

OPINION 6 INSIGHTS FROM THE RAISINA DIALOGUE

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MONEY 10 SENSEX SNAPS FOUR DAYS WINNING RUN

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Yogi expands UP Cabinet to include diverse voices

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh Government under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath embarked on its first Cabinet expansion during his second term, strategically broadening its representation across regions and castes in anticipation of the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The move aims to resonate with a diverse electorate and consolidate support for the ruling party. On Tuesday, four new Ministers were sworn in, signaling a concerted effort to encompass varied interests.

The inductees include Om Prakash Rajbhar, chief of the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP); Anil Kumar from the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD); and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders Dara Singh Chauhan and Sunil Kumar Sharma.

The swearing-in ceremony, officiated by Uttar Pradesh Governor Anandiben Patel and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, took place at Raj Bhavan in Lucknow.

Expressing his gratitude, SBSP's Om Prakash Rajbhar remarked on the significance of representation for marginalised communities in

governance. "This appointment is a testament to the acknowledgment of the marginalised society's aspirations," he said, indicating a broad spectrum of political approval for his inclusion.

RLD leader Anil Kumar, acknowledging the responsibility bestowed upon him, extended thanks to his party chief Jayant Chaudhary, Yogi, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He emphasised a commitment to

honesty in his endeavours and expressed determination towards achieving electoral success for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the State.

This Cabinet expansion marks a strategic move by the BJP to fortify its foothold across various regions of Uttar Pradesh ahead of the impending Lok Sabha polls, slated to be a crucial battleground

for electoral dominance. The recent political developments have seen RLD leader Jayant Chaudhary formalising the party's alliance with the ruling NDA, underscoring a concerted effort towards

coalition building and electoral preparation. RLD has also announced its candidates for the upcoming general elections, reinforcing its

commitment to the alliance. With these strategic appointments, the Uttar Pradesh Government aims to navigate the electoral landscape effectively, catering to the aspirations of a wide-ranging populace as the State gears up for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

After prolonged anticipation and numerous postponements, the much-awaited Cabinet expansion has finally taken place, just ahead of the looming Lok Sabha elections. Speculations had been rife since last year's Diwali festivities, but it was not until now that the expansion materialised.

The BJP has reportedly aimed to honour its commitments to alliance partners, offering Ministerial positions under the "poll deal". One inclusion in the expanded Cabinet is Omprakash Rajbhar, who previously served as a Cabinet Minister during Yogi's first term in Uttar Pradesh. Rajbhar had defected to the Samajwadi Party (SP) before the 2022 Assembly elections but returned to the BJP fold a few months ago, after falling out with the SP. His re-inclusion in the Cabinet is believed to be part of the pre-election agreement within the alliance.

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Uttar Pradesh Governor Anandiben Patel with Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and newly sworn-in Cabinet Ministers at Raj Bhavan, in Lucknow, on Tuesday PTI

Mamata shields women exploiters in Bengal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

There was a high drama at the Bengal Police headquarters at Bhavani Bhavan in South Kolkata when the State Police (read Criminal Investigation Department) refused to comply with the Calcutta High Court by handing over the papers and the prime accused Sandeshkhali Sheikh Shahjahan to the Central Bureau of Investigation in the high-profile Sandeshkhali case.

Though neither the police nor the CBI officials would react officially to the high-voltage drama, sources in the agency said there is a likelihood of them moving a contempt petition in the High Court again on Wednesday.

A three-member CBI team flanked by the Central forces had to return empty handed after the CID refused to transfer the accused to the CBI. The act of the police may be seen as a contempt of court, advocate Srinjay Sengupta said adding, "If there is no stay expressly given by any higher forum the order of the High Court would prevail and should be complied to... For



the police to act in that manner the High Court order had to be stayed by the Apex Court ... if such is not the case here then the police are liable to contempt proceedings."

Earlier on Tuesday, the Bengal Government rushed to the Supreme Court to obtain a stay on the Calcutta High Court order transferring the Sandeshkhali cases to the CBI.

However the State would not get a relief as the apex court directed senior Advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi representing the Bengal Government to mention the petition before the Registrar General.

This window of time, legal experts said, would provide the CBI the time to get the

papers related to the Sandeshkhali case transferred to it from the Bengal Police. Earlier, the Division Bench of Chief Justice TS Sivagnanam and Justice Hiranmay Bhattacharya directed the Bengal Police to handover all papers — as well as the custody of prime accused Shahjahan Sheikh — concerning the Sandeshkhali cases to the CBI.

The Sandeshkhali cases include the January 5 attack on the Enforcement Directorate officials when they went to raid the house of Shahjahan in connection with Rs 10,000 crore ration scam and subsequent allegations of land-grab and sexual attack on women.

Shahjahan went at large from January 5 and was arrested last week by the State police in connection with Sandeshkhali violence.

Indian citizen killed in Israel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

An Indian was killed and two other Indians injured in a missile attack by Hezbollah on the Israel-Lebanon border prompting the Indian Embassy there on Tuesday urging its citizens to move to safer areas in Israel. It was the first Indian casualty since the Hamas-Israel conflict began in October last year.

The advisory came shortly after a man hailing from Kollam, Kerala was killed on Monday in the attack on an orchard in Margalioth in north Israel where he was working with some others also hailing from his native State. While the deceased was identified as Nibin Maxwell, the injured were identified as Bush Joseph George and Paul Melvin.

"In view of the prevailing security situation and local safety advisories, all Indians nationals in Israel, especially those working in or visiting border areas in the north and south, are advised to relocate to safe areas within Israel. The Embassy remains in touch with the Israeli authorities to ensure the safety of all our nationals," the Indian Embassy



in Israel said. The Israel Embassy here said in a statement on Tuesday that two others, also from Kerala, were injured in the "cowardly" attack by Hezbollah. The three were cultivating an orchard at the time of the missile strike, the statement said. The Israel Embassy has said its prayers go out to the families of the dead and the injured. "Israeli Medical institutions are completely at the service of the injured who are being treated by our very best medical staff. Israel regards equally all nationals, Israeli or foreign, who are injured or killed due to terrorism. We will be there to support the families and offer them assistance," it said.

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Maldives escalates anti India rhetoric

PTI ■ MALE

Stepping up his anti-India rhetoric, Maldives president Mohamed Muizzu has affirmed that no Indian military personnel, not even those in civilian clothing, would be present inside his country after May 10, a media report said on Tuesday. Muizzu's statement comes less than a week after an Indian civilian team reached the Maldives to take charge of one of the three aviation platforms in the island nation, well ahead of the March 10 deadline agreed by the two nations for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel.

Addressing the Baa atoll Eydhafushi residential community during his tour across the atoll, the president stated that due to his Government's success in expelling Indian troops from the country, people who spread false rumours, are attempting to twist the situation, a news portal Edition.Mv reported.



"That these people [Indian military] are not departing, that they are returning after changing their uniforms into civilian clothing. We must not indulge such thoughts that instil doubts in our hearts and spread lies," the portal quoted Muizzu, widely regarded as a pro-China leader, as saying. "There will be no Indian troops in the country come May 10. Not in uniform and not in civilian clothing. The Indian military will not be residing in this country in any form of clothing. I state this with confidence," he said, on a day when his country signed an agreement with China to receive free military aid.

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Google serves Googly to India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and Messenger-social media platforms managed by Meta-were down for thousands of users in India and several other countries for almost two hours on Tuesday evening. Many users of Gmail and YouTube faced problems in logging into their accounts in several parts of the world, including India on Tuesday evening.

According to the outage tracking website Downtidetector, users were unable to load apps, deliver messages, and refresh their search feeds on Facebook and Instagram.

There were more than 300,000 reports of outages on Facebook, while there were more than 20,000 reports on Instagram, according to the website.

Several users were logged out of their Facebook accounts, and due to the outage, they are unable to log back in. "We're aware people are having trouble accessing our services. We are working on this now," said Meta spokesperson Andy Stone.

Several users across the globe, with many users complaining about login issues, that they have been facing on Tuesday evening.

According to several users, some could not refresh Instagram pages while some users were asked to change their passwords. YouTube too faced similar outage issues.

According to Downtidetector.com, which tracks outages, there have been as many as 3,00,000



reports of Facebook outages and nearly 20,000 reports of Instagram outages across the world.

Downtidetector tracks outages by collating status reports from several sources including user-submitted errors on its platform. The outage could have affected a larger number of users. WhatsApp, which is also owned by Meta, however did not report any outages till the filing of this report. The newly

launched X rival Threads was down too.

Within minutes of the outage, people moved to Elon Musk-owned X and #Instagramdown, Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg which started trending on the social media platform, with users sharing memes over the global server issue. As users jumped to X (formerly Twitter) to find out more about the outage, the social media giant made a cheeky comment, saying "We

know why you all are here right now."

Elon Musk, the owner of X took a jibe at Meta and said, "If you're reading this post, it's because our servers are working."

Last year, a major outage was reported in July across Meta platforms including WhatsApp. The services were restored later in the day. The outage in July came weeks after a similar issue was reported in June.

State Bank seeks more time to disclose electoral bond details

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

With the State Bank of India moving the Supreme Court seeking an extension of time till June 30 to disclose details of each electoral bond encashed by political parties, Opposition parties criticise the move, raising "suspicious apprehensions" and labeling it a "travesty of justice."

In an application filed before the top court, State Bank of India (SBI) contended that retrieval of information from "each silo" and the procedure of matching the information of one silo to that of the other would be a time-consuming exercise.

Sabha polls to hide Modi's "real face", CPI (M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said the SBI's move to seek an extension on disclosing information related to electoral bonds raises "suspicious apprehensions". The plea submitted that due to stringent measures undertaken to ensure that the identity of the donors was kept anonymous, "decoding" the electoral bonds and matching donors to the donations made would be a complex process.

"It submitted that the data related to the issuance of the bond and the data related to the redemption of the bond was kept recorded in two different silos. No central database was maintained. This was done to ensure that donors' anonymity would be protected.

"It is submitted that donor details were kept in a sealed cover at the designated branches and all such sealed covers were deposited in the Main Branch of the Applicant bank, which is located in Mumbai," the plea said.

In a landmark judgement that delivered a big blow to the Government, the Supreme Court on February 15 annulled the electoral bonds scheme for political funding, saying it violates the Constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression as well as the right to information. In its verdict months ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, the apex court ordered the SBI to disclose to the Election Commission the names of the contributors to the six-year-old scheme.

Controversy erupts after INDIA Bloc invokes Lord Ram

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

Yet another controversy erupted on Tuesday when prominent leaders from the INDIA Bloc invoked the name of Lord Ram in a different connotation, prompting the ruling BJP and others to attack the Opposition members for their regular disparaging remarks against Sanatan Dharma.

Though the Congress condemned and distanced itself from their close ally, DMK's A Raja's remark suggesting that 'they' be considered enemies of Lord Ram, during the day, the grand old party itself faced heavy backlash after its top leader, Rahul Gandhi, criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi over unemployment in the country, saying the PM wants the nation to chant "Jai Shri Ram and die of hunger". Rahul accused the Prime



Minister of keeping the youth busy in chanting Jai Shri Ram to avoid accountability. The BJP said Opposition parties, INDIA Bloc, are against Hinduism and Lord Ram, and insulting India's ethos and Hindu gods. It has become the hallmark of their political agenda, said the BJP. Interestingly, while the BJP uses such comments as an opportunity to attack the Opposition, it described

Raja's comments as a call for the 'balkanisation' of the country and demanded his arrest.

The controversy erupted over a video of former Union Minister in the Congress-led UPA Government, A Raja, purportedly making remarks that India has never been a nation but a subcontinent with diverse practices and cultures.

Raja's certain remarks regarding Ramayana and Lord Ram also did not sit well with the national parties. "If you say it's this God, this is Jai Sri Ram, this is Bharat Mata ki Jai, then we and Tamil Nadu will never accept Bharat Mata and Jai Shri Ram...Tamil Nadu won't accept. You go and tell, we're enemies of Ram," A Raja allegedly said.

On his part during ongoing Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra currently traversing in Madhya Pradesh, Rahul said, "PM Modi desires our youth

to spend all their time watching reels on mobile phones and chanting Jai Shri Ram, even as they starve to death".

Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur said these are the people who want to destroy the Indian culture.

Referring to Raja's controversial remark on Lord Ram and questioning the idea of India, Thakur said these are the people who "abuse Hindi, talk about destroying India and are part of the 'tukde tukde' gang".

The Union Minister alleged that "slogans of 'Pakistan zindabad' rent the air" when their leader won the Rajya Sabha elections in the State and asked the compulsion behind such steps. He appealed to the countrymen to remain united and not fall prey to the evil designs of the Congress and the INDIA Bloc parties.

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NIA raids in seven States

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The National Investigation Agency on Tuesday launched multiple raids across seven states in connection with a case related to radicalisation of prisoners by a Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist in Karnataka, an official said. The raids, being conducted in connection with the Bengaluru prison radicalisation case, are underway at 17 places across seven States and further details are awaited, the official said.

In January, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) had filed a charge-sheet against eight people in the case. The charge-sheeted accused included T Naseer of Kerala's Kannur, who is serving life sentence in the central prison in Bengaluru since 2013, and Junaid Ahmed alias "JD" and Salman Khan, who are suspected to have fled abroad.

The case was originally registered by the Bengaluru City Police on July 18 last year following the seizure of arms and ammunition, hand grenades and walkie-talkies from seven of the accused persons. The seizure was made when the seven men were in the house of one of the accused. According to the NIA, which took over the case in October last year, the investigations revealed that Naseer, who was involved in several blast cases, had come in contact with the other accused while they were all lodged in the Bengaluru prison during 2017.

Naseer had managed to get all of them shifted to his barrack after a careful assessment of their potential with a view to radicalise and recruit them into the proscribed terror group, LeT.

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People Judge resigns, joins BJP

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Justice Abhijit Gandopadhyay also popularly known as 'people's judge' for his 'exemplary' and 'time-induced' judgments in the cash-for-school-jobs cases sending a bevy of senior Trinamool Congress politicians including ministers, MLAs and top officials to jail on Tuesday resigned and announced his decision to join the BJP.

In what could broaden the smile on the saffron party's face desperately in hunt for a "credible face," the Judge soon after his retirement said he had decided to join the BJP as he thought "Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a good man and the BJP is the only national party that sincerely fights corruption."

Speaking to the media the Judge said, "I am joining the BJP ... on March 7." When asked to comment on whether he would contest in the Lok Sabha elections he said "I will inform from which seat I will contest (Lok Sabha polls) adding quickly "or if my party decides to use me in some other way without fielding me I will do accordingly." Saying that he was responding to the Trinamool Congress



challenge that "instead of using his Chair for gaining popularity he should contest politically," Justice Gandopadhyay said, "as they had challenged me to contest polls I am here and I will contest against them." On why he chose the BJP he said, "I think he (Prime Minister Narendra Modi) is a good man ... He is trying to do something for our country ... and the BJP is the only national party that is fighting against corruption." About the Left he said "I could have joined the CPI(M) but I would not do that as they are non-believers and I am a believer in God and perform Pujas ... I also did not join the Congress because they

are a party that has become the zamindari of a single family." About the TMC he said that party would not last too long as they are crumbling from within and will not last till 2026." While the BJP leadership remained largely silent with a few of them like their Rajya Sabha member Samik Bhattacharya welcoming him to the outfit saying his presence would enrich the party, the TMC said the "Tuesday's judgment" only exposed the Judge and "confirmed our argument" that all his judgments were politically motivated. TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said, "he has exposed himself ... now our contention

that his judgments were all motivated by his political ambition is coming to be true ... he used his chair for his personal ambitions ... the fact that he joined the BJP soon after his retirement raises questions on whether he was in touch with the BJP during in chair or else how could he confirm his entry in the BJP within hours of his retirement."

CPI(M)'s Sujan Chakrabarty said, Justice Ganguly has lost all his credibility and good name as an honest Judge among the hapless youth who failed to get their jobs due to corruption ... he has done a big disservice to them by strengthening the TMC's argument that he was giving his judgments from a political view point... he will soon come to know that the BJP is the most corrupt party in the country." Congress' Adhir Chowdhury too said that Justice Gandopadhyay would soon understand where he had gone. "Now they are welcoming him to utilize his name for gaining their own credibility because the BJP is party full of corrupt and opportunistic people ... He will soon realize that ... besides his joining the BJP will make it clear that his act was one of political opportunism," he said.

PM Modi in Kolkata again

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday evening reached Kolkata on a two-day visit of the State where he would inaugurate some new projects and hold a public rally on Wednesday. Soon after landing the Prime Minister went to see the President of Ramakrishna Mission Order Swami Smaranananda ji Maharaj who was recuperating at the Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratisthana in South Kolkata. From there he was likely to go to the Raj Bhavan where he is likely to hold a meeting with the State Governor C.V. Ananda Bose.

On Wednesday the Prime Minister will address a rally at Barasat where he is also likely to meet some women of Sandeshkhali who had been the victims of sexual assault by TMC goons. This is the third visit of the Prime Minister in a week's time. Earlier he held two rallies in two successive days on March 1 and 2 at Arambagh in Hooghly district and Krishnagar in Nadia district.

