a news conference after the government budget cleared parliament, Kishida stressed he was directly involved in high-level negotiations to fix various bilater-

al problems, amid growing worries about neighbouring North Korea's missiles and nuclear weapons programmes. In 2002, Kim Jong Il, the late father of Kim Jong Un, told then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that its agents had kidnapped 13 Japanese in the 1970s and 80s, and allowed five of them to return to Japan. Japan thinks hundreds more may have been abducted during that period and that some are still alive. Koizumi's second visit to North Korea in 2004 was the last summit between the two nations.

Kishida, prime minister since 2021, also promised to wrest the nation out of decades-long deflation and set off "a positive cycle" of higher wages, company profits and strong productivity.

"We have this historic chance to get out of deflation," Kishida said, noting that the changes will come under his "new capitalism" programme, based on economic changes such as a more mobile labour force, investments in artificial intelligence and income growth for the middle class.

He promised that legal revisions and an internal investigation were underway to deal with a burgeoning scandal centred around political funding that ruling party lawmakers had allegedly secretly received through shady methods like expensive tickets for fundraising parties. Kishida said more time is needed to sort out details, but the erring politicians will get punished, to restore public trust.

Indian economy can grow at 8 per cent till 2047: Subramanian

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian economy can grow at 8 per cent till 2047, if the country can redouble the good policies that it has implemented over the last 10 years and accelerate reforms, India's executive director at International Monetary Fund (IMF) Krishnamurthy Venkata Subramanian said on Thursday. Subramanian further said that clearly 8 per cent growth target is ambitious, because India has not grown consistently at 8 per cent before, but it is achievable. "So, the basic idea is that with the kind of growth that India has registered in the last 10 years, if we can redouble the good policies that we have implemented over the last 10 years and accelerate the reforms, then India can grow at 8 per cent from here on till 2047," he said at the Times Now Summit. India's economy grew at better-than-expected 8.4 per cent in the final three months of 2023, logging the fastest pace in the past one-and-a-half years. The growth rate in October-December helped take the estimate for the current fiscal to 7.6 per cent. "And if India grows at 8 per cent, India can be a USD 55 trillion economy by 2047," Subramanian added.



He pointed out that historically from 1991 onwards, India's average growth has been slightly more than 7 per cent. Subramanian emphasised that India needs to strengthen its domestic economy as about 58 per cent of the country's GDP comes from domestic consumption. "Therefore, you know, we do have the potential if we can create enough jobs, you know, that will lead to much higher consumption," he said.

India's IMF executive director stressed on need of encouraging manufacturing sector for job creation. He also pointed out that reforms are required in land, labour, capital, and logistics sector. "Reforms are required in the manufacturing sector, but at the same time, we also need reforms in our banking sector to provide credit for manufacturing sector," Subramanian noted.

Domestic drug firms to witness 8, 10 per cent revenue growth in FY25: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Revenue growth of leading 25 domestic drug firms is expected to moderate to 8-10 per cent in the next fiscal year, rating agency Icria said on Thursday. The revenue of the companies, which account for 60 per cent of the overall Indian pharmaceutical industry, witnessed an increase of 13-14 per cent in the current fiscal year. Following the high base of 2023-24, the revenue growth momentum from the US and Europe markets is expected to moderate to 8-10 per cent and 7-9 per cent, respectively, Icria said. The markets are expected to witness a year-on-year expansion of 18-20 per cent and 16-18 per cent, respectively, in the current fiscal year, it added. The domestic market, on the other hand, is expected to see a stable growth of 6-8 per cent, while the emerging markets may log an 8-10 per cent rise in FY25, against 16-18 per cent in FY24, the rating agency said. The revenue growth of the



sample set companies in the US market in FY24 has been supported by increased new product launches, product shortages in select therapeutic segments, and healthy performance of complex generics (first to file), it stated. "However, as the base effect

plays out, growth is expected to taper in FY25. While low-single digit pricing pressure in the US market is likely to sustain, Indian pharmaceutical companies remain focused on enhancing their revenue contribution from the complex generics in the US market," it

stated. Commenting on key risks being faced by the industry, Icria Assistant Vice President and Sector Head Mythri Macherla said the number of warning letters and import alerts issued by the USFDA to Indian drug firms have increased in the past year. This has led to delays in product launches, translating into failure to supply penalties and entailing significant cost burden towards remedial measures like hiring consultants and consuming additional management bandwidth, thus impacting the profit margins, she added. "Further, while the ongoing Red Sea crisis has not had an impact on the Indian pharmaceutical companies as of now, any adverse impact in the form of supply chain disruptions or increase in logistics costs will be a key monitorable," Macherla stated. Besides, since price growth has been a key revenue driver, any developments favouring genericisation and inclusion of more products under the NLEM remain key risks for the industry players, she added.