MVA leaders to meet Ambedkar today for seat sharing talks

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In an effort to bring about the Opposition unity in Maharashtra, the top brass of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) will meet Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) chief Prakash Ambedkar on Wednesday to finalise the seat-sharing arrangement for the Lok Sabha polls.

At the meeting, the MVA leaders - NCP (SCP) chief Sharad Pawar, Shiv Sena (UBT) head Uddhav Thackeray and state Congress President Nana Patole --- are expected to dissuade him against going it alone in the Lok Sabha polls and ask him to settle down for a reasonable number of seats to be given by the Opposition front. Last week, the VBA had submitted a list of 27 Lok Sabha seats that it intended to contest. However, the MVA leadership was no in mood to agree to such a "high". Subsequently, Ambedkar had gone on record saying: "I can only say that if the VBA contests independently, we can win a minimum of six seats". A two-time Lok Sabha MP



from Akola and one-term Rajya Sabha MP, Ambedkar will in all likelihood contest the polls from Akola in the Vidarbha region. In addition, the VBA has also requested MVA to field Shivba Sanghatana founder Manoj Jarange-Patil, who is leading the Maratha reservation campaign, from Jalna in Marathwada, while it has asked to field Dr Abhijeet Vaidya from the Pune seat. The VBA, which Ambedkar heads, is a group of Dalits, Tribals, Dhangers, Kolis, Agris, Banjaras, Malis, Kaikadis and other communities. The VBA has tied up with the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena to contest the Lok Sabha

polls. Last month, the MVA leadership had formally invited Ambedkar to be part of the opposition coalition. However, Ambedkar has not yet conveyed his decision officially to the leadership of MVA, comprising the Congress, Shiv Sena and NCP (SP). It may be recalled that in the LS polls, Ambedkar had an electoral arrangement with Asaduddin Owaisi-led All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM). The VBA-AIMIM alliance had cut into the traditional vote banks of the Congress and NCP prospects resulting in two parties losing more than a dozen seats.

Thakur inaugurates Sansad Khel Mahakumbh 3.0 in Hamirpur

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Anurag Thakur once again provided a splendid platform for young sports talents in Hamirpur by inaugurating Sansad Khel Mahakumbh 3.0 on Tuesday. Indian cricket team captain Rohit Sharma and coach Rahul Dravid graced the occasion as chief guests. Lakhvinder Singh Vadali, Kuldeep Sharma, "Natti King", "Pines of Harmony" Himachal Police Band, and Aaparsakti Khurana also enhanced the grandeur of the inaugural ceremony.

During the inauguration, Luhn Ground in Bilaspur dazzled with spectacular fireworks. Notable dignitaries, including BJP district president Swatantra Sankeyan, former MP and senior BJP leader Suresh Chandel, MLA Satpal Satti, MLA Naina Devi, MLA Randeep Sharma, MLA Trilok Jamwal, MLA JR Katwal, former MLA Rajendra Garg, Hamirpur Lok Sabha in-charge



Sumit Sharma, and state minister Narendra Atri, graced the occasion. While inaugurating Sansad Khel Mahakumbh, Anurag Thakur said, "Prime Minister Narendra Modi says 'Khelega India toh Khilega India', emphasizing the importance of sports. Therefore, Sansad Khel Mahakumbh not only provides a platform for talents in my Hamirpur parliamentary constituency but also offers them the opportunity to shine at

national and international levels. Sansad Khel Mahakumbh has become the biggest platform for players in my Hamirpur parliamentary constituency to play, compete, and showcase their talents. "After 40,000 participants in the first edition and 45,000 in the second, our aim this time is to engage 75,000 players. I extend my best wishes to all participants of the event," Thakur said.

JKNC to contest on all three Kashmir Valley LS seats

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The Parliamentary Board of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, the highest decision-making body, Tuesday finalised the proposal to field party candidates on all three seats of Kashmir valley leaving no scope for the Peoples Democratic Party to contest in alliance from at least one Lok Sabha seat of Anantnag-Rajouri.

The Parliamentary board also deliberated on the names of probable candidates likely to be fielded on all three Lok Sabha seats of Srinagar, Baramulla, and Anantnag-Rajouri. Due to health reasons, Dr Farooq Abdullah may avoid contesting the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. In his place, Omar Abdullah is most likely to throw his hat in the poll arena to return to the Lok Sabha. The decision of the National Conference Parliamentary Board now leaves no scope for the Peoples Democratic Party to enter into any negotiations



at all. PDP Chief Mehbooba Mufti is now expected to take a final call on fielding party candidates in consultation with the chairman of the PDP parliamentary board separately. Briefing media persons informally about the deliberations, a senior National Conference leader told reporters in Srinagar that the Parliamentary board of the party today decided to go ahead with the proposal to contest all three seats of Kashmir valley while talks were still on with the Congress party to approve the seat-sharing

formula on two Lok Sabha seats of Jammu region and one of Ladakh. Efforts made to reach out to the official spokesman of the party Tanvir Sadiq could not materialize. The party spokesman had not released any formal statement till late evening. The Party President Dr Farooq Abdullah, former Chief Minister and Vice President Omar Abdullah attended the Parliamentary board meeting along with Provincial chiefs of Jammu and Kashmir province and senior members of the party.

Rajeev Chandrasekhar gets new mentor

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

T P Sreenivasan, former Ambassador and Governor for India in the International Atomic Energy Agency, had a surprise guest on Tuesday at his residence in Golf Links at Thiruvananthapuram. Rajeev Chandrasekhar, the BJP candidate contesting from Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha constituency called on the Ambassador, an absolute apolitical person, who spends his retired life playing golf, writing and delivering speeches at various functions. "There is nothing surprising in Rajeev's visit to my house. We have been friends for quite sometime and I wished him all the best in the ensuing Lok Sabha election. He asked me to help him and I assured him of whatever help I could do," Sreenivasan told The Pioneer.

It may be remembered that Sreenivasan was the one who coordinated the election cam-

paign of Sasi Tharoor in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls. Tharoor and Sreenivasan were colleagues in the United Nations where the former was a deputy secretary general.

"Well, Sasi's interests got deviated after the election and we lost touch. But I welcome the decision of Rajeev to contest from Thiruvananthapuram. He has experience and is reasonably young.

We need people like him to play a major role in the future of Thiruvananthapuram as well as the nation," said Sreenivasan. The veteran diplomat was all praise for the good works done by Rajeev Chandrasekhar during the last five years. "He could replicate the same here in Kerala too and we should give him a chance to this young man," said Sreenivasan who also presented a copy of his book Encounters (in which one chapter is on Sasi Tharoor) to Chandrasekhar.

Indian citizen killed in...

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"Our countries, who are sadly well versed in civilian loss, stand united in hopes of a speedy recovery for the injured and solace for the family of the bereaved," the statement added. Israel's Ambassador to India, Naor Gilon, said he had spoken to the brother of the Kerala man killed in the missile strike. "I offered my heartfelt condolences to him and the family and reassured that Israel will be by their side for anything and everything," he said in a post on X. The anti-tank missile was fired from Lebanon, news agency PTI has reported. The Shia faction of Hezbollah has been carrying out rocket strikes and drone attacks in north Israel in support of Hamas since the war began. A report by PTI from Kollam said the deceased had gone to Israel only two months ago to work in a poultry farm, according to his father.

Maxwell's father said it was his elder son who informed him about his younger son's death. "My elder son called me around 4.30 pm on Monday and told me that Maxwell was injured in the attack and was hospitalised. Later, at around 12.45 am, he told me that my younger son had died," the father told a TV channel. He also said Maxwell left behind a four-and-a-half year old daughter and his wife was pregnant. "Maxwell was in Muscat and Dubai earlier and then returned here. Thereafter, he went to Israel. First my elder son went there and a week later my younger son too went there," he said. He also said according to his elder son, Maxwell's body would be brought back to Kerala in four days time as there are some formalities and paperwork to be

completed.

The missile hit a plantation in Margaliot, a moshav (collective agricultural community), in the Galilee region in the north of Israel around 11 am on Monday, Zaki Heller, spokesperson for rescue services Magen David Adom (MDA), told PTI. The attack is believed to have been carried out by the Shi'ite Hezbollah faction in Lebanon, which has been launching rockets, missiles, and drones at northern Israel daily since October 8 in support of Hamas amid the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip. The Israel-Hamas war has raged on for nearly five months after the October 7 attacks on Israeli cities. Tel Aviv's brutal counter strike has led to thousands of deaths in the Gaza Strip. New Delhi has said it is deeply troubled by the conflict and the humanitarian crisis it has led to.

At a briefing at the UN General Assembly, Permanent Representative of India to the UN, Ruchira Kamboj, said "the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas has led to a large-scale loss of civilian lives, especially women and children." "This is simply unacceptable. We have strongly condemned the deaths of civilians in the conflict. India has a longstanding and uncompromising position against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations," she said. "India is committed to supporting a two-State solution where the Palestinian people are able to live freely in an independent country within secure borders with due regard to the security needs of Israel," she added.

Yogi expands UP Cabinet to include...

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The BJP leadership is optimistic that Rajbhar's return to the Cabinet will help alleviate tensions and foster greater cooperation. Rajbhar had expressed discontent over the denial of a ticket to Rajesh Singh Dayal from the Salempur Lok Sabha seat, openly voicing his grievances during a recent event in Ballia, where he also criticised BJP candidate Ravindra Kushwaha. Another significant addition to the Cabinet is Dara Singh Chauhan, who also made a comeback to the BJP fold after a stint with the SP. Despite losing the Ghosi seat in a by-election, Chauhan's stature within the BJP remained intact, leading to his elevation to ministerial status.

Hailing from the Nonia-Chauhan community, which holds sway in the OBC demographics of Azamgarh, Mau, and Varanasi in Purvanchal, Chauhan's inclusion is seen as a strategic move by the BJP to consolidate support among non-Yadav OBC voters. With Akhilesh Yadav's campaign focusing on the PDA (Backward-Dalit-Extremely Exploited) slogan, the BJP aims to counterbalance by leveraging Chauhan's influence to attract OBC votes in crucial constituencies. The cabinet expansion, therefore, not only signifies a fulfillment of alliance promises but also underscores BJP's strategic maneuvers ahead of the impending electoral battle.

Controversy erupts after INDIA Bloc...

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In the video, Raja purportedly said, "India is not a (one) nation. Understand this well. India has never been one nation. "One nation denotes one language, one tradition and one culture and only such characteristics make one nation." "What's the reason? Here, Tamil is one nation and one country. Malayalam is one language, one nation and one country. Oriya is one nation, one language and one country. All such national races constitute India. So, India is not a country, it is a subcontinent that has various practices, traditions and cultures. Further, he said states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Delhi and Odisha, there were respective local culture. "In Manipur, dog meat is eaten, which is a cultural aspect. In Kashmir there is one culture. Every culture has to be recognised. If a community eats beef, recognise it, what is your

problem? Did they ask you to eat? So, (that is) unity in diversity. We have differences and it has to be acknowledged." This is the second time Raja has made such remarks which were seconded by his colleague TR Balu who also served as Union Minister in Manmohan Singh Government. Another DMK leader Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Udayanidhi Stalin too had said 'eradicate Sanatan Dharma' which led to a huge controversy and all the opposition alliance partners including Congress had distanced with the statement. Addressing a Press conference at the BJP headquarters, senior party leader and former Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad noted that DMK MP Raja in his latest speech in Tamil had said "India is not a nation. Understand this well. India is never a nation. One nation means one language, one tradition, one culture. Then, only it is a nation.

India is not a nation but a sub-continent."

"This is Maoist ideology," Prasad charged, reacting sharply to the DMK leader's reported remarks. Prasad further quoted Raja who said in his speech "if this is your Jai Shri Ram, if this is your Bharat Mata Ki Jai, we will never accept that Jai Shri Ram and Bharat Mata. Tamil don't accept. You go and tell (that) we are enemies of Ram." Supriya Shrinete, a Congress spokesperson, when asked about Raja's remarks, said, "I 100 per cent disagree with his remarks. From this platform, I condemn such a statement. I believe Ram belongs to everyone and is all encompassing." The Supreme Court on Monday rebuked Dayanidhi Stalin over his "eradicate Sanatan dharma" remark and asked why he has moved the court with his plea for clubbing together the FIRs filed against him after abusing his right to freedom of speech and expression.

NIA raids in seven...

From Page 1

The agency had said he first managed to radicalise and recruit Ahmed and Khan to further the activities of the LeT. Thereafter, he conspired with Ahmed to radicalise and recruit the other accused, the official said. He also conspired with Khan to deliver arms, ammunition, hand grenades and walkie talkies to the others as part of a plot to carry out a "fidayeen (suicide)" attack and help Naseer escape from police custody enroute to court, the official said. Ahmed also instructed his co-accused to steal used police caps for the attack and to commit arson on Government buses as a practice run. The plot was foiled with the seizure of the arms in July last year.

Maldives escalates anti India...

From Page 1

Earlier last month, after a high-level meeting in Delhi on February 2 between the two sides, the Maldivian Foreign Ministry said India would replace its military personnel operating the three aviation platforms in the Maldives by May 10 and the first phase of the process would be completed by March 10. In his maiden address to Parliament on February 5, he made similar remarks. There are 88 military personnel manning the three Indian platforms that have

been providing humanitarian and medical evacuation services to the people of the Maldives for the last few years using two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft. Muizzu rode to power last year on an anti-India stance and within hours of taking oath demanded India to remove its personnel from the strategically located archipelago in the Indian Ocean. Edition.Mv further reported that while the first troops to depart the country are the Indian military personnel

operating the two helicopters in Addu City, the military personnel present in Haa Dhaalu atoll Hanimaadhoo and Laamu atoll Kahdhoo are also expected to leave ahead of May 10. India had agreed to remove their troops from Maldives under the condition that a number of their civilians equivalent to the military presence are brought to operate the aircraft. The Opposition has been directing criticism at the administration asserting that the Indian personnel sent to Maldives as civilians are in

reality military officials out of uniform and that the Government has no way to ascertain otherwise, the portal claimed. Meanwhile, local media reports also said that Maldives has successfully tied up with Sri Lanka to run flights for medical evacuation last week, further indicating that it is bent on removing all Indian troops in whichever category. Further highlighting that securing true independence is a concept he regards with utmost priority, the President remarked that the

State is exerting efforts with due importance "to regain the southern maritime area deprived of the country in addition to expelling Indian troops from the Maldives." "I am confident we can achieve this. The delay in concluding this task is due to the adverse procedures practiced during the implementation. It was done without even taking the matter to the parliament ... In violation of the Constitution as well," the portal quoted the President as saying. The Maldives' proximity to

India, barely 70 nautical miles from the island of Minicoy in Lakshadweep and 300 nautical miles from the mainland's western coast, and its location at the hub of commercial sea lanes running through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) gives it significant strategic importance. The Maldives has been India's key maritime neighbour in the IOR and it occupies a special place in its initiatives such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Neighbourhood First Policy.'

Farmers march to city: Cops step up vigil

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police has directed its personnel to ensure strict vigil at the Tikri, Singhu and the Ghazipur borders, and railway and metro stations and bus stands after protesting farmers announced that they would reach Delhi for their protest on Wednesday. The Kisan Mazdoor Morcha and the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political), the two umbrella bodies that are spearheading the farmer's agitation, on March 3 gave a call to farmers from across the country to reach Delhi on Wednesday. "We had temporarily removed barriers for commuters at the Singhu and the Tikri borders. The deployment of police and paramilitary personnel is still there and (they) will ensure strict, round-the-clock vigil," a senior police officer said. The officer further said that additional police and paramilitary forces have already been



deployed at railway and metro stations and bus stands. "No one will be allowed to breach the law," the officer said. The police said checking will be intensified at different locations and there may be traffic congestion in the city. Farmer leaders Sarwan Singh Pandher and Jagjit Singh Dallewal on March 3 gave a call to farmers across the nation to reach Delhi on Wednesday for a protest. They also called for a four-hour countrywide rail roko on March 10 in support of their various demands, includ-

ing a legal guarantee on minimum support price for crops. He said the sacrifice of a farmer will not go in vain and the struggle will continue until the demands are met. The protesting farmers have been staying put at the Shambhu and the Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana after their "Delhi Chalo" march was stopped by security forces. They began their march on February 13 but were stopped by the security forces, which led to clashes at the border of Haryana and Punjab.

Modi to launch additional section of RRTS corridor

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch the 17-km long additional section of the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut RRTS corridor from Duhai to Modi Nagar North on Wednesday, NCRTC officials said on Tuesday.

A Namoo Bharat train will be flagged off on the new additional section by the prime minister from Muradnagar Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) station remotely through video conference from Kolkata. Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri will also remain present during the inauguration.

With this, an additional 17-km stretch from Duhai to Modi Nagar North on the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut RRTS corridor, beyond the operational priority section, will be ready for operations. The extension encompasses three stations - Murad Nagar, Modi Nagar South and Modi Nagar North.

"With the inauguration of this additional 17-km section, Namoo Bharat services



will be seamlessly available on 34 km of the Delhi-Meerut RRTS corridor, incorporating eight stations from Sahibabad to Modinagar North," the National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC) said. The foundation stone for India's inaugural RRTS corridor, linking Delhi to Meerut, was laid by the prime minister in March 2019. It was started for passenger operations in October 2023.

"The newly-added 17-km stretch of the Namoo Bharat train service extends the cov-

erage of the Delhi-Meerut RRTS corridor beyond its initial operational priority section. This expansion is poised to boost regional connectivity, making commuting within the area more convenient and seamless," the NCRTC said in a statement.

The RRTS boasts a design speed of 180 kmph and operation speed of 160 kmph. The Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut RRTS corridor, stretching over 82 km, is expected to shrink travel time between Delhi and Meerut to less than an hour.

LG flags poor civic facilities

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After Delhi Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena slammed the city government for depriving the people of basic public facilities, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday hit back and said the former is "playing the role of the opposition" despite holding a constitutional post.

The lieutenant governor's criticism came after he visited Sangam Vihar, Kirari and Burari areas on Monday.

"Went to Sangam Vihar on Monday on the request of the local residents. Despite nine years of hardships, more than 20 lakh people living in the area are forced to live a life where they are deprived of basic public facilities. There are no roads, no sewers, no garbage disposal," Saxena said in a post on X in Hindi.

Attaching some pictures to his post, Saxena said there are randomly hanging electrical wires that are dangerous, adding that a rickshaw overturned in front of him and injured a woman.

"The country cannot imagine

that overflowing drains, heaps of garbage and streets filled with stinking sewer water will be in the capital of India. All the concerned departments are completely under the Delhi government and the MCD is also under you. The chief minister is requested to pay attention to the problems," he wrote on another post on X.

Responding to the LG, Kejriwal said he has ordered the chief secretary to remove the shortcomings in all areas mentioned by him within the next seven days.

"I am ordering the chief secretary to remove all these shortcomings within seven days. The work you are doing should have been done by the opposition. It is the job of the opposition to point out the shortcomings of the ruling party," Kejriwal posted on X.

"Unfortunately, today all the seven MPs of the opposition (BJP) are busy retiring from politics and the eight MLAs are fast asleep. This is the reason why power in Delhi has been away from BJP for the last 26 years," he wrote.

14 agendas cleared in NDMC last meeting before Lok Sabha polls



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) on Tuesday held its council meeting where 14 agendas out of 15, including those related to mid-day meal, water and pollution, were passed, officials said.

Addressing a press conference, NDMC member Kuljeet Chahal said this meeting was the last before the Lok Sabha polls.

"Through 'Har ghar jal yojana', the water supply will

be provided to every cluster households in the NDMC area. The council has also sanctioned the budget of Rs 52.79 crore for collecting, transporting and dumping of C&D waste in the area," Chahal said.

The NDMC is also going to establish a kitchen through which around 7,000 to 8,000 school kids would get mid-day meal. In the meeting, a budget of Rs 169.57 crore has also been sanctioned for the high-tech cleaning of Kushak drain, he said.

Road rage, pending challans, fuel prices top anxiety triggers among car owners: Survey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Road rage, pending challans and fuel prices are the top anxiety triggers among car owners while driving on Delhi-NCR roads, according to a survey report.

The survey was conducted by Park+ — a utility app for car owners — and involved 18,000 car owners in Delhi-NCR. The survey sheds light on mental wellness and anxiety triggers faced by those navigating roads in the regions.

According to the survey, road rage is the primary cause of anxiety among car owners in Delhi-NCR.

Frequent traffic jams, restricted road conditions, two-wheelers manoeuvring through traffic, and people disregarding traffic rules are the main factors contributing to road rage, the survey has found.

Pending challans and fuel prices are two other pain points for car owners. Despite streamlined e-chal-



lans, challenges arise when car owners neglect online checks or have outdated contact information, resulting in fines and vehicle impoundments.

Fuel prices, which make up 30-40 per cent of maintenance costs, are also a major concern, particularly with city driving limiting efficiency to 12-14 kilometres per

litre. This causes substantial monthly expenses for regular commuters, the survey found. Park+ founder Amit Lakhota said, "We aim to enhance the car ownership experience and have launched 'Offence Reporter' for digital challan settlements and partnered with Indian Oil for affordable petrol."

Weather office forecasts partly cloudy sky



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhiites woke up to a slight chill in the air in the morning as the minimum temperature settled at 11.2 degrees Celsius on Tuesday. According to data shared by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) the relative humidity stood at 71 per cent.

The weather office has forecast partly cloudy sky in the day.

The minimum temperature around 9 am stood at 11.2 degrees Celsius and the maximum temperature is expected to hover around 25 degrees Celsius.

On Monday, the national capital had registered a high of 24.9 degrees Celsius, three

notches below the normal. The Air Quality Index (AQI) was recorded in the "moderate" category (122) at 9 am on Tuesday.

An AQI between zero and 50 is considered "good", 51 and 100 "satisfactory", 101 and 200 "moderate", 201 and 300 "poor", 301 and 400 "very poor", and 401 and 500 "severe".

LG presides over 16th Convocation at GGSIPU



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Around 24,708 students, including 78 Gold medalists & 82 Ph.D holders were conferred upon with the degrees at the 16th Convocation ceremony of Indraprastha University (GGSIPU) on Tuesday.

A Gold medal in the memory of the former registrar of the University Late B. P. Joshi was given to Dr Hemant K Arya. Also, the Sidharth Khitolia Award was given to Manisha Puri, a passing out student for her outstanding work in the field of Architecture. The Chancellor of the University & Lieutenant Governor of Delhi Vinai Kumar Saxena presided over the function. He said, "the image is reflected both in the water and in our speech, but water reflects only the picture, whereas, the speech reflects the character of a human being". He appreciated the integrative approach of the university to provide the ancient knowledge of Ayurveda, Unani, Homeopathy, Gita and

Upanishads, along with the emerging modern fields like Design and Innovation, Automation and Robotics, Pharmaceuticals, AI, etc.

Presenting the University report, Padmashri Prof. (Dr.) Mahesh Verma, Vice Chancellor said that from a small temporary campus at Kashmere Gate, the University has grown up to two huge campuses in Dwarka and East Delhi with over 90,000 students, 191 programs, across 18 schools of studies, 3 centres of Excellence and 113 affiliated institutions across Delhi and NCR.

The university has attained highest A++ Grade in the 3rd cycle of NAAC accreditation for a period of 7 years and is at 74 in NIRF ranking. Some of the other highlights included 'Mega IPU Health mela', 'Anugoonj', 12 patents in the last 2 years, Alumni meet, Indraprastha Incubation Foundation and Atal Incubation Centre promoting start-ups, he added. Delivering the convocation address, chief guest, B. V. R.

Subrahmanyam, CEO of Niti Aayog said, "the name of the university is relevant for being named after the 10th Sikh Guru Govind Singh and for the land of Pandavas, who were known for their finest human values".

India stands at Number 2 with regard to imparting higher education in 1200 universities for 4.2 crore students. And, we are striving towards becoming the largest higher education system by 2047 by enrolling over 9 crore students in the colleges and universities. Demographic dividend can be achieved by investing in students and education in the four key areas: Providing access; Promoting research; Creating a culture of innovation and incubations; and Providing holistic education, he added.

To mark the Silver Jubilee celebrations, a Postal Stamp and the special cover was released by Mr Ashok Kumar, Post Master General. A Commemorative Coin and a 'Silver Jubilee Book' were also released on the occasion.

Gangster duo marriage becomes talking point in police circles

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A scheduled wedding, taking place between two alleged gangsters — Anuradha Choudhary alias 'Madam Minz' from Rajasthan and Sandeep alias Kala Jathedi from Haryana — is being discussed in police circles.

The gangster duo is going to tie the nuptial knot on March 12 at Sonipat in Haryana after a courtship of about four years. Sandeep will be out on bail for just six hours for his wedding.

The court has granted parole to Sandeep for his marriage. Anuradha is already on bail. Their marriage invitation card also went viral on social media.

Anuradha, a closed confidante of slain gangster Anandpal Singh, is facing over half-a-dozen cases related to money laundering, abduction, giving threats and arms Act in Rajasthan and Delhi.

Sandeep, who is a close associate of jailed gangster Lawrence Bishnoi, is facing over a dozen cases of robbery, murders, attempt to murder, extortions and arms Act in Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, according to Delhi police records.

An officer said both were arrested by a team of Delhi Police Special Cell from near a dhaba on Yamuna

Nagar-Saharanpur highway on July 30, 2021. They were staying together at that point in time.

Then, Anuradha was carrying a reward of Rs 10,000 by the Rajasthan Police while Sandeep was carrying a reward of Rs 7 lakh for his arrest, the officer said.

The duo's love story began in 2020, when Anuradha met Sandeep in Madhya Pradesh's Indore through a common associate, Vicky Singh, who is also Anandpal's brother, an officer said, adding both were on the run then.

According to Sandeep's dossier, he got married to Anuradha in a temple and stayed in a rented accommodation in Indore for a few months.

The police said in March, 2021, the duo went to Bihar and stayed there for a few months. In June, they left from Bihar and went to Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. Later, they went to Shirdi in Maharashtra and also visited Mathura in UP. They finally spent a few days in Uttarakhand, Haridwar before getting arrested by Delhi Police, as mentioned in Anuradha's dossier.

Another officer said after getting bail, Anuradha would meet Sandeep in jail using legal methods. "We got to know that Anuradha was taking care of Sandeep's parents in Sonipat," he said.

The officer said Anuradha got the title 'Minz' from

her first husband, Deepak Minz, whom she married in 2007 but parted ways in 2013.

The police said Anuradha also pursued MBA before joining banking business.

Later, she got involved in money laundering cases and joined hands with Rajasthan's slain gangster Anandpal Singh, who was gunned down in an encounter in Churu in 2017.

A resident of village Jathedi in Sonipat, Sandeep was a student of ITI in Sonipat in Haryana.

While studying, he fell in bad company, according to his dossier shared by a senior officer of Sonipat police.

"In 2004, he came to Delhi with his associates. On the same day that he visited Delhi, he snatched a mobile phone of one person in Siraspur area.

"He was caught by the police red-handed on the spot and a first case was registered against him at Samaipur Badli police station," said the senior police officer.

Last year, the Haryana government ordered demolition of his house and shops constructed on the government's 'panchayati' land.

"We had to announce a reward of Rs 7 lakh on his head. At the same time, the Delhi Police imposed MCOCA on him," a Haryana police officer said.

Painted storks population soars at Delhi zoo

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The population of painted storks soared at the zoo here this season as their numbers doubled over the last seven months which officials attributed to procreation in the National Zoological Park's waterbodies.

"This year, the zoo has become a nesting haven, with approximately 450 nests established around ponds and in trees," Director of Delhi Zoo Manoj Kumar told PTI.

Painted storks, scientifically known as 'Mycteria leucocephala', comes from the Himalayan foothills and are not migratory birds. However, they make short-distance movements in response to changes in weather, food availability, or breeding.

Kumar said that around 1,000 painted storks arrived in first



week of August in 2023. The entire population will fly back from the national capital March approaches, he said.

Their breeding season begins in the winter months shortly after the monsoons. "August to October marks the

peak breeding season for painted storks, who stay in Delhi until March before flying away with their chicks. This year around 1,000 painted arrived but around 2,000 of them will fly back this month," Kumar said.

The zoo is one of the few places in Delhi where painted storks nest and breed, making it a prominent birding spot, zoo official Akansha Mahajan said. Mahajan said that around 90 kg fish, from two to four inches, is provided daily to ensure a

proper diet for the painted storks. Speaking on the unique communication methods of painted storks, officials said that the birds use beaks and wings and chirp until they are fed by their parents.

As the end of March approaches, these migratory birds are anticipated to depart from the capital following their fixed routes.

The zoo official highlighted that storks stay for 6 to 7 months in Delhi every year, undertaking nesting and breeding, which adds to the beauty of the National Zoological Park. "And this year, the number of nests, each housing one to three chicks, has increased," she added.

The National Zoological Park remains open to visitors throughout the week except Fridays.

Rajnath: India ensuring no one exercises hegemony in Indian Ocean region

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday said India is protecting sovereignty and autonomy of countries in the Indian Ocean region and ensuring no one exercises "hegemony" there in apparent reference to China flexing its muscle. He also said due to the Navy's readiness, India is fulfilling its responsibility very well and providing full help to allied countries in the Indian Ocean.

"Our Navy ensures that no country, with its overwhelming economic and military power, can suppress our friendly countries or crush their sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific region," he said after inaugurating a new administrative building of the Naval War College near Goa capital Panaji. "The readiness with which the Indian Navy stands with our allies provides substantive strength to India's global values," he added. Rajnath also virtually unveiled an aircraft carrier pier and auxiliary vessel pier at the Sea Bird naval base at Karwar in neighbouring Karnataka. Lauding the Navy, the defence minister said "Our Navy's presence in the Indian Ocean prevents the rest of our allies there from coming under any pressure." He also said rule-



based maritime order has been strengthened in the Indian Ocean Region. India's rise is not only in the interest of 140 crore citizens, but it is also presenting the unique value of taking the whole world together through the mantra of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" - that if India progresses, then only areas around it will progress, Rajnath said. Today, the Indian Navy is continuously becoming stronger. "Our naval industrial base is getting stronger. Our shipyards are expanding. Our aircraft carriers are increasing," he said. "This growing power of India is not to achieve dominance in the Indian Ocean but to create an environment of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region," he added.

The defence minister reiterated India's commitment to work towards strengthening the economic and security co-operation with its maritime neighbours, in line with the Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He commended the Navy for fulfilling this commitment, adding that India's stature at the global level will increase if the Navy becomes stronger. Underscoring the transformative strategic thinking of 'New India', Rajnath asserted that "we were once known as a 'landlocked country with sea shores', but now we can be seen as an 'island country with land borders'." He stated that the resources and opportunities available in this region will be the factors of India's

prosperity, which makes the Indian Navy's role even more important in the future. The defence minister said most of the goods trade takes place through the sea route, with the Indo-Pacific region emerging as its hub. He highlighted that due to the increasing goods trade, many threats such as incidents of piracy and trafficking have come to the fore. He said these incidents have reduced due to the promptness of the Indian Navy, the threats cannot be ignored. Rajnath referred to the recent attacks on the undersea cables, terming such incidents as a direct attack on strategic interests. He urged the Navy to remain prepared to deal with such challenges. Delivering the keynote address, Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar drew the attention of the audience to the evolving security challenges, particularly in the maritime domain. He highlighted the indispensable role of higher military education in countering these challenges. He expressed confidence that the new training facility will serve as an icon of the country's resurgence as a maritime power by serving as a Gurukul for learning and sharing maritime perspectives, not only for the officers of Indian forces but also for maritime neighbours.

UP Congress leader joins BJP ahead of LS polls, hails Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In a setback to the Congress ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, its prominent leader from Uttar Pradesh Rajesh Mishra joined the BJP on Tuesday, hailing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. Mishra, a former Congress MP from the Varanasi Lok Sabha seat, joined the BJP here in the presence of senior party leaders, including national general secretary Arun Singh and Ravi Shankar Prasad. Addressing a joint press conference, Mishra expressed gratitude towards Prime Minister Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, party chief JP Nadda and other leaders for his induction into the BJP and asserted that he will continue to remain with the saffron party for the rest of his political life. "My efforts will be to ensure that in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, the opposition party doesn't even get a polling agent to man the booths in Varanasi seat this time," Mishra told the press conference at the BJP headquarters. "I started politics with the Congress and it is now certain that I will remain with the BJP for the rest of my political life," he added. Prime Minister Modi is contesting the Lok Sabha polls seeking his re-election from



the Varanasi seat for a third consecutive term. Welcoming him to the party fold, Singh said Mishra, a "strong" Congress leader from Varanasi, has joined the BJP accepting the party's policies and also looking at the work done by Prime Minister Modi government in the last ten years for people's welfare and country's progress. "He is from Banaras (Varanasi) and a strong leader of the Congress. In the recent Congress president's election, Rajesh Mishra was a key member of the party's election committee. He was an MP from Banaras from 2004-09," the BJP national general secretary told reporters. Singh said Mishra is a "very popular" leader in Uttar Pradesh. "Resigning from the Congress, he has joined the BJP today. He will work for the party now under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi and ensure a massive and historic victory of the BJP from Banaras and neighbouring constituencies," he added.

CDS calls for fostering innovation in defence manufacturing

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan has highlighted the need for collaborative efforts for a 'Whole of Nation' approach between the Government, Services, Research and Development (R&D) and defence production ecosystem towards fostering innovation in India's journey of achieving self-reliance in defence manufacturing and production in sync with India's 'Vision 2047'. Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane emphasised the government's commitment towards promoting indigenisation through private sector participation in the defence sector. These were main pointers from the maiden two-day brainstorming session, 'Impetus to Indigenisation', organised under the aegis of the Department of Military Affairs by HQ Integrated Defence Staff in collaboration with the Society of Indian Defence

Manufacturers which concluded on Tuesday. The event resulted in extremely productive outcomes with takeaways for policy reform aimed at accelerating the indigenisation process and enhancing private sector participation in the Indian defence manufacturing sector, defence ministry said here. The Brainstorming Session saw consultative discussions on various aspects of indigenisation, including evolving way ahead to address policy level challenges, ways and means of providing impetus to indigenisation with focus on sustenance, maintenance, repair and Overhaul (MRO) issues effecting aviation, maritime and land assets. The outcome-based discussions focused on identifying key areas for development of indigenous technologies and products and reduction of our dependence on imports towards enhancing product availability and ensure high operational readiness of the Armed Forces.