Gold climbs ₹350; silver jumps ₹200

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold price climbed Rs 350 to Rs 67,350 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid strong trends in the international markets, according to HDFC Securities. Extending its gains for the second straight session, the price of the precious metal had settled at Rs 67,000 per 10 grams in the previous trade. Silver also jumped Rs 200 to Rs 77,450 per kg. In the previous close, it had ended at Rs 77,250 per kg. "Gold prices advanced on Thursday before the outcome of crucial US macro data. Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 67,350 per 10 grams, up by Rs 350 taking positive global cues," Saamil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the global markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,194 per ounce, up by

USD 14 from the previous close. "Gold prices were trading higher amidst positive sentiment regarding interest rates, but the rise in the dollar index could exert pressure on the yellow metal prices. "Strong resistance is observed around the USD 2,200-2,215 range," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst at LKP Securities, said. Silver was also marginally higher at USD 24.55 per ounce. In the previous trade, it had finished at USD 24.50 per ounce. "Gold is seen trading steady to positive, but gains are capped by a firm dollar against major currencies, while some caution is seen ahead of the US GDP and the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) inflation data, due on Thursday and Friday," Pranav Mer, VP, EBG - Commodity & Currency Research at JM Financial Services Ltd, said.

Market extend winning momentum for second day

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices climbed in early trade on Thursday, extending their previous day's rally, on foreign fund inflows and positive trend in the US markets. The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 342.48 points to 73,338.79 in early trade. The NSE Nifty went up by 96.25 points to 22,219.90. From the Sensex basket, Bajaj Finserv, Bajaj Finance, ICICI Bank, State Bank of India, Power Grid and Infosys were the major gainers. HCL Technologies, Maruti, Tech Mahindra and Asian Paints were among the laggards. In Asian markets, Shanghai and Hong Kong traded in the positive territory while Tokyo



and Seoul quoted lower. Wall Street ended higher on Wednesday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 2,170.32 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. "In the final trading session of the week, month, and fiscal year 2023-24, heightened volatility is expected, driven by

the March F&O expiry. Investors are poised for bargain hunting as optimism pervades Dalal Street, with positive catalysts including significant FII buying and a global stock market rally," said Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd. Global oil benchmark Brent

crude climbed 0.24 per cent to USD 86.30 a barrel. The BSE benchmark climbed 526.01 points or 0.73 per cent to settle at 72,996.31 on Wednesday. The NSE Nifty went up by 118.95 points or 0.54 per cent to 22,123.65. Equity markets would remain closed on Friday for 'Good Friday'.

Over 44 per cent respondents of survey say they paid extra for flight seats

PTI ■ MUMBAI

As much as 44 per cent respondents in a survey complained that they had to pay extra charges to get a seat at the time of purchase of a flight ticket. Many of the respondents also reported paying between Rs 200 and Rs 2,000 as seat allocation fee, which can amount to 5-40 per cent of the air fare, LocalCircles, which carried out the survey, said in a statement. It also said there has been a very marginal improvement in the last 12 months in the ability of consumers to get a free seat when booking their flight. The Ministry of Consumer Affairs and consumer regulator CCPA late last year convened a meeting of the airlines on the issue



and questioned them about the alleged unfair trade practices and misleading claims of "free" web check-in, it said. The new survey, which received over 41,000 responses from consumers across 339 districts of the country, has focused on fliers' problems when booking for travel with family members, particularly young children,

LocalCircles said. According to the survey, if the family wants to sit together, per se they end up spending more than what the actual ticket costs as most of the seats are available on extra payment of Rs 200-Rs 2,000 on many airlines. Else the family members must sit in separate rows as in some airlines only the middle seat requires no extra payment, it added. As per the survey estimates, nearly 80 per cent seats for some airlines now require payment of a seat allocation fee. About 65 per cent of fliers who booked a flight in the last 12 months, paid extra fee for reserving a seat once or more, the survey added.

Smart TV prices to go up this year, says report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Prices of smart TVs are likely to increase in the first half of the ongoing calendar year as prices of panels have gone up in the international market, according to a report on Thursday. The brands are likely to pass on the increase in rates, resulting in a hike in smart TV prices, according to the latest research from Counterpoint's IoT Service. However, the report also expects "smart TV shipments to increase by 9 per cent" this year, as the demand for premium models will increase and consumers will likely upgrade to a larger screen. "The push towards online purchases is set to increase as consumers' confidence in online platforms is increasing, which will encourage them to buy premium models from these platforms. The increasing preference for premium TVs

will drive the overall market's average selling price (ASP) further," it said. In 2023, India's smart TV shipments declined 16 per cent, impacted by a hit in the first half due to macroeconomic challenges and excess inventory, according to a Counterpoint Research report on Thursday. The year also witnessed the premiumisation of the TV market, where consumers moved towards premium devices and large-screen smart TVs. Now, smart TV penetration reached its highest level of 93 per cent of the overall TV shipments during the year and the share is expected to continue rising, it added. "QLED TVs are gaining popularity as leading brands such as TCL, Hisense, Acer, Kodak, Thomson, and other long-tail brands have started offering them in 43," screen size variants and at lower prices (sub-Rs 30,000), due to which its shipments more than doubled in 2023, it said.

Rupee falls 6 paise to settle at 83.39 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee depreciated 6 paise to settle at 83.39 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday due to a strengthening greenback against major rivals overseas and rising crude oil prices in the international markets. However, a firm trend in domestic equity markets and recent foreign fund inflows supported the domestic currency, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.32 and oscillated between the intra-day peak of 83.30 and the lowest level of

83.40 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 83.39 (provisional), registering a loss of 6 paise from its previous close. On Wednesday, the rupee declined 4 paise to close at 83.33 against the US dollar. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.34 per cent higher at 104.42. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the Indian rupee depreciated on Thursday on strong US dollar and dollar demand from oil marketing companies (OMCs). Weak Asian



currencies and a rise in crude oil prices also weighed on the rupee. However, the surge in domestic markets and FII inflows cushioned the downside. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on strong US dollar and weak Asian currencies. Demand for dollars from importers and OMCs towards the end of the financial year may put downside pressure also weigh on the rupee. "However, strong domestic markets may support the rupee at lower levels. Traders may take cues from final GDP, weekly unemployment claims, pending home sales and revised

consumer sentiment data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.20 to Rs 83.70," Choudhary said. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.52 per cent to USD 86.54 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex surged 655.04 points, or 0.90 per cent, to settle at 73,651.35 points. The Nifty rose 203.25 points, or 0.92 per cent, to close at 22,326.90 points. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) were net buyers in the capital markets on Wednesday as they purchased shares worth Rs 2,170.32 crore, according to exchange data.

Less than 5 per cent companies in India prepared to tackle cybersecurity risks: Cisco

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Less than 5 per cent of companies in India are ready to deal with cybersecurity risks even though an overwhelming number of them said their businesses are likely to be impacted by such threats in the next 12-24 months, according to a study. The 2024 Cisco Cybersecurity Readiness Index, which was released on Thursday, found that only 4 per cent of companies in India are ready

to tackle today's threats, with 59 per cent of organisations falling into the "beginner or formative stages of readiness". Globally, 3 per cent of companies are at a "mature stage", meaning they are prepared to handle cybersecurity risks, it said. Cisco said while companies are building defences against these attacks, they are slowed down by their own overly complex security postures that are dominated by multiple-point solutions. The study is based on a survey



of 8,136 private sector business leaders — over 1,000 of them from India — who have cybersecurity responsibilities in their organisations. The study revealed that 82 per cent of the participants surveyed expect a

cybersecurity incident to disrupt their business in the next 12-24 months. "The cost of being unprepared can be substantial, as 74 per cent of respondents said they experienced a cybersecurity incident in the last 12 months,

and 55 per cent of those affected said it cost them at least USD 300,000," it said. It further said the traditional approach of adopting multiple cybersecurity point solutions has not delivered effective results, as 88 per cent of respondents admitted that having multiple point solutions slowed down their team's ability to detect, respond, and recover from incidents. While companies are aware of cybersecurity risks, talent gap further intensifies the issue, it said.

"Progress is being further hampered by critical talent shortages, with 91 per cent of companies highlighting it as an issue. In fact, 59 per cent of companies said they had more than 10 roles related to cybersecurity unfilled in their organisation at the time of the survey," the study noted. However, businesses are increasing their investments to tackle the issue with 71 per cent planning to significantly upgrade their IT infrastructure in the next 12-24 months, the study added.

Sindhu advances to Madrid Masters quarters

PTI ■ MADRID

Star Indian shuttler P V Sindhu continued her impressive run at the Madrid Spain Masters, advancing to the quarterfinals with a comfortable straight-game win over Chinese Taipei's Huang Yu-Hsun here on Thursday.

It was a smooth performance from Sindhu as she was hardly tested by the Taiwanese qualifier, ranked world no. 63, resulting in a 21-14 21-12 win in 36 minutes.

The former world champion, who finished runner-up in the last edition, will take on either sixth seed Supanida Katethong of Thailand or Japan's Natsuki Nidaira.

In the opening game, Sindhu was 3-0 up initially but then entered a phase where she often found the net or went long, while her rival



produced some precise returns to grab a 7-6 lead before taking a one-point advantage with a straight

down-the-line smash. The Indian, however, produced a better show after resumption, taking a 18-12

cushion with Yu-Hsun making errors. She soon grabbed eight game points, wasted two of them before

sealing the opening game with her trademark smash. After the change of sides, Yu-Hsun struggled to control the

shuttle as her lifts repeatedly went long. The Taiwanese shuttler tried to use her drops and placements but she didn't have power in her smashes. The result was Sindhu quietly waited for her opponent to commit errors. Soon she had a five-point advantage at the break. Every time Yu-Hsun tried to extend the rallies, she ended up with unforced errors.

Soon a smash handed another eight match points to Sindhu and she wrapped it up when her opponent sprayed into net again.

With top seed Carolina Marin of Spain pulling out of the tournament after her title-winning run at the All England Championships and Swiss Open in the last two weeks, Sindhu is now the favourite to claim the crown and end a long wait.

Sindhu won her last BWF tour title at the 2022 Singapore Open Super 500.

Man City hosts Arsenal in last clash of EPL

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Win against Arsenal on Sunday and Manchester City's path to a record fourth straight English Premier League title becomes clearer.

Lose, and Arsenal takes a giant step towards becoming league champion for the first time in 20 years.

Draw, and the big winner this weekend could be Liverpool.

With 10 rounds to go, the clash at Etihad Stadium is the last time any of the three title rivals will go head to head.

Arsenal leads the league. Liverpool is second on goal difference. City is a point behind both of them. Just five goals separate the top two.

An element of risk and reward hangs over City and Arsenal.

History is clearly on City's side, having won its last eight home games against the Gunners. City's last home loss in this fixture was in 2015. But Arsenal has been better this season after beating City in a penalty shootout to win the Community Shield in August, followed by a 1-0 victory at Emirates Stadium in October.