Indian Navy rescues Liberian vessel under drone attack

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

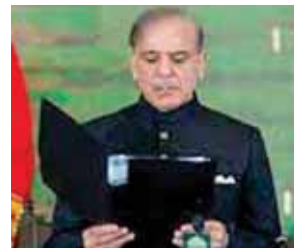
The Indian Navy has come to the rescue of a Liberian flagged commercial vessel after it came under a drone attack in the Gulf of Aden, officials said here on Tuesday. The fresh incident on Monday came amid increasing global concerns over attacks on various commercial vessels in the Red Sea by Houthi militants. In the last few weeks, the Indian Navy extended assistance to a number of merchant vessels in the western Indian Ocean following attacks on them. As regards the latest incident, the Navy swiftly responded to a maritime incident in the Gulf of Aden, it said on 'X'. It said the Liberian-flagged vessel, while transiting approximately 90 nautical miles



Southeast of Aden reported a fire due to "drone/ missile attack" on Monday. "INS Kolkata, mission deployed in the Gulf of Aden for maritime security operations, promptly responded and arrived at scene of incident by 2230 hours," it said. The Navy said a specialised

firefighting team of 12 personnel from INS Kolkata embarked on the vessel early morning hours of March 5 to assist in firefighting efforts. A specialist EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) team also embarked on the vessel and provided assistance in residual risk assessment, it said.

Modi congratulates Shehbaz after he takes oath as Prime Minister of Pakistan



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday congratulated Shehbaz Sharif on taking oath as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Sharif on Monday took the oath as prime minister of Pakistan, assuming the cash-strapped country's reins for a second time, nearly a month after an inconclusive election marred by allegations of vote rigging.

Rajnath witnesses twin carrier operations at Naval Commanders Conference 2024

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The first edition of the three days Naval Commanders Conference of 2024 commenced on Tuesday with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh embarking at sea off Goa to witness the Indian Navy's ability to conduct 'twin-carrier operations'. Both aircraft carriers showcased the growing capabilities of the Navy to safeguard India's maritime interests. The demonstration served as a powerful testament to the crucial role of sea-based air power in maintaining maritime superiority. Rajnath also addressed the Naval Commanders during the session. He commended the Indian Navy for increasing its multi-dimensional capabilities in the Indian Ocean region and continuously



emerging in a leadership role. He appreciated the Navy's efforts to work towards peace and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific region, in line with Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) as envisioned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He lauded the anti-piracy operations of the Indian Navy in the Indo-Pacific region which, he said, is being appreciated not

only in India but across the globe. The defence minister highlighted the Navy's important contribution in maritime security and maintaining the sovereignty of India, in addition to the crucial role it plays in fulfilling the global commitments. The defence minister underscored the importance of jointness and synergy of the

three Services amidst the constantly-evolving geopolitical scenario. He also spoke about the increasing use of drones in modern-day warfare and various maritime operations. He urged the Commanders to remain prepared to deal with all kinds of challenges, assuring Government's all-possible support. The Naval Commanders' Conference, this time around, is being held in a hybrid format. It serves as a platform for Naval Commanders to deliberate on strategic, operational, and administrative matters concerning maritime security. Held against the backdrop of evolving geopolitical dynamics, regional challenges and the current volatile maritime security situation in the region, the conference plays a pivotal role in shaping the future course of the Indian Navy.

Inclusion of non invasive tests part of WHO norms for newborns screening

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Inclusion of simple tests with non-invasive tools that can be integrated within the existing health systems is part of the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines calling for universal screening of newborns for hearing impairment, eye abnormalities, and neonatal jaundice. Highlighting the importance of this regional implementation guidance, Saima Wazed, the South-East Asia regional director of WHO said the move aimed to facilitate capacity-building for newborn or neonatal screening, focusing on pre-symptomatic detection shortly after birth. The guidelines follow concerns that the contribution of birth defects to under-five mortality in the region has increased from 4 per cent to 11 per cent during the past two decades (2000 to 2021) as countries successfully addressed other major causes of death. "By identifying serious treatable conditions early on, such as hearing impairment, eye abnormalities, and neonatal jaundice, healthcare professionals can intervene promptly, potentially preventing long-term disabilities and improving the quality of life for affected infants," she said. "Backed by referral, diagnosis, management and follow-up for appropriate treatment, these screenings will enable prevention of long-term disability or premature death," she said during the release of the guidance



at a regional webinar on birth defects. The guidance incorporates simple tests with non-invasive tools that can be integrated within the existing health systems. These screenings should be done prior to discharge after a health-facility birth or at the first postnatal care contact in an outpatient setting after a home birth, according to the guidance prepared after the exhaustive consultative process with technical experts from member countries of the region. "Focusing on improving care around the time of birth and the first week of life is important to ensure every child survives and thrives to reach their full potential," Wazed said. She added, persistent collaborative efforts over the years has led to the South-East Asia region witnessing a 45 per cent decline in under-five mortality between 2010 and 2021 -- the steepest among all WHO regions and against the global reduction of 26 per cent. "Our region is committed to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal targets for maternal, newborn and child mortality," Wazed said.

One bed per 5,000 population deemed essential for quality patient care: Ayush

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Union Ayush Ministry has issued a set of new guidelines emphasising the need for quality in-patient care and the spread of Ayush hospitals across the country, in line with a bed per population norm according to which one hospital bed per 5,000 population will be deemed "essential," while 1 bed per 2,000 population to be considered "desirable." However, the proposal looks quite ambitious at least in the near future given that more than 69 per cent of the integrated Ayush hospitals approved under the National Ayush Minister (NAM) are still either under construction or the construction has not started yet. Similarly, only about 65% of the sanctioned Ayush Health Wellness Centres have been established, as per the sources. Moreover, many hospitals in the sector are grappling with inadequate administrative set-up in States/UTs. Currently, there are 3,844 Ayush hospitals of various categories across the country, managed by both central and state governments, with a collective bed strength of 60,943. The guidelines suggest that the "essential" number of beds can be provided through the public health system, including medical colleges, district hospitals, and various sizes of Ayush hospitals, as per the Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS) for Ayush healthcare facilities. To achieve the "desirable"



number of beds, the guideline suggests involvement of the private sector is encouraged while continuing to enhance bed provision at public health facilities. All beds operational for more than 24 hours for patient care are considered in-patient hospital beds. Ayush hospitals are expected to offer a comprehensive range of essential services aligned with Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, SowaRigpa, and Homoeopathy principles. This includes promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative services for a wide array of health conditions, with an emphasis on integrating traditional and complementary medicine practices with modern healthcare systems. The guidelines stress the importance of ensuring a continuum of care, establishing referral systems, and facility readiness for managing referred cases. They also highlight the need for strategic planning for service delivery, emphasizing

service categorization and corresponding human resource classification. States and Union territories are urged to conduct Ayush-specific training needs assessments, integrate Ayush and modern medicine training for healthcare professionals as needed, and establish robust grievance redressal mechanisms in Ayush hospitals. Furthermore, an occupational safety and health policy for Ayush hospitals is recommended to ensure the safety, health, and well-being of employees, patients, and visitors. As per guidelines, quality assurance will be deemed crucial, with an emphasis on maintaining standards that meet prescribed criteria independently. Best practices from contemporary systems like the National Quality Assurance System and National Accreditation Board for Hospital and Healthcare Providers standards will be consulted and customized for Ayush Centers.

El Nino reaches peak, temperature to hit above normal from March to May

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The 2023-24 El Nino has reached its peak, ranking among the five strongest on record, and is anticipated to continue influencing global climate patterns in the coming months, despite showing signs of weakening, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said on Tuesday. It reported that above-normal temperatures are expected over almost all land areas from March to May in the current year. The prevailing El Nino conditions fuelled record temperatures and extreme events the world over, with 2023 being the warmest on record. According to the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service, the global mean temperature breached the 1.5-degree Celsius threshold for an entire year for the first time in January. A permanent breach of the 1.5-degree Celsius limit, specified in the Paris Agreement, however, refers to long-term warming over many years. In its latest update, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) said there is about a 60 per cent chance of El Nino persisting during March-May and an 80 per cent likelihood of neutral conditions (neither El Nino nor La Nina) during April to June. There is a chance of La Nina developing later in the year but those odds are currently uncertain, it said. Scientists closely tracking the



development in India have said La Nina conditions setting in by June-August could mean monsoon rains would be better this year than in 2023. El Nino -- a periodic warming of the ocean surface in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean -- occurs every two to seven years on an average, and typically lasts nine to 12 months. It is associated with increased rainfall in the Horn of Africa and the southern US, and unusually dry and warm conditions in Southeast Asia, Australia and southern Africa. "Every month since June 2023 has set a new monthly temperature record -- and 2023 was, by far, the warmest year on record. El Nino has contributed to these record temperatures but heat-trapping greenhouse gases are unequivocally the main culprit," said WMO Secretary-General Celeste

Saulo. "Ocean surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific clearly reflect El Nino. But sea-surface temperatures in other parts of the globe have been persistently and unusually high for the past 10 months. The January 2024 sea-surface temperature was by far the highest on record for January. This is worrying and cannot be explained by El Nino alone," she said. Scientists say El Nino typically has the greatest impact on the global climate in the second year of its development -- 2024, in this instance. The continuing, albeit weaker, El Nino and predicted above-normal sea-surface temperatures over much of the global oceans are expected to lead to above-normal temperatures over almost all land areas in the next three months, and influence regional rainfall patterns, according to a Global Seasonal Climate Update issued by the WMO.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Probity in public life

The Supreme Court ruling exposing lawmakers to prosecution for bribery is a welcome step

In a landmark judgment that is sure to go a long way in cleaning up the system but making the political class somewhat uncomfortable, the Supreme Court has reversed an earlier decision to rule that the lawmakers are not immune from prosecution for bribery. The verdict, which will indeed help fortify the pillars of Indian democracy, underlines accountability and integrity among elected representatives. The apex court has sent out a resounding message that the rule of law is paramount, even in the highest echelons of governance. The sacrosanct duty of MPs and MLAs, entrusted with shaping policies and laws reflecting the collective will of the electorate, can be undermined if and when corruption seeps in, eroding public trust and subverting the very soul of democracy. Bribery, in particular, poses a grave threat to the purity of political processes, distorting decision-making and skewing priorities. The notion of parliamentary immunity has shielded lawmakers from legal repercussions within the legislative domain,



ensuring uninhibited debate and deliberation. While this immunity serves a crucial purpose in fostering open discourse, it should not be misconstrued as a license for malfeasance or abuse of power. This is about to change with the Supreme Court's recent verdict, which draws a clear line that lawmakers cannot invoke immunity as a shield against allegations of bribery, a practice antithetical to the principles of democracy and justice.

This decision underscores the notion that even the lawmakers are not above the law but are subject to its scrutiny, reinforcing the accountability mechanisms essential for the functioning of a robust democracy.

Moreover, the ruling serves as a deterrent against perversion of political processes through illicit means, safeguarding the integrity of electoral mandates and preserving the sanctity of democratic institutions. In a landscape marred by cynical disillusionment with politics, such decisive action by the judiciary will instil confidence among citizens, reaffirming their faith in the impartiality of the system. However, such judgments find true efficacy when the Government implements these in letter and spirit. More often than not, the political class finds means to subvert the best of laws when it comes to serving their own interests. Moreover, the laws are often selectively applied to harass the rivals rather than to bring a person to book for his misdeeds. The process becomes the punishment. Since investigating agencies are under Government control, the latter often determines which cases to pursue for legal action. That said, the ruling is certainly a step forward as the primary condition for change is a legal framework. This judgment represents a significant milestone; it is imperative to recognise that the battle against corruption is ongoing and multifaceted. Efforts to foster clean politics must extend beyond legal pronouncements to encompass broader reforms in electoral financing, institutional oversight and civic education.

PICTALK



The Badrinath Dham covered in a layer of snow after heavy snowfall, in Chamoli district

Insights from the Raisina Dialogue

With discussions spanning from reforming the UN to navigating complex geopolitical dynamics, the Dialogue underscores India's strategic importance

Think tanks play a pivotal role in the policy-making and implementation of these policies. In India, though the Prime Minister and the government officials articulate policies, it's the intellectual prowess of these institutions that shapes India's cultural diplomacy landscape. Their influence in shaping foreign policy is increasingly recognised, with India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) leveraging their expertise to advance Indian interests on the global stage. A prime example of this collaborative effort is evident in the annual Raisina Dialogue, a prestigious forum jointly organized by the MEA and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), which serves as a platform for global leaders to address pressing issues facing the international community. Around 2500 participants from 115 countries took part in the recent edition of Raisina Dialogue this year. Under the theme 'Chaturanga: Conflict, Contest, Cooperate, Create,' the dialogue provided a platform to discuss the evolving dynamics of the global landscape.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's call for reforms in the United Nations and Security Council to better reflect the contemporary world order was a significant highlight of the dialogue. This emphasised India's push for a more inclusive global governance system that acknowledges the rise of new global powers.

The discussions at the Raisina Dialogue delved into the complex geopolitical dynamics involving Russia. India advocated for a balanced approach that provides Russia with multiple options beyond aligning closely with China. This stance, amidst differing views from Western countries, reflects India's strategic positioning as a 'middle power' capable of navigating between competing global interests. Additionally, discussions on cultural rebalancing and challenging skewed narratives demonstrated India's commitment to promoting fairer representation in global diplomacy and challenging the status quo. The significance of the Raisina Dialogue lies not only in its high-



profile participants but also in its ability to generate discourse that transcends traditional diplomatic channels. Through multilateral conferences and facilitated dialogues, think tanks like ORF play a crucial role in bringing together stakeholders from like-minded states to devise solutions to common challenges. The Raisina Dialogue showcased India's prominence in shaping the future world order and its assertiveness on a global level. The Raisina Dialogue, often compared to Singapore's Shangri-La Dialogue, attracts distinguished participants from various fields, including politics, defence, diplomacy, academia, and journalism. Over the years, it has witnessed the participation of eminent figures such as former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This year's event, held in New Delhi, featured panels addressing critical topics, including discussions on the Indo-Pacific security framework, showcasing India's commitment to regional stability and cooperation. At the Raisina Dialogue, these think tanks present insights on how India's cultural diplomacy can foster mutual understanding and respect among nations. They offer recommendations on leveraging cultural heritage, soft power assets, and digital plat-



EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER S JAISHANKAR'S CALL FOR REFORMS IN THE UNITED NATIONS AND SECURITY COUNCIL TO BETTER REFLECT THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD ORDER WAS A SIGNIFICANT HIGHLIGHT OF THE DIALOGUE

forms to enhance India's global influence.

At its core, the Raisina Dialogue serves as a testament to the growing importance of think tanks in shaping international relations and cultural diplomacy. By providing an informal space for the exchange of ideas between states, these dialogues foster dialogue and cooperation on a wide range of issues, from security and defence to trade and climate change.

Moreover, think tanks have a long history of influencing foreign policy and diplomacy, dating back to the Cold War era. For example, initiatives like the Dartmouth Conference and the Neerama Dialogue paved the way for unofficial dialogues between adversaries, leading to confidence-building measures and cooperation on critical issues. Similarly, the Raisina Dialogue has become a platform for India to assert its role in the Indo-Pacific region and engage with stakeholders on a new security framework.

Think tanks like the Observer Research Foundation, India Foundation, and Vivekananda International Foundation are at the forefront of formulating policies that project India's cultural heritage and values on the global stage. Through research, analysis, and strategic recommendations, they facilitate dialogue and cooperation

between India and other nations. The prominence of Indian think tanks in cultural diplomacy has surged in recent years. Institutions like India Foundation and Vivekananda International Foundation have stepped up, providing innovative solutions and policy frameworks for cultural exchange programmes, educational initiatives, and people-to-people connections.

Furthermore, think tanks collaborate with universities and academic institutions to deepen cultural ties through educational exchanges, research partnerships, and language programs. By engaging with diverse stakeholders, including civil society, diaspora communities, and international organisations, they amplify India's cultural narrative and promote intercultural dialogue.

Through their research and advocacy efforts, they contribute to shaping a vibrant and inclusive cultural diplomacy agenda for India. Not only do they play a crucial role in promoting cross-cultural understanding, but they also help in countering cultural stereotypes related to India in the West. By highlighting India's rich diversity and pluralistic ethos, they challenge misconceptions and foster a more nuanced appreciation of Indian culture and society.