City manager Pep Guardiola's preparations haven't been helped by injuries to key defenders Kyle Walker and John Stones during the international break.



games to the end of the league. Arsenal and Liverpool both have to travel to Manchester United and face respective derbies against Tottenham and Everton.

All three teams still have to face Aston Villa and Spurs, who are competing for fourth spot and Champions League qualification. Liverpool plays Brighton on Sunday with the chance to go to the top of the standings before City and Arsenal kick off.

FORM GUIDE

There is little to choose between the challengers.

City is on an ominous 22-game unbeaten run in all competitions, dating to the start of December.

Liverpool has lost two of its last 23 games and already has its first trophy of the season after winning the English League Cup in February.

One of those defeats was Manchester United's extra time winner in the FA Cup final this month. The other was 3-1 to Arsenal in the league in February. Arsenal, meanwhile, has risen to the top of the league on the back of an eight-game winning streak.

DISTRACTIONS

All three teams are battling on multiple fronts.

City is defending its Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup treble at last season. Liverpool is no longer competing for a quadruple, but after winning the League Cup it is also still in contention for the Europa League.

Arsenal is in the Champions League quarters, where it faces Bayern Munich.

City was given the toughest draw of all against Real Madrid.

MASTER AND APPRENTICE

Mikel Arteta was once Guardiola's trusted lieutenant at City. Arteta was spoken of as a future City manager but is working on creating his own legacy at Arsenal after transforming the club's fortunes since taking charge in 2019. He has been backed with money and time, and that faith has paid off with Arsenal leading the league and advancing to the Champions League quarterfinals.

After falling away badly at the end of last season to allow City to take the English title, it remains to be seen if Arteta and his players have learned from that experience.

Those two wins against City this season suggest Arsenal is more prepared to go head to head against the champion.

RUN-IN

Arsenal stands as the last major test for City. It has arguably the smoothest run of



Marseille hit by injuries

AP ■ MARSEILLE (FRANCE)

For Jonathan Clauss, the France friendly against Chile this week was meant to be pure joy in front of his home crowd.

It ended up as a sour 11-minute experience concluded by an injury that ruled out the defender from French soccer's biggest game this weekend.

Clauss, who plays for Marseille, left the pitch with a torn left hamstring and was forced to watch his teammates' 3-2 win from the sidelines.

The former Lens player is expected to be out of action for up to four weeks at a crucial moment of the season for Marseille, which has big matches lined up against Lille then Benfica in the Europa League following the clash with bitter rival Paris Saint-Germain on Sunday.

Marseille was already hit by an injury crisis ahead of hosting PSG at a sold-out Stade Velodrome in a match known as "Le Classique."

The confrontation became popular during the 1990s when the arrival of prominent players such as Rudi Voeller and George Weah ignited the rivalry.

Marseille, the only French team to win the Champions League back in 1993, has fallen well behind since PSG was taken over by

Qatari investors in 2011, but the game continues to stir up passion.

PSG has won 11 of the last 14 matches against Marseille. Marseille has failed to score in the last four. Clauss is just the latest name to join Marseille's injury list. The defense has been severely hit, and it's a big blow before PSG's attacking armada led by Kylian Mbappe sets foot in town.

Alongside Clauss, Bamo Meité and Amir Murillo have already been ruled out, while Samuel Gigot and Leonardo Balerdi are doubtful. Building a solid backline should give a real headache to interim coach Jean-Louis Gasset, who has managed to put the club back on track since he replaced Gennaro Gattuso last month. With eight league matches left, seventh-placed Marseille is lagging 20 points behind PSG but can still qualify for next season's Champions League. At the top, PSG has a 12-point lead over Brest and looks all but guaranteed a record-extending 12th league title.

A N T I - R A C I S T CAMPAIGN

"Let's end racism!" Following incidents earlier this season, that's the message the league will be hammering at matches in the top two divisions this weekend.

Juan says he is bitter about Italian league not punishing Acerbi

AP ■ MILAN

Napoli defender Juan Jesus says he has been left feeling "very bitter" and "crestfallen" by the Italian league's decision not to punish Inter Milan player Francesco Acerbi for an allegedly racist remark toward him.

The Italian league's sporting judge announced on Tuesday that there wasn't enough proof that Acerbi's insult to Juan Jesus was racist to impose what would have been a lengthy ban on the Italy defender.

The alleged incident happened during a match between Inter and Napoli on March 17 and the match was halted for about 90 seconds when Juan Jesus, who is Black, told the referee that Acerbi directed a racial slur at him.

"I have read several times and with great disappointment the decision of the sports judge, who felt there was no evidence that I was the victim of a racist insult during the match," Juan Jesus said in a statement on Wednesday.

"While respecting the decision, it is one I find difficult to comprehend and it leaves me feeling very bitter. "Quite honestly I am



crestfallen by such a serious incident in which my only mistake was that I dealt with it as a gentleman," deciding not to interrupt an important game, with all the inconvenience that would have caused the spectators watching the match. I did so believing that such an attitude would have been respected, and perhaps taken as an example."

Juan Jesus was visibly upset when he approached the referee during the second half at San Siro and was also pointing at his shirt sleeve which had a Keep Racism Out' badge - as part of the league's anti-racism

campaign.

The 32-year-old Brazilian said after the match that Acerbi apologized and seemed to wish to put the matter behind him, adding, "What happens on the field, stays on the field ... he is a good guy."