(The writer is an associate professor, views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NOT AN INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

Sir — Had the Karnataka home department and the state police worked in unison the terror strike could have been avoided and the bomb planter could have been apprehended. The state government got an opportunity to thumb its chest as the biggest achievement. Having failed in the home front the blame was passed on to NIA and IB. The Bengaluru City Police are probing the networks of at least four terror suspects from Karnataka in connection with the recent Rameshwaram Cafe blast. Owing to the similarities between the explosion at the restaurant and the cooker bomb blast in Mangaluru on November 19, 2022, the police are now probing the networks of the absconding accused in the Mangaluru case. The fourth suspect, Junaid, belonged to another alleged terror module that the city police busted in July 2023. This alleged module linked to the Mangaluru blast, inspired by the Islamic State (IS), originated from Shivamogga district. The culprit first appeared on the agencies' radar with pro-terror graffiti in Mangaluru in 2020, along with his associates Arafath Ali, Yasin and Maaz Muneer. All three have been arrested now. The blame game will commence now even though the damage has been done.

CK Subramaniam | Mumbai

THE SCOURGE OF OBESITY

Sir — The incidence of obesity, a major public health problem, has risen four times since 1990 and more than one billion people across the globe are hit by the scourge according to a study conducted by the journal "Lancet" in collaboration with WHO after recording height and weight of 220 million people in more than 190 countries. For the record, India had more than 135 million obese people in 2016 of which fifteen million were children. By 2030, the country is expected to have a whopping 27 million obese children. One aspect of the Lancet study highlighted increasing obesity in low-income, less industrialised, nations in the Caribbean, Middle East and

India's exponential growth



The Brookings Institution's recent report underscores India's remarkable strides in eliminating extreme poverty, with the nation experiencing a substantial decline from 21.9% in 2011-12 to an impressive 2.0% in 2022-23. This achievement is credited to the government's robust redistributive policies, sustained economic growth, and effective social security programs. Notably, the report empha-

sises the successful reduction of rural-urban disparities, showcasing a significant drop in poverty rates from 25.7% to 2.5% in rural areas and 13.9% to 1.0% in urban areas. The concerted efforts to provide access to fundamental amenities, including sanitation, electricity, modern cooking fuel, piped water, education, health services, and housing, have played a pivotal role in India's triumph over extreme poverty.

The eradication of extreme poverty in India not only reflects the effectiveness of comprehensive policy measures but also suggests a potential model for other nations seeking to address similar challenges. This achievement positions India as a significant player in the global effort to uplift vulnerable populations and underscores the interconnected nature of poverty reduction on a broader scale.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

North Africa. Obesity, which simply denotes excessive body fat accumulation, is a known cause of dangerous health disorders, especially lifestyle ones. Being overweight has to be differentiated from obesity, and is usually done by body mass index (BMI). If calorie consumption surpasses calories burnt then obesity may set in. An important cause that can lead to slouching in children and adults alike is the overuse of smartphones. It is important to know what not to eat than what to eat. Shunning "bad eating", has to be everyone's mantra.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

UN STRATEGY ON HATE SPEECH

Sir — UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language concerning a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor." The India Hate Lab, a research group, documented

668 hate speech events targeting Muslims in 2023.

The IHL report noted, 'The normalisation of hate speech has been central to the Hindu far-right project of transforming India into a de facto Hindu nation.' In Britain, former Tory deputy chairman and now an independent member of the House of Commons, Lee Anderson, accused London's Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan that the 'Islamists' had 'got control' of him, and he had 'given away our capital' to extremists. He was suspended from the Tory party for hate speech. In England and Wales, where Sadiq Khan is the Mayor of London and Rishi Sunak, a practising Hindu, is the Prime Minister of Britain, only 6.5% of the people are Muslims and 1.7% are Hindus. British colonialists have shed their inhibitions, but the new rulers of the erstwhile colony refuse to change their colonial mindset of division.

Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Mitigating risks in infrastructure development

With crores in damages and a tragic loss of lives, there is an urgent need for sustainable infrastructure strategies



VIKRAMJIET ROY

India looks back at a year that presented challenges, particularly in addressing the infrastructural damages resulting from natural disasters. Subsistence in Joshimath incurred a cost of over Rs. 565 crores in damage. Subsequently, rivers surged beyond the danger mark, wreaking havoc on the infrastructure and properties of Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal and Delhi. The toll was grim, with 208 lives lost, 621 houses destroyed, and over 4,200 houses partially damaged across these states. Heavy rains further exacerbated the situation, causing an estimated 10,000 crores in damages, while under-construction bridge collapses in Gujarat, Mizoram and Bihar claimed numerous lives.



Much like the Silkyara-Barkot tunnel collapse, this incident exemplifies the vulnerability of infrastructure especially in eco-sensitive zones that jeopardise lives. The devastation of infrastructure, loss of lives, and drained resources serve as stark reminders, emphasising that prioritising sustainable infrastructure isn't merely a choice but an immediate imperative. Without this focus, our investments and dreams of advancement risk being swept away or collapsing altogether. Tackling the Core Issue Crucial to averting such incidents is addressing the core factors that might precipitate them, such as reevaluating the L1 tender bidding system. Adopting more effective practices can contribute positively by promoting quality over solely opting for the lowest bidder. This cost-centric approach often results in compromises on the quality of materials and construction practices which may lead to catastrophic failures.

Comprehensive Solutions To address the causes several measures can be implemented. Conducting thorough geological and geotechnical surveys before construction, consulting experts in the field, and focusing on the use of

high-quality are crucial steps. Active adoption of Geosynthetic materials and locally available materials in construction can be a pivotal step toward achieving sustainable infrastructure goals. Geosynthetic materials not only meet rigorous environmental standards but also enhance cost and time efficiency in project execution. The strategic use of Geosynthetic materials not only aligns with rigorous environmental standards but also plays a crucial role in improving the overall durability and longevity of infrastructure projects, ensuring a resilient and sustainable built environment.

A shift in the construction approach, prioritising quality and safety over cost-cutting, is essential. Opting for the Quality and Cost Based Selection System (QCBS), commonly utilised for consultancy contracts, would offer greater benefits. Incorporating advanced technologies and monitoring systems can also enhance the overall integrity of structures. These sustainable practices will not only contribute to long-term resilience but also

align with global efforts to combat climate change. Forward-Looking Approach In conclusion, the recent infrastructure incidents and challenges faced should serve as a compelling call to action, prompting the nation to revisit its construction practices. However, policymakers must approach this issue with a forward-looking perspective. The evolving technological landscape and heightened awareness regarding the importance of quality infrastructure provide a robust foundation for improvement. A collaborative effort involving government initiatives, industry partnerships, and public awareness holds the potential to reshape India's infrastructure paradigm. By acknowledging and addressing the root causes, prioritising safety measures, and embracing sustainable construction methods, India can pave the way for a future where infrastructure not only withstands the test of time but also contributes significantly to the nation's overall progress.

(The writer is an expert on sustainable infrastructure; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

THE QUEST FOR OMNIPRESENCE

Religious teachings assert the presence of a higher power in every facet of existence



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

We all are today living in an age where technology rules, yet many of us believe that god is everywhere and in everything around us. According to religious scholars, HE is present in every creature and every particle and everything is a manifestation of HIM. Is it so? If that's the case then why is there so much strife, hatred and sorrow in this world? For ages, humans have prayed to HIM and undertaken penances to get a glimpse of HIM or receive HIS blessings. Now! From a rational point of view, the very act of prayer is contrary to the belief in God's omnipresence, because if HE is present everywhere and in everyone, what is the need to pray? And why have saints, seers and other holy people searched for Supreme if HE was everywhere?

In the 18th Chapter of the Gita which is a summary of the entire Bhagavad-Gita, God says 'sarva-dharman parityajya, mam ekam saranam vraja, aham tvam sarva-papebhyo, moksaisyami ma sucah' meaning Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions.

Do not fear. This brings up the most important question of liberation or salvation. It is believed that God comes or descends to this world to liberate humanity from sorrow. Now! if he is already present everywhere, where is the need for him to come from anywhere? nor should sages and saints need to undertake rigorous practices to attain moksha or liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.



Going by the history of various religions, it is said that the founders of those religions brought the Supreme's message to mankind at different points in history to rid humanity of evil. Now! If HE were in this world HE wouldn't need to send any messenger to communicate with HIS children among whom He is present. Does he? There is also the belief that all human souls are fragments of God and they will ultimately merge into HIM.

This mistaken belief also implies that the Supreme Soul and human souls are separate, though the fact is that souls are children, not fragments, of God and both of them are eternal and they never merge. When all these things contradict the idea of an omnipresent God why is it that it still has a hold on human minds? One reason is that the devotees have misinterpreted the omnipotence of God as omnipresence because HE helps them wherever they are and whenever they need HIM, often by giving them divine visions.

This is mistaken by many devotees to be a manifestation of the omnipresence of God. But in reality, it is not so. In Bhagavad-Gita, the Almighty Supreme clearly says that humans cannot reach HIM by prayer, penance, reading scriptures or doing charitable deeds. HE gives HIS introduction to everyone when HE comes to this world at the end of the Iron Age when unrighteousness has reached extreme proportions and humanity is experiencing great sorrow.

He also reminds us of our true identity, that we all are eternal souls and not bodies and finally HE teaches us the unique art of Rajyoga, by which the souls can cleanse themselves of all their sins and become worthy of taking birth in the Golden Age where there is complete peace, purity and happiness. So, stop searching for him, instead start following his divine teachings.

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

WTO deadlock over agricultural subsidies



UTTAM GUPTA

At the WTO Ministerial Conference, India stood firm on its stance on public stockholding programme, drawing strong opposition from the developed countries

The 13th ministerial conference (MC) of WTO (World Trade Organisation) held on February 26-29, 2024 in Abu Dhabi ended in a deadlock. This is because India leads about 80 countries—the G33 including India, African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, together called ACP—on one hand and the European Union (EU) and the USA representing the developed countries on the other didn't budge from their respective pre-meditated positions.

On the most important issue of finding a permanent solution to the public stockholding (PSH) programme for food security, India's stance was vehemently opposed by the USA/EU. Currently, under India's PSH programme, government agencies like the Food Corporation of India (FCI) buy agri-produce such as wheat, rice/paddy, and coarse cereals from farmers at the minimum support price (MSP) and give it free to India's poor population under the National Food Security Act (NFSA).

The cost of supplying food i.e. MSP plus handling, storage and distribution costs is paid as a subsidy from the Union Budget. This can be bifurcated into two components (a) subsidy to the farmer, which is the excess of MSP of, say, rice over its international price also known as External Reference Price (ERP) and (b) subsidy to the food consumer, being the excess of ERP over 'nil'. The WTO is concerned with (a) branded as "product-specific" subsidies.

The international price/ERP of any commodity is based on global demand-supply forces and is determined competitively. All farmers irrespective of their country of location are expected to receive this price. In case, because of the intervention by the government of a member country say India, the farmers therein receive a price/MSP higher than this, they are presumed to have been subsidised to the extent of excess of MSP over ERP. The WTO is also concerned with subsidies on agricultural inputs like fertilisers, seeds, irrigation, power, etc., referred to as "non-product specific" subsidies. Termed as 'Amber box' subsidies, under the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), the total of product and non-product-specific subsidies or aggregate measurement support (AMS) is capped at 10 per cent of the value of agricultural production for a developing country. If a member country gives AMS over 10 per cent, it is a violation.

The AoA came into force in 1995. For India, until 2005, MSP was less than ERP. Thereafter, MSP has been higher than ERP and, in the last decade, this gap widened. During 2019-20, in the case of rice, AMS was 13.7 per cent, exceeding the 10 per cent cap. The big question is: Does this excess subsidy distort international trade? The answer is a categorical 'no'. This is because the formula for the computation of AMS is flawed. The ERP used for comparing with MSP (albeit current) dates back to 1986-88. This is bound to "artificially" inflate the subsidy. Besides, AoA calculation doesn't exclude subsidies given to resource-poor farmers. These farmers mostly produce food for self-consumption meaning they don't have a surplus to sell. Both these flaws need to be removed.

By using the current ERP and excluding subsidies to resource-poor farmers, India's



THE INTERNATIONAL PRICE/ERP OF ANY COMMODITY IS BASED ON GLOBAL DEMAND-SUPPLY FORCES AND IS DETERMINED COMPETITIVELY. ALL FARMERS, IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR COUNTRY OF LOCATION, ARE EXPECTED TO RECEIVE THIS PRICE

subsidy will automatically go below the 10 per cent threshold. Second, the entire purchases from the farmers albeit at the MSP are meant for sale to the poor beneficiaries under the NFSA. Hence, the question of cereals thus procured entering the global market doesn't arise.

For over a decade, India has been hammering on these points to constitute what is being touted as a 'permanent solution'. But, developed countries have looked the other way. All that they conceded was sanction for a "peace clause" at the MC-9 in Bali (2013).

It said, "If a developing country gives AMS over 10 per cent, no member will challenge this until 2017 when the WTO would look for a permanent solution." This was modified in the General Council (GC) held in December 2014, to say "The peace clause will stay till a permanent solution is found."

However, the peace clause comes with several riders, such as the submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not "trade distorting". Besides, programmes implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the 'peace clause'.

India has invoked the 'peace clause' several times for breaching the 10 per cent ceiling in case of subsidy on rice. However, developed countries have objected to such invocation citing it is not transparent and that cereals procured under PSH are 'illegitimately' exported. It would appear that charge levelled by Thailand Ambassador to the

WTO Pimchanok Vonkorporon Pitfield (she said, 40 per cent of India's rice exports were stocks diverted from PSH) was made at their behest.

The developed countries have an interest in ensuring that their agri-produce occupies a big space in the international market. This, in turn, will require that Indian exports be discouraged. Therefore, the extant arrangement (read: peace clause with riders) suits them. Hence, they have no interest in finding a permanent solution. It has been deferred for over a decade and they will continue to do so.

Meanwhile, India will do well to ensure smooth sailing with the peace clause. To avoid pinpricks by developed countries, the government should ensure that purchases by its agencies are synchronized with the requirements of NFSA; that excess stock situations are avoided and that there is no leakage of subsidised food from the PSH programme.

On fisheries subsidies, in sync with the principles of "polluter pays" and "common but differentiated responsibilities," India had proposed that developed countries abolish their subsidies over the next 25 years even while exempting developing countries from over-fishing subsidy prohibition within these 25 years.

In this regard, the MC - 12 held on June 12-17, 2022 (Geneva) decided that "no subsidies will be given for fishing in areas outside exclusive economic zones (EEZ) or RFMOs (regional fisheries management organisation)". It also agreed to check illegal, unreport-

ed and unregulated (IUU) fishing and mooted "very strict controls" on overfishing so that fish stocks are restored.

India was allowed to give subsidies for fishing in the EEZ - merely a reiteration of its rights under the UN Law of the Sea Convention. However, this was subject to putting in place a regime for managing and monitoring marine fish stocks within two years. If it fails, it will be compelled to stop subsidies for poor fishermen.

In the MC-13, India wanted unconditional exemption to the poorer nations for the subsidies they give for their small-scale and artisanal fishermen. The developed countries refused to give it. As for the moratorium on customs duty on e-commerce (developed countries have been its prime beneficiaries since 1998), India wanted this to go as developing countries are losing billions of dollars in duties foregone. The MC-12 had decided to extend the moratorium till MC -13 or March 2024, whichever is earlier. During the Abu Dhabi Ministerial, India reiterated this demand.

It stuck to its stance till the last moment but had to give up as the majority of the members (including the UAE) decided to continue the moratorium for two more years. Meanwhile, India stalled attempts by China to get through an agreement on "investment facilitation". It also opposed efforts by developed countries to bring other non-trade issues such as environment, labour standards, industrial policy etc to the table.

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

Modernisation threatens livelihoods in the Himalayas

As machines replace manual labour, rural women bear the brunt of diminishing opportunities, exacerbating the exodus towards urban centres

As a child, I often sat amidst the greenery, gazing at the Himalayan mountains. Returning after many years, the changes in the landscape and my village were striking. The condition of schools has improved significantly, and piped water lines are visible in every home, along with the construction of toilets. Most houses, once with stone roofs, have now transitioned to concrete structures. While the physical infrastructure development was impressive, it lacked the charm that fascinated me during my childhood. The ongoing changes have altered the village's ambience due to modernization. Pankaj Tiwari, 23, from



BINA BISHT

Lweshali village near Haldwani, shares, 'There was a time when vegetables from our village were sent to plain areas for sale, ensuring good income for villagers, leading to a prosperous and content life. However, due to the impact of modernization, people have either abandoned or reduced agricultural work. Now, even for their sustenance, villagers have to source vegetables from the

plains. Rural communities are abandoning villages to seek livelihoods in urban areas, relying on meagre-paying jobs, as the responsibilities of family upkeep rest solely on their shoulders. Initially, stone houses were common in the hills, providing a sense of living in the mountains. 'Bakhali', a collective structure where 5-6 families lived together, was prevalent.

However, due to increasing tourism, these 'Bakhali' spaces are now being converted into hotels/resorts/buildings, resulting in continuous deforestation and harm to the hills. The lure of money and employment opportunities is inadvertently causing us to harm our mountains.



In reality, the geographical conditions were a source of employment for rural communities, which is now

being undermined by modernisation. The repercussions are being felt by everyone, with rural women bear-

ing the brunt. The participation of women in various activities, once common, is diminishing as machines take over tasks. While the speed of certain tasks has increased with machines, local employment opportunities have been reduced, and current work is being assigned to external labourers. Presently, livelihood opportunities at the village level have become scarce, compelling people to leave their homes. This is endangering the existence of the mountains.

Saraswati Devi, 68, from Bhunoli village, recounts significant changes in her lifetime. At 12, she witnessed both men and women singing and laughing together while ploughing

fields with the help of oxen. However, at 35, this practice was limited to a few families. Today, at 68, neither family members nor oxen can be seen in these fields; machines have taken over. The geographical and cultural gap created by modernization is forcing people away from each other. Saraswati Devi states that modern tools and technology have not only taken away rural employment but also distanced village residents from their villages.

Development is not inherently negative. It not only facilitates the acquisition of amenities but also plays a crucial role in the economy. However, the ongoing changes in villages due to modernization pose a dan-

gerous threat. This danger is not only related to social and cultural transformations but also involves the linked peril of losing the identity of the hills.

If not stopped in time, a day is not far when the simplicity of the hills and its culture will disappear into anonymity, and future generations will only see mountains in books or pictures. Development is simultaneously robbing the rural population of their livelihoods, demanding timely interventions and policies that allow both development and local employment in the villages.

(The author hails from Haldwani and writes on development issues; views are personal. Charkha Features)

'Latest talks on Gaza have ended with no breakthrough'

AP ■ CAIRO

Three days of negotiations with Hamas over a cease-fire in Gaza and the release of Israeli hostages ended Tuesday without a breakthrough, Egyptian officials said, less than a week before the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the informal deadline for a deal.

The United States, Qatar and Egypt have spent weeks trying to broker an agreement in which Hamas would release up to 40 hostages in return for a monthlong cease-fire, the release of some Palestinian prisoners and an influx of aid to address the humanitarian catastrophe in the isolated territory.

Two Egyptian officials said the latest round of discussions had ended. They said Hamas presented a proposal that mediators would discuss with Israel in the coming days.

Hamas has refused to release all of the estimated 100 hostages it holds, and the remains of around 30 more, unless Israel ends its offensive, withdraws from the territory and releases a large number of Palestinian prisoners, including senior militants serving life sentences. Jihad Taha, a Hamas spokesperson, said the negotiations were ongoing but "the ball is in the Israeli court". He said Israel had thus far refused Hamas' demands for people who fled northern

Gaza to be allowed to return and for guarantees of a cease-fire and full withdrawal.

"Hamas is open to proposals and initiatives that are consistent with its position calling for a cease-fire, withdrawal, the return of the displaced, the entry of relief convoys and reconstruction," Taha said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has publicly rejected Hamas' demands and repeatedly vowed to continue the war until Hamas is dismantled and all the hostages are returned. Israel did not send a delegation to the latest round of talks.

An Israeli official said Israel was still waiting for Hamas to hand over a list of hostages who are alive as well the hostage-to-prisoner ratio it seeks in any release deal. It was not clear if that information was included in the latest proposal.

The Israeli and Egyptian officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief media on the negotiations.

Benny Gantz, a member of Netanyahu's War Cabinet and his main political rival, met with senior US officials in Washington on a visit that drew a rebuke from the prime minister, the latest sign of a growing rift within Israel's leadership.

Mediators had hoped to broker an agreement ahead of Ramadan, the

month of dawn-to-dusk fasting that often sees heightened Israeli-Palestinian tensions linked to access to a major holy site in Jerusalem. The month is expected to begin around March 10, depending on the sighting of the moon. "The negotiations are sensitive. I can't say there is optimism or pessimism, but we haven't yet reached a point at which we can achieve a cease-fire," Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said Monday.

The war began with a Hamas attack into southern Israel on Oct 7 in which Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people and took around 250 hostages. More than 100 of them were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November.

The attack sparked an Israeli invasion of the enclave of 2.3 million people that Gaza's Health Ministry says has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians. Aid groups say the fighting has displaced most of the territory's population and pushed a quarter of the population to the brink of famine. The UN children's agency said Monday that at least 10 children have reportedly died in isolated northern Gaza because of dehydration and malnutrition. "There are likely more children fighting for their lives somewhere in one of Gaza's few remaining hospitals, and likely even more children in the north unable to obtain care at all," Adele Khodr, the

UNICEF regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, said in a statement. "These tragic and horrific deaths are man-made, predictable and entirely preventable," she added. The Gaza Health Ministry said Sunday that 15 children have starved to death at the Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza and another six were at risk of dying from malnutrition and dehydration. It was not clear if the children had underlying medical conditions that increased their vulnerability.

Northern Gaza, the first target of Israel's offensive, has suffered mass devastation. The World Food Programme recently suspended aid shipments to the north, citing the breakdown of security. An attempt by the Israeli military to bring in aid ended in tragedy last week when over 100 Palestinians were fatally shot by Israeli forces or trampled to death in a melee. Up to 300,000 Palestinians are believed to remain in northern Gaza after Israel ordered the evacuation of the entire region, including Gaza City, in October. Many have been reduced to eating animal fodder to survive.

The UN says one in six children under 2 in the north suffer from acute malnutrition. The United States and other countries have carried out air drops in recent days, but aid groups say the expensive, last-ditch measure is not enough to address the soaring needs.

One Indian killed & two hurt in anti-tank missile attack

Jerusalem (PTI): An Indian national was killed and another two were injured on Monday when an anti-tank missile fired from Lebanon by Hezbollah militants struck an orchard near Israel's northern border community of Margaliot, officials said and condemned it as a cowardly terror attack on peaceful agriculture workers.

All three victims were from Kerala.

The missile hit a plantation in Margaliot, a moshav (collective agricultural community), in the Galilee region in the north of Israel around 11 am on Monday, Zaki Heller, spokesperson for rescue services Magen David Adom (MDA), told PTI.

Patnibin Maxwell, 30, from Kollam in Kerala was killed in the attack. His mortal remains were identified in Ziv hospital, official sources said.

Bush Joseph George, 31,

and Paul Melvin, 28, were injured and taken to hospitals for treatment, they said. "George was taken to the Beilinson hospital in Petah Tikva after suffering injuries on face and body. He underwent an operation, is recovering well, and has been kept under observation. He could speak with his family in India," an official source told PTI.

Melvin was slightly injured and is hospitalised at Ziv Hospital in the northern Israeli city of Safed. He is from the Idukki district.

Embassy of Israel in New Delhi said: "We are deeply shocked and saddened by the death of one Indian national and the injury of two others due to a cowardly terror attack launched by Shia Terror organisation Hezbollah, on peaceful agriculture workers who were cultivating an orchard at the northern village of Margaliot yesterday early afternoon."

Turkiye detains 7 more for selling information to Israel's spy agency

Ankara (AP): Turkish police on Tuesday detained seven more people suspected of selling information to the Israeli spy agency Mossad, authorities said, the latest in a wave of such arrests in Turkey. The suspects were taken into custody during simultaneous raids in Istanbul, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter. The raids were a joint operation with Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation.

The detained are suspected of collecting data on individuals and companies in Turkey and selling it to the Israeli intelligence agency, Yerlikaya said. "We will never allow espionage activities to be carried out within the borders of our country."

It was not immediately known if any charges have been raised and authorities provided no additional information. Last month, seven other people, including private detectives, were arrested on similar suspicions.

Gangs in Haiti try to seize control of int'l airport

AP ■ PORT-AU-PRINCE

Heavily armed gangs tried to seize control of Haiti's main international airport on Monday, exchanging gunfire with police and soldiers in the latest attack on key government sites in an explosion of violence that includes a mass escape from the country's two biggest prisons.

The Toussaint Louverture International Airport was closed when the attack occurred, with no planes operating and no passengers on site.

Associated Press journalists saw an armoured truck on the tarmac shooting at gangs to try and prevent them from entering airport grounds as scores of employees and other workers fled from whizzing bullets.

It wasn't immediately clear as of late Monday whether the attack, which was the biggest one in Haiti's history involving the airport, was successful.

Last week, the airport was struck briefly by bullets amid ongoing gang attacks, but gangs did not enter the airport nor seize control of it.

The attack occurred just hours after authorities in Haiti ordered a nighttime curfew following violence in which armed gang members overran the two biggest prisons and freed thousands of inmates over the weekend.

"The secretary-general is deeply concerned by the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Port-au-Prince, where armed gangs have intensified their attacks on critical infrastructure over the weekend," said UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

A 72-hour state of emergency began Sunday night. The government said it would try to track down the escaped inmates, including from a penitentiary where the vast majority were in pre-trial detention, with some accused of slayings, kidnappings and other crimes.

"The police were ordered to use all legal means at their disposal to enforce the curfew

and apprehend all offenders," said a statement from Finance Minister Patrick Boivert, the acting prime minister.

Gangs already were estimated to control up to 80 per cent of Port-au-Prince, the capital. They are increasingly coordinating their actions and choosing once-unthinkable targets like the Central Bank.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry travelled to Kenya last week to try to salvage support for a United Nations-backed security force to help stabilise Haiti in its conflict with the increasingly powerful crime groups. Dujarric said the secretary-general stressed the need for urgent action, especially in providing financial support for the mission, "to address the pressing security requirements of the Haitian people and prevent the country from plunging further into chaos." Haiti's National Police has roughly 9,000 officers to provide security for more than 11 million people, according to the UN. They are routinely overwhelmed and outgunned.

The deadly weekend marked a new low in Haiti's downward spiral of violence. At least nine people had been killed since Thursday — four of them police officers — as gangs stepped up coordinated attacks on state institutions in Port-au-Prince, including the international airport and national soccer stadium.

But the attack on the National Penitentiary late Saturday shocked Haitians. All but 98 of the 3,798 inmates being held at the penitentiary escaped, according to the Office of Citizen Protection. Meanwhile, at the Croix-des-Bouquets prison, 1,033 escaped, including 298 convicts. The office said late Monday that it was seriously concerned about the safety of judges, prosecutors, victims, attorneys and others following the mass escape. It added that it "deplored and condemned the policy of nonchalance" demonstrated by government officials amid the attacks.

Top EU officials propose plans to boost bloc's defense in face of Russian threats

Brussels (AP): Top European Union officials on Tuesday outlined ambitious plans to boost its defense industry at an unprecedented pace as the bloc seeks to respond to the threat posed by Russia's war on Ukraine and a trans-Atlantic partner that could be wavering on its commitments to Europe. For decades, EU nations have slumbered under the protective nuclear cover of the United States through the NATO alliance while their defense spending and crisis preparedness withered.

A first warning under Donald Trump's presidency highlighted a lack of coordination and supplies that would be needed if European nations would ever have to defend themselves without Washington's help.

Now, with an increasingly assertive Moscow, the need to beef up defense is becoming ever clearer.

"After decades of under-spending, we must invest more on defense, but we need to do it better and together," said EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell. "A strong, resilient, and competitive European defense industry is a strategic imperative."

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed glaring weaknesses in Europe's arms manufacturing capacities that were neglected in the wake of the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the promise of a peace dividend in Europe.

So when Kyiv was badly in need of the most elementary ammunition to stave off Russian forces, European nations were caught out, unable to deliver what was asked and even promised.

The realization that former President Trump might return to the White House and undermine support for Ukraine has also focused minds in Europe. EU heavyweights France and Germany have warned that the bloc must do more to protect itself.

Trump wins North Dakota Republican caucuses

AP ■ BISMARCK

Donald Trump won the North Dakota Republican presidential caucuses on Monday, adding to his string of victories heading into Super Tuesday. The former president finished first in voting conducted at 12 caucus sites, ahead of former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley. The result puts Trump back on the winning track, which was briefly interrupted on Sunday when Haley notched her first victory of the campaign in the District of Columbia's primary.

The White House hopefuls now turn their attention to Super Tuesday, when results will pour in from 16 states in contests that amount to the single biggest delegate haul of any day in the presidential primary. Trump and President Joe Biden, a Democrat, are dominating their races and are on track to winning their nominations later this month.

Under North Dakota's rules, candidates are eligible to win delegates if they finish with at least 20 per cent of the vote.



Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump speaks at his Mar-a-Lago estate, Monday in Palm Beach, Fla. The Supreme Court unanimously restored Trump to 2024 presidential primary ballots, rejecting state attempts to ban him over the Capitol riot. AP/PTI

However, a candidate who wins at least 60 per cent of the vote receives all of the state's 29 delegates.

Four candidates were on the ballot, including Trump and Nikki Haley. The other candidates, who have received little attention, were Florida businessman David

Stuckenberg and Texas businessman and pastor Ryan Binkley, who recently ended his campaign.

Retired music teacher and librarian Karen Groninger, of Almont, said Monday that she voted for Trump, calling him the best choice. The 76-year-old cited Trump's 2020 speech

at the annual March for Life anti-abortion event in Washington, DC. — the first by a sitting president — and his border policies.

Longtime Republican state Sen. Dick Dever, of Bismarck, said he voted for Haley, but added she's unlikely to win. The retired factory representative, 72, said, "I hear an awful lot of people say that they really liked Trump's policies but they don't like the way he conducts himself, and I think he's gone overboard a bit."

Caucus voters were encouraged to be paying party members, but those who wouldn't pay USD 50 for annual membership were asked to sign a pledge to affiliate with the party, caucus Chair Robert Harms said.

North Dakota is the only state without voter registration. The caucuses followed official state voter identification protocols, such as providing a driver's license. Voting was done only in person and on printed ballots, which will be hand-counted.

In 2016, it was a North Dakota delegate who helped

Trump secure the number needed for the Republican presidential nomination.

He swept North Dakota's three electoral college votes in 2016 and 2020, winning about 63 per cent and 65 per cent of those votes, respectively.

As president, Trump visited Bismarck and Mandan in 2017 to talk about tax cuts, and he campaigned twice in Fargo in 2018 for Kevin Cramer in the then-congressman's successful Senate bid against Democratic Sen. Heidi Heitkamp.

North Dakota's Democratic-NPL Party is holding a presidential primary almost entirely by mail, with mail-in voting from Feb. 20 to March 30, and limited in-person voting for residents of Indian reservations. President Joe Biden, Rep. Dean Phillips and six others are on the ballot.

A third party will count ballots in Fargo on March 30, with results available on the party's website afterward.

Sen. Bernie Sanders won the Democratic caucuses in 2016 and 2020.

Ex-Twitter CEO Parag sues Elon Musk

PTI ■ NEW YORK

Twitter's former leadership team, including ex-CEO Parag Agrawal and Chief Legal Officer Vijaya Gadde, has sued the platform's owner Elon Musk, saying the billionaire fired them without reason and owes them severance payments worth USD 128 million.

The lawsuit against the Tesla and SpaceX chief and X Corp was filed in the US District Court, Northern District of California by Agrawal, Gadde, Twitter's former Chief Financial Officer Ned Segal and General Counsel Sean Edgett. Musk has a "special ire" toward Agrawal, Segal, Gadde, and Edgett, who in their leadership roles at Twitter "appropriately and vigorously represented the interests of Twitter's public shareholders throughout Musk's wrongful attempt to renege on the deal. For their efforts, Musk vowed a lifetime of revenge," the 38-page



lawsuit said. Agrawal worked at Twitter from 2011 until 2022 and was the platform's Chief Executive Officer from November 29, 2021, until October 27, 2022, a role he took over from the company's founder and former CEO Jack Dorsey.

The lawsuit also notes that as Musk was closing Twitter's acquisition for USD 44 billion in 2022, the billionaire told his

official biographer Walter Isaacson, that he would "hunt every single one of" Twitter's executives and directors "till the day they die."

"These statements were not the mere rantings of a self-centred billionaire surrounded by enablers unwilling to confront him with the legal consequences of his own choices. Musk bragged to Isaacson specifically how he planned to cheat

Twitter's executives out of their severance benefits in order to save himself USD 200 million," he said. The four former Twitter executives claim in the lawsuit that Musk owes them severance payments totalling about USD 128 million. "Under Musk's control, Twitter has become a scofflaw, stifling employees, landlords, vendors, and others. Musk doesn't pay his bills, believes the rules don't apply to him, and uses his wealth and power to run roughshod over anyone who disagrees with him," the lawsuit said. It said that Agrawal is entitled to severance benefits amounting to over USD 57 million, which is equal to his one-year salary of one million dollars plus restricted stock units, performance share units and other benefits. Gadde is entitled to severance benefits in the amount of USD 20 million, an amount equal to one year's salary of USD 600,000 plus other benefits.

The lawsuit alleges that under Twitter's severance plans if an eligible executive is terminated without cause following a change in control, they are entitled to severance benefits.

"Because Musk decided he didn't want to pay Plaintiffs' severance benefits, he simply fired them without reason, then made up fake cause and appointed employees of his various companies to uphold his decision. He claimed in his termination letters that each Plaintiff committed 'gross negligence' and 'willful misconduct' without citing a single fact in support of this claim," the lawsuit said.

The four executives highlighted "the Musk playbook," which is "to keep the money he owes other people and force them to sue him. Even in defeat, Musk can impose delay, hassle, and expense on others less able to afford it."

Rishi is better cook, says Akshata

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has got the thumbs up on his cooking skills from his wife Akshata Murty, who admitted that he does not get much time to spend in the kitchen with a busy day job running the country. The British Indian first couple were speaking to 'Grazia' women's magazine in a joint interview from 10 Downing Street in time for International Women's Day this month.