The Italian soccer federation prosecutor questioned the players and witnesses last week and a report was sent to the Italian league sporting judge, who also studied images from the match, as well as audio from the referee and VAR before making the decision not to sanction Acerbi.

"Following this decision, I imagine that anyone else finding themselves in a similar situation to mine will act in a very different manner, in order to protect themselves and to curb the disgrace of racism, which, sadly, we are struggling to rid ourselves of," Juan Jesus' statement continued.

"I do not feel in any way protected by a decision which both admits that there was certainly evidence of the insult' and maintains there is no certainty that it was of a discriminatory nature, which only I perceived in good faith."

Chelsea, Lyon advance to Women Champions League semifinals

AP ■ LONDON,

Emma Hayes' hopes of going out on the ultimate high at Chelsea moved a step closer on Wednesday as the London club reached the Women's Champions League semifinals after a 1-1 draw with Ajax. Chelsea advanced 4-1 on aggregate after winning the first leg in Amsterdam 3-0.

Hayes takes over the U.S. Women's national team at the end of the season, when she will lead its bid to win Olympic gold in Paris.

Before that, she is aiming to win a quadruple of trophies with Chelsea - including the Champions League for the first time.

The Women's Super League champion had effectively secured its place in the next round after a dominant performance in the first leg of the quarterfinals at Ajax. And it extended its overall advantage to 4-0 on aggregate after Mayra Ramirez's goal in the 33rd minute at Stamford Bridge. Chasity Grant scored in the



65th to give Ajax some consolation and a 1-1 draw on the night. While Chelsea is searching for its first Women's Champions League trophy, Lyon is hunting a record-extending ninth.

The French champion advanced to the semifinals for a record 13th time after a 4-1 win over Benfica.

Delphine Cascarino and Kadidiatou Diani scored two goals each as record eight-time champion Lyon won 6-2 on aggregate at Groupama Stadium after a 2-1 first leg win in Portugal.

Cascarino's goal in the first leg had set up Lyon's comeback win after trailing 1-0 at halftime of that match. And she tightened the French champions' control of the tie when she opened the scoring in the 43rd of the second leg with a long-range chip to put Lyon ahead on the night.

Marie-Yasmine Alidou evened the score two minutes later, but Cascarino restored the home team's lead with a powerful effort from distance in the 51st.

Ukraine soccer victory provides welcome distraction from tragedy of war

AP ■ KYIV (UKRAINE)

Ukrainians have expressed pride and gratitude toward their men's national soccer team for qualifying for the European Championship, a rare bit of good news and a welcome distraction from the war with Russia.

Though celebrations after Ukraine's 2-1 win over Iceland were muted as Russian missiles kept raining down on the country, the team's success gives Ukrainians something to cheer for this summer when the tournament kicks off in Germany.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Tuesday night's victory in the decisive playoff stirred emotions throughout the country and proved that "whenever Ukrainians face difficulties but do not give up and continue to fight, Ukrainians certainly win."

Mykhailo Mudryk scored the winning goal as Ukraine came back from a goal down to beat Iceland in Poland. The



team had to play its qualifying matches outside Ukraine because of the war.

Youth players at the Sporting Kyiv football academy in the Ukrainian capital on Wednesday said they were inspired.

"(It) shows that war does not stop us from pursuing sports, and we can qualify for the European Championship and compete in it," said 12-year-old Hlib Kochetov.

Artem Mykhailenko, 15, said

that seeing Ukraine compete at Euro 2024 will be a moment of pride for the entire nation.

"We need to show what we are truly worth, who we are, and that we are Ukraine, that Ukraine is a great, united, and strong country in many respects," he said.

Trying to live life as normally as possible has become a way for Ukrainians to show defiance amid Russian missile strikes and drone attacks.

Keeping youth active in sports and other activities is also a way to keep their minds off a war that has deeply traumatized families across the country, said Anatolii Kartashov, a coach at Sporting Kyiv. "They have dreams, they set goals for themselves. Many of them want to become professional footballers, so this is a very positive event," the 36-year-old Kartashov said.

Ukraine will face Belgium, Slovakia and Romania in the group stage of the Euro 2024 tournament.

CAPTAIN PANDYA: IN SEARCH OF A SOUNDING BOARD

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

It's just two games into the tournament but Hardik Pandya already seems to have loads to worry about in his second stint with Mumbai Indians, the leadership part not quite falling in place thus far. The exuberant all-rounder, arguably one of the biggest match-winners in the current national set-up, has been, to put it mildly, struggling in the IPL despite being back in the team that shaped him, the one he considers his home. It's been anything but homely ever since Pandya was named captain, replacing the much-loved Rohit Sharma. The results have only made matters worse. Two matches, two losses, some baffling tactics, his own form not being the brightest spot and Pandya has his back against the wall within the first week of the tournament.

There is no imminent threat to the 30-year-old's captaincy as the MI owners, after bringing him on board in IPL's biggest one way transfer, would not want to take any decision in haste. After all, MI have always been slow starters, who take a while to find their rhythm, and it would be a bit presumptive to dismiss Pandya this early in the tournament given that he is, after all, leading a five-time champion side. But a team that is so desperate for success after three barren seasons perhaps cannot also look away from the fact that Pandya is making mistakes and he doesn't seem to have a sounding board for course correction. He had a solid one during his time as Gujarat Titans skipper when Ashish Nehra would always be in his ears. "I didn't try to convince Hardik to stay back," Nehra had said



with a dead pan expression in Ahmedabad in the pre-season press conference when Shubman Gill formally took charge as captain. Nehra is widely seen as the back-room strategist, the one who actually calls the shot

through the captain. He is often seen pacing along the boundary line like an overzealous football manager, trying to grab the attention of his captain and players, and shouting down instructions when he gets it.

"It was an open secret in Gujarat Titans camp that Ashu (that's how old teammates address Nehra) was the strategist and Hardik was the executor," a former India teammate, who has played with Nehra, tried to dissect one of

the most interesting characters in Indian cricket. "Hardik was good at implementing Ashu's vision. Ashu is more of a football manager in the garb of a cricket coach. He is constantly hovering around the boundary line with some advice. He believes, if a skipper is willing to commit, he can prepare the recipe for success. "Now, the same Ashu worked for RCB with Virat Kohli but it didn't work. Shubman Gill is also a new skipper, who like Hardik, needs a mentor at the start of his leadership journey and who better than Ashu," the notable player of yesteryears said. So, leading Gujarat to the title was a relatively less complicated task for Pandya but MI is a different beast where there are multiple points of leadership. For Pandya, return to Mumbai has been like coming from a nuclear family to a joint set-up,

where one needs to adjust with queries, demands and suggestions of a number of people. While a big think-tank helps to close ranks off the field when the campaign is going haywire but on field, no one quite knows who to make eye contact with in the dug-out. It would have helped when Pandya made some rather baffling calls like the one to let Tim David, who finds it difficult to hit when pace is taken off deliveries, to go ahead of him in the match against GT. And then none can decipher just why he delayed Jasprit Bumrah's introduction for three overs when SRH batters went on a rampage on Wednesday night. The argument can be that Pandya wanted to save Bumrah for Heinrich Klaassen but but the South African was already set by the time Bumrah was brought into the attack.

To be fair to Pandya, not having an enforcer like Suryakumar Yadav, who is injured, at number three and missing two international bowlers in Dilshan Madushanka and Jason Behrendorff have affected the team's balance. But what has baffled everyone is Pandya's own batting approach. In the years 2015, 17, 19 and 20, the four editions when he won the IPL with MI, Pandya's strike rates were 180.64, 156.25, 191.42 and 178.98 respectively. He would come at the back-end and traumatised bowlers with his aggressive strokes. But moment he became Gujarat Titans skipper, his strike-rate dropped to 131.27 and 136.76 in two seasons. During the first season (2022), when his team won, David Miller and Rahul Tewatia were finishing games and last season, Gill alone did the heavy lifting with 890 runs in 2023.



Foreign players were frustrated by KKR coach style of functioning: Wiese

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Several foreign cricketers from Kolkata Knight Riders were frustrated by head coach Chandrakant Pandit's "militant" style of functioning during the previous edition of the IPL, former South Africa and Namibia all-rounder David Wiese, who played for the franchise last year, has claimed. The 38-year-old all-rounder, who played three IPL games for KKR in 2023, said foreign cricketers weren't happy at being tutored on how to behave or what to wear by the coach. "He (Pandit) is known in India as a very militant type of coach. He is very strict, very disciplinarian that type of stuff. Sometimes in franchise cricket, when you have overseas guys, who've played all over the world, they don't need anyone coming and telling them how they need to behave, what they need to wear and what they need to do the whole time. So, that was tough," said Wiese on the podcast 'Hitman for Hire: A year in the life of a franchise cricketer' recently. Pandit took charge as KKR's head coach after New Zealander Brendon McCullum quit the job in 2022. The much-admired coach, who played five Tests for India, coached Vidarbha to successive Ranji Trophy titles in 2018 and 2019. He later guided Madhya Pradesh to its maiden Ranji title in 2022. Wiese, who was part of the Namibia side that played the 2022 T20 World Cup, said he saw players unhappy with

Pandit's style of coaching. "...He liked to do things a certain way and that didn't sit well with certain players. It caused a little bit of tension in the changing room. "Guys were frustrated, there was a lot that changed over the last couple of years (when McCullum was around) and the new coach brought in some new things that he thought would bring success to us," Wiese, who first played the IPL in 2015, said. Wiese added he wasn't too bothered about the environment around him. "I'm like 'listen it's your circus, you run the show. End of the day, I am here just to play. If you tell me to do this, I'll do it. I'm not the guy who's going to bump heads or anything. But there are certain players who are a bit more stubborn than me," he said. Two-time champions KKR had a disappointing season last year finishing seventh and Wiese said he felt frustrated because he didn't get more opportunities to showcase his talent. "...That frustration was more because of the fact that I played those games. I didn't really get the opportunity to do much. "I did hit a couple of sixes but didn't really get the opportunity to showcase my skills there, and never got picked again in the team that was struggling with players," he added. "I think if I hadn't played a single game it would've been fine but the fact that I played three games, had a taste, did relatively well and then didn't get another chance in a team that is struggling, that was the more frustrating part."