They gave insights into their life at the UK's most famous address where they live with their daughters Krishna, 12, and Anoushka, 11, and the family dog Nova.

"Rishi is the better cook. I do have a great deal of enthusiasm, but Rishi definitely has more talent in that department," Murty shared.

"But it's mainly just breakfast on Saturday mornings now. Gordon Ramsay's scrambled eggs" added Sunak.

The couple also admitted



that Sunak is the tidier of the two, often having to come back into the bedroom to make up the bed in the mornings.

"I'm not a morning person," admits Murty, to which her husband remarks: "But you also just don't like making the bed and it bugs me. I actually sometimes come up back into the flat from the office after we've all left to make the bed because I'll be irritated if it's not been made." Having met when they were both studying at Stanford University, Murty reveals how her untidy habits

would rile him even back then. "When we were studying, I used to actually eat in my bed. Rishi would come to where I lived."

Sometimes there would be plates in my bed," said Murty, admitting that she is "not the most organised person" compared to her husband. Now as parents, the couple — both 43 — said they tend to divide the task fairly equally with Murty taking charge of the homework department and Sunak taking care of the rest.

"I'm stricter when it comes

to things related to school, like getting their homework done, making sure they are reading. Making sure that anything related to school is done well," said Murty.

The businesswoman daughter of Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy also admits to having greater flexibility in her daily schedule to be able to exercise more than her husband and also find time to read more books. The couple wind down for the day by watching re-runs of episodes of the sitcom 'Friends', which they both love because it "never gets old". "I'm too exhausted when I get home so I watch an episode of 'Friends' and go to bed," shares Sunak, who is able to find time to go out running only once or twice a week.

The couple moved into 10 Downing Street in October 2022 when Sunak was elected leader of the governing Conservative Party and took charge as Britain's first non-white Prime Minister following months of political turmoil.

Princess of Wales to appear in June for royal ceremony

AP ■ LONDON

British officials said on Tuesday that Kate, the Princess of Wales, will attend a Trooping the Colour ceremony in June. It is her first confirmed major official duty since the royal underwent abdominal surgery. Kate, Prince William's wife, has been out of the public eye since January, when palace officials announced that she was admitted to a private London hospital for planned surgery. At the time, they did not provide more details but said she would not return to public duties until after Easter.

The ceremony is celebrated on June 8 and the weekend that follows. The events, annual highlights in the royal calendar, are pomp-filled birthday parades to honour the reigning monarch and usually draw huge crowds each June to watch



The display. The tradition dates back more than 260 years. The Ministry of Defence said Kate, 42, will inspect soldiers on parade during the June 8 ceremony. Hundreds of foot guards, horse guards and members of military bands will participate in the spectacle at central London's Horse Guards and along The Mall, the promenade outside Buckingham Palace.

The royal family has been under intense media scrutiny in recent weeks because both Kate and King Charles III cannot carry out their usual public duties due to their health problems. Royal officials say Charles is undergoing treatment for an unspecified form of cancer, which was discovered during treatment for an enlarged prostate.

Kate was discharged from the hospital on January 29 after two weeks for her undisclosed condition. Palace officials have said she wished her personal medical information to remain private.

Pritzker Prize goes to Japanese architect Rikon

Tokyo (AP): The Pritzker Architecture Prize has been awarded to Japan's Riken Yamamoto, who earns the field's highest honour for what organisers called a long career focused on "multiplying opportunities for people to meet spontaneously, through precise, rational design strategies."

Yamamoto, 78, has spent a five-decade career designing both private and public buildings — from residences to museums to schools, from a bustling airport centre to a glass-walled fire station — and prizing a spirit of community in all spaces. "By the strong, consistent quality of his buildings, he aims to dignify, enhance and enrich the lives of individuals — from children to elders — and their social connections," the jury said, in part, in a citation released on Tuesday. "For him, a building has a public function even when it is private."

Philippine and Chinese vessels collide in SCS, 4 crew injured

AP ■ MANILA

Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels collided in the disputed South China Sea, and four Filipino crew members were injured Tuesday in a series of confrontations as Southeast Asian leaders gathered for an Asian summit where alarm over Beijing's aggression at sea was expected to be raised. The Chinese coast guard ships and accompanying vessels blocked the Philippine coast guard and supply vessels off the disputed Second Thomas Shoal and executed dangerous maneuvers that caused two minor collisions between the Chinese ships and two of the Philippine vessels, Philippine officials said. The BRP Sindangan of the Philippine coast guard had minor structural damage from the collision that happened shortly after dawn. Over an hour later, another Chinese coast guard ship first blocked then collided with a supply boat the Philippine coast guard was escorting, the Philippine officials said.

The supply boat, manned by Filipino navy personnel, was later hit by water cannon blasts from two Chinese coast guard ships. Its windshield shattered, injuring at least four Filipino crew members, according to a statement from the Philippine government task force dealing with territorial disputes. The task force said the actions by the Chinese was "another attempt to illegally impede or obstruct a routine resupply and rotation mission". "China's latest unprovoked acts of coercion and dangerous maneuvers" against Philippine ships en route to deliver supplies and fresh troops to the Philippine-occupied shoal "put the lives of our people at risk and caused actual injury to Filipinos," it said. A small Philippine marine and navy contingent has kept watch onboard a rusting warship, the

BRP Sierra Madre, which has been marooned since the late 1990s in the shallows of the Second Thomas Shoal. China also claims the shoal lying off the western Philippines and has surrounded the atoll with coast guard, navy and other ships to press its claims and prevent Filipino forces from delivering construction materials to fortify the Sierra Madre in a decades-long standoff. The shoal has been the site of several tense skirmishes between Chinese and Philippine coast guard ships last year. The Chinese coast guard said in a statement that "it took control measures in accordance with the law against Philippine ships that illegally intruded into the waters adjacent to Ren'ai Reef," the name Beijing uses for Second Thomas Shoal. A Chinese coast guard spokesperson said a Philippine ship deliberately rammed a Chinese coast guard vessel, causing a minor scratch. The long-simmering territorial disputes in the South China Sea are expected to be discussed at a summit of leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and their Australian counterpart on Wednesday in Melbourne. On Monday, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr said in the Australian city that his administration "will do whatever it takes" to manage any threat to his country's territory but stressed that Manila would continue "to tread the path of dialogue and diplomacy" in resolving disputes with China.

The Philippines and Vietnam plan to raise their alarm over China's increasingly aggressive actions in the disputed waters during the summit, a senior Southeast Asian diplomat told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because of not being authorized to discuss the issue publicly.

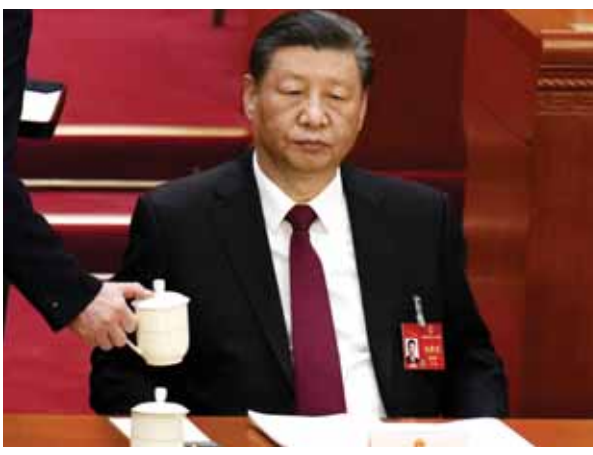
China hikes defence budget amid rivalry with US

PTI ■ BEIJING

China on Tuesday increased its defence budget by 7.2 per cent to USD 232 billion as it continues with the massive modernisation of its military amid prevailing tensions over Taiwan, the South China Sea, border frictions with India and increasing rivalry with the US.

China, which is the second highest spender on defence after the US, has allocated 1.67 trillion yuan (about USD 232 billion) for defence spending. The US defence budget for the last year amounted to USD 886 billion. The increase in terms of the percentage of China's defence budget was the same as last year.

China last year hiked its defence budget by 7.2 per cent to 1.55 trillion yuan (about USD 225 billion), marking the eighth consecutive year of increase in its military spending. Like its previous budgets, this year's defence budget of China was almost three times higher than that of India. India's defence allocation this year amounted to Rs 6,21,541 crore (about USD 74.8 billion). While hiking the defence budget,



Chinese President Xi Jinping looks on as he served a drink during the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China on Tuesday. AP/PTI

China proposed a modest around five per cent target this year for the growth of its economy which is in a slowdown mode. China has simmering territorial disputes with some of its neighbours.

China views Taiwan as a rebel province that must be reunified with the mainland, even by force. Beijing claims most of the South China Sea, while the Philippines, Vietnam,

Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have counterclaims.

In recent months, tensions simmered between China and the Philippines as Manila, backed by the US, stepped up efforts to assert its rights over the part of the South China Sea firmly resisted by the Chinese coast guard ships.

China is yet to resolve fully the eastern Ladakh standoff with India in May 2020 as a

result of the action by its military which caused the Galwan Valley clash that marked the most serious military conflict between the two sides in decades.

Proposing the defence budget hike in the National People's Conference (NPC), China's parliament, Premier Li Qiang said the armed forces will strengthen all-around military training and combat readiness, make well-coordinated efforts to improve military preparedness and devote great energy to training under combat conditions, to firmly safeguard China's national sovereignty, security, and development interests.

"We will modernise the military governance system, advance military development as outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan, and speed up the implementation of major defence-related projects," he said in his first work report submitted to the NPC on Tuesday attended by President Xi Jinping. Also, China's current proceeding of the NPC in which substantial Chinese military personnel are delegates, is keenly watched this year due to recent purges of

the military carried out by Xi, who heads the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC) the overall high command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Last October, China abruptly dismissed Defence Minister Gen Li Shangfu reportedly for corruption. Before becoming the Defence Minister, Li headed the country's Rocket (missiles) force, a key organ of the military.

After that, nine generals, including top commanders, from the rocket force have been removed from the NPC for suspected "violations of discipline and the law" - usually a euphemism for corruption. Observers say while there is no imminent plan of war for China to expand its defence budget, Beijing is expected to continue "buying time", meaning steady growth in military spending to build up capacity so that it can achieve its goal of reunification with self-ruled Taiwan, and to narrow the military power gap with the United States. But the budget is also expected to take into account the risk of an armed conflict triggered by something "unpredictable", with more military encounters in the

disputed South China Sea, Taiwan electing a new independence-leaning president in January, and a possible comeback of Donald Trump (as president) in the US, a report in the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post said.

The PLA has a target of 2027 - the year of its centenary - to achieve its costly modernisation goals, paving the way for it to become a "world-class" military power by 2049. Li said the government will consolidate and enhance the integration of national strategies and strategic capabilities, refine the system and layout of defence-related science, technology, and industries, raise public awareness concerning national defence, and strengthen national defence mobilisation and readiness of reserve forces, he said.

"We in governments at all levels will provide strong support to the development of national defence and the armed forces and strengthen mutual support between civilian sectors and the military, so as to consolidate the unity between the military and the government and between the military and the people," he said.



In this handout photo provided by the Philippine Coast Guard, a Chinese coast guard ship approaches a Philippine coast guard ship, foreground, causing a minor collision, in the vicinity of Second Thomas Shoal on Tuesday. The vessels collided in the disputed South China Sea, slightly injuring four Filipino crewmen in a new confrontation that unfolded as Southeast Asian leaders gathered for an Asian summit where alarm over Beijing's aggression at sea was expected to be raised.

China retains 5% growth target for 2024 as economy struggles to shake off slowdown

PTI ■ BEIJING

Grappling with economic slowdown and dwindling business sentiment, China on Tuesday fixed a modest growth target of around five per cent this year with a pledge to create 12 million jobs amid growing concerns over rising unemployment. The country expects to create over 12 million jobs in urban areas and keep the surveyed urban unemployment rate at around 5.5 per cent this year, Chinese Premier Li Qiang said in his maiden work report presented to the opening session of the country's rubber-stamp parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC). The week-long NPC annual session at the Great Hall of People was attended among others by Chinese President Xi Jinping besides over two thousand delegates from across the country

to deliberate and legislate on key initiatives needed to strengthen the growth of the second-largest economy, which continued with post COVID-19 slowdown.

A proactive fiscal policy and a prudent monetary policy will be continued, with the ratio of deficit to gross domestic product (GDP) set at three per cent and the government deficit to rise by 180 billion yuan (USD 26 billion) from the 2023 budget figure, Li said in his 39-page work report. This is the first work report by Li who succeeded Li Keqiang last year. As a staunch Xi loyalist, Li Qiang has discarded the decade-old practice of addressing the media at the end of the annual parliament sessions.

Last year China posted 5.2 per cent GDP, exceeding the official target of around five per cent amid mounting market

concerns, waning investor confidence, a protracted property market slump, and a weak private sector progress.

Significantly, last year the government stopped publishing data on unemployment for the first time amid reports of a deepening job crisis.

However, in January the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said the jobless rate for the 16 to 24 age group stood at 14.9 per cent in December. Playing down the concerns over the slowdown of the world's second-largest economy, Li in his work report said, "We secured a smooth transition in epidemic response following a major, decisive victory in the fight against COVID-19". He said the main goals and tasks for economic and social development in 2023 were accomplished, and the government made steady progress

in pursuing high-quality development, maintained overall social stability, and made solid advances in building a modern socialist country in all respects.

"Overall economic recovery and growth were boosted. China's gross domestic product (GDP) surpassed 126 trillion yuan (about USD 18 trillion) an increase of 5.2 per cent, ranking China among the fastest-growing major economies in the world," he said.

A total of 12.44 million urban jobs were added, and the average surveyed urban unemployment rate stood at 5.2 per cent, he said. "Looking back at 2023, we can see that as we faced an array of interwoven difficulties and challenges, China's economy grew in a wave-like fashion amid twists and turns. Indeed, our achievements did not come easily," Li said.

Pak Army top brass dismayed at 'allegations' of interference in electoral process

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Top military brass on Tuesday expressed "dismay" that some small segments of the polity and media, especially social media, were "maliciously" the armed forces with "unsubstantiated allegations" of interference in the process of elections. These remarks were made by Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir who presided over the 263rd Corps Commanders' Conference (CCC) held at GHQ, Rawalpindi, a day after Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz President Shehbaz Sharif was sworn in as the Prime Minister.

He also said that rather the security force provided a secure environment for the conduct of polls, according to a statement by the Army. The powerful army, which has ruled Pakistan for more than half of its 75-plus

years of existence, has wielded considerable power in matters of security and foreign policy.

The meeting noted that the armed forces, at great peril to their primary responsibility, provided a security environment for the conduct of elections on February 8 as per the given mandate, and had nothing to do with the electoral process.

"However, the forum expressed dismay that some vested small segments of polity and media especially social media have been maliciously maligning Armed Forces of Pakistan with unsubstantiated allegations of interference which is highly deplorable," it read.

According to the statement, it is unfortunate that rather than focusing on real issues such as good governance, economic recovery, political stability and public well-being, the "entire

focus of such vested elements is on creating political instability and uncertainty by attempting to scapegoat others for their own failings".

Though the military did not name any political party, it was directed at jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which has been alleging that the powerful establishment had supported the PML-N party to steal its mandate.

The meeting emphasised that due legal processes be followed with evidence and proof rather than resorting to unconstitutional and uncalled-for baseless political rhetoric and emotional outbursts. The commanders also appreciated the efforts of civil administration, law enforcement agencies and security forces for providing all-out assistance during general elections in the light of the

Election Commission of Pakistan's guidelines for creating a safe & secure environment for the electoral process, despite overwhelming odds.

The meeting noted with satisfaction the smooth democratic transition of power and hoped that the post-election environment would bring the desired political and economic stability resulting in peace and prosperity. It further expressed that the armed forces strongly believed that democratic consolidation was the way forward for the country.

The meeting resolved that terrorists, their facilitators and abettors, working on the behalf of hostile forces to destabilise Pakistan, will be dealt with the full might of the state, with the COAS directing the commanders to continue consolidating the gains against terrorism and militancy.

Imran's party announces nationwide protests on March 10 against 'stealing' of mandate

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party on Tuesday announced that it will launch nationwide protests on March 10 against the "stealing" of the mandate, nearly a month after an inconclusive general election marred by allegations of vote rigging. "We will unite all political forces and will launch a movement within the law and Constitution," said former National Assembly speaker and senior PTI leader Asad Qaiser while speaking to the media here. He said that they are planning to take to the streets in all provinces so their demands are met, Geo News reported. "Our movement will continue and will bring together all political forces," he said, adding that they will ally with like-minded parties. The February 8 general election, marred by allegations of widespread rigging, in Pakistan,

resulted in a hung Parliament with independent candidates backed by Imran Khan's party winning more than 90 seats at the 266-member National Assembly. Ex-premier Nawaz Sharif's PML-N bagged 75 seats and former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto's PPP got 54 seats. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) won 17 seats. Nawaz's younger brother Shehbaz Sharif was sworn in as prime minister on Monday, days after his Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan Peoples Party agreed on a power-sharing deal to form a coalition government. Qaiser said that they would protest peacefully as they don't believe in the Shehbaz Sharif-led "fake government". "You have no respect for our mandate and the 30 million votes we got," he said, adding that "180 seats" have been stolen from the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), the party joined by PTI-backed lawmakers.