IPL 17 opening day registers record breaking viewership: Broadcaster

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The 17th edition of the Indian Premier League opened to blockbuster viewership numbers with 16.8 crore viewers tuning in to watch the season's first game between Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru on March 22, the tournament's official broadcaster said on Thursday. Disney Star said the opening day also registered a watch-

time of 1276 crore minutes -- the highest-ever for the first day of any season. The watch-time minutes are a compilation of the time spent by each viewer in watching the game. The 17th season of IPL also witnessed the highest-ever peak TV concurrency for an opening day, with 6.1 crore viewers watching the broadcast simultaneously on the Disney Star network. "Disney Star had recorded 870

crore minutes on the IPL's opening day in 2023. In comparison to the previous edition, there is a growth of 16 per cent in TV consumption," the company stated. Defending champions Chennai Super Kings defeated Royal Challengers Bengaluru by six wickets in the season-opener in Chennai. "This growth is a reaffirmation of the incomparable capacity of Live Cricket to aggregate audiences

on TV and provides a blockbuster start to the tournament. We will continue to enrich the magic of one of the world's biggest sporting events to take forward the launch momentum and deliver unprecedented viewership," a Star Sports spokesperson said in a press release. The channel said that the record-breaking TV viewership on the opening day comes on the back of an

array of programmes in the lead-up to the 17th season which attracted more than 24.5 crore viewers till a week prior to the start of the tournament. In the digital space, JioCinema clocked 11.3 crore viewers on the first day of the IPL. The streamer claimed that it registered a 51 per cent jump over day one of IPL 2023. The total watch time on JioCinema on day 1 was 660 crore minutes.

Surya might take a few more days to get match fit: BCCI source

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

World's number one T20 batter Suryakumar Yadav will skip a few more IPL matches as he continues to recover from a sports hernia surgery with the National Cricket Academy (NCA) keeping a watch on his progress. Yadav, who plays for Mumbai Indians, has been missing in action in the league and his team has lost both its matches so far. "Surya is making very good progress and very soon he will be back playing for MI. However, he might have to sit out for a few more games, having missed the first two," a BCCI source said. While MI is missing Yadav, the BCCI doesn't want to take any chances with the big-hitter's fitness as he is expected to play a huge role in the upcoming T20 World Cup in the USA and the West Indies in June. "For BCCI, the main concern is if he is on course for World T20 which he is. Obviously he will play for MI but after a sports hernia surgery, he can't be rushed," the source said. The 33-year-old often draws comparisons with retired South African superstar A B de Villiers for his range of shots. He has a superb strike rate of 171.55 in the format. Yadav has appeared in 60 T20 Internationals for India and has 2141 runs, including four hundreds.

Perplexed by Bumrah getting just one over till 13th over: Smith

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Left perplexed by Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya's tactics in the record-breaking IPL loss to Sunrisers Hyderabad, former Australia captain Steve Smith has said he cannot fathom why premier pacer Jasprit Bumrah bowled just six deliveries up until the 13th over of the match. In a stunning display of power-hitting, Sunrisers Hyderabad posted the highest ever IPL total of 277/3 before clinching a 31-run victory over an equally aggressive Mumbai Indians on Wednesday night. Bumrah was the second-most economical bowler in the match, after SRH captain Pat Cummins (2/35), conceding 36 runs in his four overs which did not yield any



wicket. "I was perplexed with some of their bowling changes in the first innings for Mumbai. Bumrah bowled in the fourth over, he went for 5 and then we didn't see him again till the 13th over when they were on 173," Smith told host broadcaster 'Star Sports'. "All the damage had been

done, you needed your best bowler to be coming back and take some wickets in that period and I think they missed a trick there bringing him back only in the 13th over," he pointed out. "I think he got a few things wrong, and that was the main one for me. I mean you can't have one of the best bowlers in the world bowling one over." Smith said Bumrah's late reintroduction into the attack rendered him ineffective. "When the ball is going around like that, you've just got to bring your best bowler back earlier than you would have liked. It's just about adapting on the go and I'd have almost bowled Bumrah out by the 15th, 16th over, try to get some wickets, if he gets wickets, you slow the rate down anyway.

Never thought of becoming a cricketer: Burger

PTI ■ JAIPUR

South African left-arm fast bowler Nandre Burger never aspired to be a cricketer but chose to take up the sport as "it was a free way to study". In 2014, it was through a cricket trial that Burger got admission to University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) with a full scholarship to pursue a psychology major. He has never looked back since. Burger, 28, now is an all-format pacer for South Africa, having made his national team debut in December last year. His performances for South Africa earned him a Rs 50 lakh contract with Rajasthan Royals. He also played for Joburg Super Kings in SA20 last month.

"Sounds strange, right. WITS offered a scholarship for those who played cricket. I thought it was cool. I didn't want to be a cricketer, but I was getting a free way to study, so I thought, why not? Cricket was actually my back-up to academics (laughs)," Burger told ESPNcricinfo. He made his IPL debut in RR's 20-run win over Lucknow Super Giants here on March 24. But the journey wasn't easy for the lanky left-arm pacer. He tried his hand at tennis and squash before turning to cricket because of a back injury. Burger has since recovered from the injury. It was his university coach Neil Levenson who saw a potential fast bowler in him for the national team.

Team management message to go out and express yourself worked wonders: Abhishek

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Being given the freedom to "go out and express" was the key factor in Sunrisers Hyderabad's record-shattering batting performance against Mumbai Indians, said the home side's batter Abhishek Sharma. Records tumbled as SRH batters went on the rampage against Mumbai Indians to post the highest IPL total of 277 for 3 and then winning the match by 31 runs on

Wednesday night. It was scintillating exhibition of power-hitting from SRH opener Travis Head (62 off 24) and number three Sharma (63 off 23) with the latter registering his team's record for the fastest fifty in IPL. Heinrich Klaassen (80 not out off 34 balls) provided the fireworks towards the end to help SRH break an 11-year-old record. The previous highest total in IPL was 263 for 5 scored by Royal Challengers Bangalore in



2013. "To be honest I didn't realise that it was the fastest fifty for SRH and for this year. I just wanted to go and express myself and after getting out I realised that it was the quickest. I enjoyed it," said 'Man of the Match' Sharma. "I think the message was pretty much simple for all the batters in the meeting we had before this match. 'Everyone just go and express yourself'. That's a very positive message if you get it from your captain

and coach. That's really supportive for all the batters." Sharma and Head stitched 68 runs off just 22 balls for the second wicket for SRH. "I was batting with Travis and he is one of my favourite batters. I really enjoyed batting with him," Sharma said. Sharma said despite putting a mammoth total on the board, it wasn't a cakewalk for SRH as MI came pretty close. Tilak Varma (64 off 34 balls) took the game deep with a

high-quality knock, comprising half-a-dozen sizes and, towards the end, Tim David (42 not out off 22) tried his best but it was not enough. "When Tilak Varma, Hardik bhai and even Tim David were batting, we were still a bit, I won't say worried but concerned. The way they were playing it was very good but we knew our bowlers were very much prepared for this kind of situation and they executed really well," Sharma said.

RCB, KKR eye course correction to add momentum to campaign

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Victory in their respective previous games might have eased the initial nerves but imperfections remain, hence Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Kolkata Knight Riders will eye a quick course correction to add steam to their campaign in an IPL 2024 match here on Friday. The Royal Challengers defeated Punjab Kings by four wickets, while the Knight Riders elbowed out Sunrisers Hyderabad by four runs to garner some early points. But entering the points table has not really eased some of the worries -- particularly pertaining to the top and middle-order batting. The Bengaluru dugout might be a happy space after star

batter Virat Kohli made a classy fifty on an unusually gripping Chinnaswamy pitch while chasing 177 against Punjab the other night, but that's only one part of the story. Skipper Faf du Plessis, Glenn Maxwell, Cameron Green and Rajat Patidar are yet to hit the overdrive, and for the win against PBKS they had to rely on the last-minute cameos of Dinesh Karthik and 'Impact Player' Mahipal Lomror. The Kolkatans have a much more capable bowling unit, at least on paper, and such a collectively underwhelming effort by frontline batters might push RCB into deep troubles against them. Once they iron out that rough edges, RCB can look at their bowling unit that still needs to fill a couple of unticked boxes



despite good outings by pacers Mohammed Siraj and Yash Dayal against Punjab. Pacer Alzarri Joseph continues to be profligate and his figures

-- 0/38, 1/43 -- might prompt the RCB think-tank to bring in England left-arm quick Reece Topley, who has impressive white-ball skills, in place of the

West Indian for this match. The Knight Riders offer a strikingly similar plot. Their top and middle-order consisting of captain Shreyas

Iyer, Venkatesh Iyer, Sunil Narine and Nitish Rana malfunctioned against SRH at the Eden Gardens. It required a combined effort from impact sub Ramandeep Singh, Rinku Singh and Andre Russell -- the 6, 7, 8 -- for them to post a competitive total. Shreyas, who is central to their batting plans, was dismissed for a two-ball duck, but the return to Chinnaswamy might give him a sense of relief as he had fruitful outings here in white-ball cricket in his last two innings. The elegant right-hander made an unbeaten 128 against the Netherlands in last year's World Cup before making a 53 against Australia in the fifth T20I in December. In bowling, Narine redeemed himself with a frugal spell (1/19) after a modest effort

with the bat, but pacer Mitchell Starc, their record buy, and Varun Chakravathy failed to impress, leaking over 50 runs in their four overs. The KKR think-tank might not be unduly worried as their campaign is still at a nascent stage, but they would like to see the first-choice pacer and spinner finding their range at the earliest. But it is unlikely that the Knights will make changes to their eleven for this match, unless they want to give a go to promising leg-spinner Suyash Sharma, who showed fine form during KKR's pre-season matches. Squads: Royal Challengers Bengaluru: Faf du Plessis (c), Glenn Maxwell, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Anuj Rawat, Dinesh Karthik, Suyash Prabhudessai,

Will Jacks, Mahipal Lomror, Karn Sharma, Manoj Bhandage, Mayank Dagar, Vyshak Vijaykumar, Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj, Reece Topley, Himanshu Sharma, Rajan Kumar, Cameron Green, Alzarri Joseph, Yash Dayal, Tom Curran, Lockie Ferguson, Swapnil Singh, Saurav Chauhan. Kolkata Knight Riders: Shreyas Iyer (c), KS Bharat, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Rinku Singh, Angkrish Raghuvanshi, Sherfane Rutherford, Manish Pandey, Andre Russell, Nitish Rana, Venkatesh Iyer, Anukul Roy, Ramandeep Singh, Varun Chakravathy, Sunil Narine, Vaibhav Arora, Chetan Sakariya, Harshit Rana, Suyash Sharma, Mitchell Starc, Dushmantha Chameera, Sakib Hussain, Mujeeb Ur Rahman.