New Pak PM Sharif orders 'immediate' talks with IMF

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan's new Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has ordered "immediate" talks with the IMF for an extended fund facility for his cash-strapped country, saying that improving the state of the economy would be the top priority of his government which has received the "mandate". In January, Pakistan received over USD 700 million second tranche from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under the existing USD 3 billion Stand-by Arrangement (SBA) agreed towards June last year when Pakistan was slowly drifting towards default. Pakistan has not completed the last USD 6.5 billion IMF bailout package, and therefore, the first task of the new government will be to sit with the Washington-based global lender to get the last loan tranche of USD 1.2 billion. The official handle of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) president on Monday posted in Urdu on X that a few hours after the swearing-in of Prime Minister Sharif, a meeting was held regarding "the restoration of the country's economy". He was briefed by the finance secretary on the occasion. The prime minister directed to "immediately proceed" with the talks with the IMF regarding the Extended Fund Facility, it said. Sharif directed to prepare an action plan on an emergency basis to restore the economic situation.

Opp MPs submit no-confidence motion against Parl Speaker

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lanka's opposition SJB party on Tuesday submitted a non-confidence motion against Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena, questioning his endorsement of the controversial Online Safety Bill. The motion with signatures of 44 MPs from the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, National Peoples Power, Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Illangai Tamil Arasu Katchi and some independents, apart from the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya party, was handed over to Chaminda Kularatne, the parliament's assistant secretary general, sources from the SJB said. This is the first-ever instance of a parliamentary speaker facing a no-trust motion in independent Sri Lankan history. Leader Sajith Premadasa said Abeywardena had failed to incorporate the amendments recommended by the SC for the Online Safety Bill during its tabling in Parliament in January.

Ukraine claims it has sunk another Russian warship in Black Sea

AP ■ KYIV

Ukraine claimed Tuesday it has sunk another Russian warship in the Black Sea using high-tech sea drones as Kyiv's forces continue to take aim at targets deep behind the war's front line. Russian authorities did not confirm the claim. The Ukrainian military intelligence agency said a special operations unit destroyed the large patrol ship Sergey Kotov overnight with Magura V5 uncrewed vessels that are designed and built in Ukraine and laden with explosives. The patrol ship, which Ukraine said was hit near the Kerch Strait, reportedly can carry cruise missiles and around 60 crew.

The Ukrainian claim could not immediately be independently verified, and disinformation has been a feature of the fighting that broke out after Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbour in February 2022.

Kyiv's forces are struggling to keep the better-provisioned Russian army at bay at some points along the largely static 1,500-km (930-mile) front line, but are also taking aim at targets deep beyond the battlefield.

Last month, Ukraine claimed it twice sank Russian warships using drones. On Feb 1, it claimed to have sunk the Russian missile-armed corvette Ivanovets, and on Feb 14 it said it destroyed the Caesar Kunikov landing ship. Russian officials did not confirm those claims.

Kyiv officials say some 20% of Russian missile attacks on Ukraine are launched from the Black Sea, and hitting Russian ships there is embarrassing for Moscow.

Almost a year ago, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, the Moskva guided-missile cruiser, sank after it was heavily damaged in a missile attack.

Int'l court seeks arrest of two Russian officers

The Hague (AP): The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants Tuesday for two high-ranking Russian military officers on charges linked to attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. It's only the second time the global court has publicly announced arrest warrants linked to Russia's war in Ukraine. In March 2023, the court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin for war crimes, accusing him of personal responsibility for the abductions of children from Ukraine. On Tuesday, the court announced warrants for Russian Lt Gen Sergei Ivanovich Kobylash, who was commander of the Long-Range Aviation of the Aerospace Force at the times of the alleged crimes.

China: Relations with Maldives do not 'target' any third party

Beijing (PTI): China on Tuesday vowed to work with the Maldives to build a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership with the island nation and underlined that normal cooperation between the two does not "target" any third party and will not be disrupted by any 3rd party. Asked for her comments on China's military agreement with the Maldives at a press briefing here, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning referred the media to "competent Chinese authorities" for details. "More broadly, China is committed to working with the Maldives to build a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership," she said. "Normal cooperation between China and the Maldives does not target any third party and will not be disrupted by any third party" Mao said, without naming any country.

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY
e-TENDER CALL NOTICE
No.EM/PEP-07/2024
No.EM/PEP/TECH-22/2023/875 Date:28/02/2024
Name of the work: Management of Power Distribution System of Paradip Port Authority. Estimated Cost- Rs.21,41,67,922/- Last date & time of submission of bid: dt.20/03/2024 up to 17:00 Hrs.
Refer our website for details
https://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
Tender Notice Reference No.GNDU/Gen/26/2024
The Department of G.N.D.U. Amritsar invites online bids for the following:
Sr. No.1
Item: Hiring of fully managed dedicated secure server
Quantity: 02
Closing date & time: 20-03-2024 at 5:00 p.m.
For details long onto www.eproc.punjab.gov.in
Note: Any corrigendum(s) to the tender notice shall be published on the above website only.
Assistant Registrar (General) Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
NA/12/22591/2023/33244 Dated CHD : - 3/5/2024

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
Tender Notice Reference No.GNDU/Gen/27/2024
The Department of G.N.D.U. Amritsar invites online bids for the following:
Sr. No.1
Item: Supply of Toner/ Drum for various printer and photocopier machine
Quantity: 92 items
Closing date & time: 26-03-2024 at 5:00 p.m.
For details long onto www.eproc.punjab.gov.in
Note: Any corrigendum(s) to the tender notice shall be published on the above website only.
Assistant Registrar (General) Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
NA/12/22608/2023/33266 Dated CHD : - 3/5/2024

MUNICIPAL CORPORATION CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR
EXECUTIVE ENGINEER (Building)
Tel.No (0240) 2333536-40
Address: Municipal Corporation Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Executive Engineer (Building & Electrical)
Head office : Town Hall Pin 431001 E-Tender Call AMC (For Help): Cell No. 9764999592
Fax.No (0240) 2331213
No/AMC/EX.Eng./Bldg./687/2024
Date : 5/03/2024

Sr. No	Work Name	Last Date of Tender Submission
1	Regarding Leasing Fifteen (15) Practice Pitches (Turf) and Five (05) Cement Pitches at CSMC's Garware Sports Complex, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.	11/03/2024

Note 1. For the above stated work is available on web site www.mahatenders.gov.in
Sd/- Executive Engineer (Building & Electrical) Municipal Corporation Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.

Unemployment rate dips to 3.1 per cent in 2023

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Unemployment rate for persons aged 15 years or above declined to 3.1 per cent in 2023, the lowest in the last three years, as per a report of National Sample Survey Organisation under the Statistics Ministry.

According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for calendar year 2023, the unemployment rate came down to 3.1 per cent in 2023 from 3.6 per cent in 2022 and 4.2 per cent in 2021.

Joblessness, or unemployment rate, is defined as the percentage of unemployed people in the labour force.

As per the data, employment situation is improving after the pandemic hit the country in March 2020, which forced authorities to impose lockdown to curb the spread of deadly coronavirus.

The data also showed the improvement in buoyancy in economic activities after lifting of lockdown by the Centre and states. The survey showed that unemployment rate among females also declined to 3 per cent in 2023 from 3.3 per cent in 2022 and 3.4 per cent in 2021.

Similarly for males, it came down to 3.2 per cent in 2023 from 3.7 per cent in 2022 and 4.5 per cent in 2021.

The overall rate of



unemployment also declined in urban areas to 5.2 per cent in 2023 from 5.7 per cent in 2022 and 6.5 per cent in 2021.

Similarly, in rural areas it came down to 2.4 per cent in 2023 from 2.8 per cent in 2022 and 3.3 per cent in 2021.

Labour force participation rate (LFPR) in Current Weekly Status (CWS) in urban areas for people aged 15 years and above increased to 56.2 per cent in 2023 from 52.8 per cent in 2022 and 51.8 per cent in 2021.

Labour force refers to the part of the population which supplies or offers to supply labour for pursuing economic activities for the production of goods and services and, therefore, includes both employed and unemployed persons. The NSSO launched PLFS in April 2017.

The estimates of unemployed persons in CWS give an

average picture of unemployment in a short span of seven days during the survey period.

In the CWS approach, a person is considered unemployed if he/she did not work even for one hour on any day during the week but sought or was available for work at least for one hour on any day during the period.

Labour force, according to CWS, is the number of persons either employed or unemployed on an average in a week preceding the date of the survey. LFPR is defined as the percentage of the population in the labour force.

Worker Population Ratio (WPR) is defined as the percentage of employed persons in the population. The WPR also increased to 53.4 per cent in 2023 from 49.8 per cent in 2022 and 48 per cent in 2021.

India services sector growth eases in February

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The services sector growth in India moderated in February amid softer expansions in business activity, sales and jobs, a monthly survey said on Tuesday.

The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Services Business Activity Index registered 60.6 in February, down from 61.8 in January.

In Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) parlance, a print above 50 means expansion, while a score below 50 denotes contraction.

"India's services PMI suggests that the pace of expansion in the services sector eased in February from January," said

Ines Lam, Economist at HSBC.

According to the survey, the business activity index eased in February, but remained historically strong.

New business from abroad placed with services firms in India rose for the thirteenth successive month. Survey participants reported gains from Australia, Asia, Europe, the Americas and UAE.

Business confidence regarding the year-ahead outlook for activity weakened in February. Still, around 26 per cent of companies foresee a growth and only 2 per cent anticipate a fall.

"Due to a slowdown in growth in new orders and output, services companies' outlook



for future business activity, while remaining strongly positive, weakened slightly," Lam added.

Lam further noted that prices charged for services rose at the slowest rate in 24 months as

input prices inflation moderated.

On the employment front, companies created jobs on the back of rising workloads, but the easing of capacity pressures and lower confidence towards

the outlook dampened employment growth.

Meanwhile, the HSBC India Composite PMI Output Index slipped from a six-month high of 61.2 in January to 60.6, indicating a softer but sharp rate of expansion.

Composite PMI indices are weighted averages of comparable manufacturing and services PMI indices.

Growth of private sector sales likewise remained sharp in spite of softening since January, the survey said.

Rates of expansion were broadly similar at manufacturers and services firms, though the former registered an acceleration and the latter a slowdown, it added.

Loans to women grow at 19 per cent in 2023: Firm

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Loans availed by women grew 19 per cent in 2023, outpacing the overall loan growth of 17 per cent, a credit information company said on Tuesday.

Personal loans and two-wheeler loans portfolio showed the fastest growth at 26 per cent, the report released in the run-up to the International Women's Day by Crif High Mark said.

In absolute terms, the overall portfolio to women stood at Rs 30.95 lakh crore in 2023 against Rs 26 lakh crore at the end of 2022.

From an active loans perspective, the number of loans availed by women borrowers grew by 19



per cent. All segments witnessed growth excluding business loans and education loans which showed a decline of 19 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively.

The growth in women borrow-

women grew 26 per cent to Rs 12.76 lakh crore.

It can be noted that since 2023, the sector regulator RBI has been flagging concerns on unsecured loans like personal loans and also increased the risk weights to dissuade the lenders from such lending activities.

A large number of the potentially risky lendings has happened under Rs 50,000 which is a small ticket, according to industry executives.

The average ticket size for a personal loan by a woman declined to Rs 80,000 in 2023, from Rs 1 lakh in the year-ago period. In a majority of other loans, the average ticket size increased in 2023 when compared to 2022.



Gold hit record high of ₹65,000 per 10 grams

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices on Tuesday surged Rs 800 to hit a fresh record high of Rs 65,000 per 10 grams in the national capital amid strong global trends, according to HDFC Securities.

In the previous close, the precious metal had closed at Rs 64,200 per 10 grams.

Silver also rallied Rs 900 to Rs 74,900 per kg. In the previous trade, it had settled at Rs 74,000 per kilogram.

"Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 65,000 per 10 grams, up by Rs 800, taking bullish cues from the overseas markets.

"In domestic markets, spot gold hit a new all-time high of Rs 65,000 on Tuesday," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,110 per ounce, up by more than 1 per cent from the previous close.

"Gold prices experienced an uptick driven by growing speculation that the US Federal Reserve will cut interest rates in June, thus gain of more than Rs 2,400 was seen in MCX in last three days.

"The rise was also fuelled by signs of slowing industrial and construction spending in the US, coupled with a decrease in inflationary pressures," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst at LKP Securities, said.

Additionally, heightened geopolitical tensions have dampened the appetite for short-selling, thereby bolstering yellow metal's attractiveness as a buy-on-dip asset, Trivedi added.

Sensex snaps four days winning run

PTI ■ MUMBAI

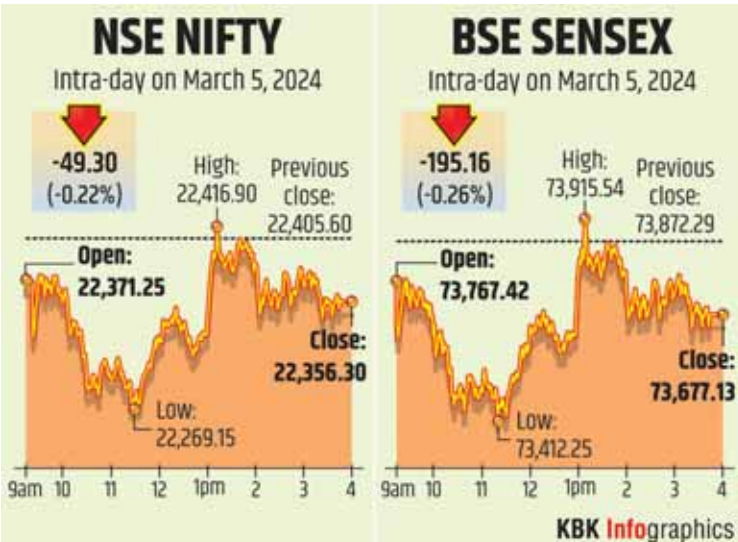
Benchmark Sensex declined by 195 points while Nifty slipped below the 22,400 level on Tuesday, snapping the four-day gaining streak due to losses in IT and FMCG shares amid weak global trends and foreign fund outflows.

Getting a breather after a record-breaking rally, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined by 195.16 points or 0.26 per cent to settle at 73,677.13 due to profit taking. During the day, the barometer tanked 460.04 points or 0.62 per cent to a low of 73,412.25.

The broader Nifty declined by 49.30 points or 0.22 per cent to close at 22,356.30.

Sensex and Nifty closed at lifetime high levels on Monday after a four-day winning run which saw the indices rising by around 2 per cent.

"The domestic market experienced range-bound movement post hitting new record high in the preceding day, influenced by cautious trend in global peers ahead of the Fed Chair's congressional



testimony and key US jobs data.

"The absence of significant stimulus measures from China further dampened sentiment," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services.

Among Sensex firms, Bajaj Finserv and Bajaj Finance fell by over 4 per cent each. Nestle, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, UltraTech Cement, HCL Technologies, Larsen & Toubro and Hindustan Unilever were the other major laggards.

Bharti Airtel, State Bank of India, Sun Pharma and NTPC were among the gainers.

Tata Motors, which announced the demerger of its passenger and commercial vehicle businesses into two listed entities, closed higher by 3.52 per cent after rallying to a 3.52-week high in intra-day trade.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge declined 0.63 per cent and midcap index dipped 0.17 per cent. Among sectoral indices, IT fell by 1.61 per cent, FMCG

dipped 1.02 per cent, teck by 0.89 per cent, capital goods by 0.37 per cent and consumer durables by 0.36 per cent.

Consumer Discretionary, energy, telecommunication, utilities and auto were among the gainers.

"Markets traded volatile amid mixed cues and ended with a modest cut. After the flat start, Nifty drifted lower in the first half however a sharp recovery in the select heavy weights; especially from the banking pack trimmed the losses," Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research at Religare Broking Ltd said.

Among Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong settled lower while Shanghai ended in the green. European markets were trading lower. The US markets ended in negative territory on Monday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.21 per cent to USD 82.63 a barrel.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 564.06 crore on Monday, according to exchange data.

Vibrance 2024 at VIT Chennai from today

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) Chennai is going to host its annual International cultural fest Vibrance 2024, from March 6 to March 9, 2024, said Sekar Viswanathan, Vice President, VIT in an address to the media in Chennai.

The fest will witness presence of a number of famous personalities, including singers Shreya Ghoshal, Jonita Gandhi and Andrea Jeremiah, actor Sonu Sood and cricketer Dinesh Karthik. Attracting around 22,000 students from across India and abroad, Vibrance 2024 is one of the biggest and most well-liked cultural and sporting festivals in the country.

International students from countries like Japan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Brazil, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Poland and Philippines are anticipated to participate in this 4-day long cultural event.



Ministry weighs reduction of GST on flex fuel vehicles

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The heavy industries ministry is examining requests seeking reduction in GST on flexible fuel vehicles (FFVs) from the current 28 per cent, sources said.

The ministry is in consultation with various stakeholders and other government departments.

Once the consultations are completed, the ministry will submit a recommendation to its finance counterpart.

Thereafter, the GST Council will take a decision on the issue, a senior official said.

"We have received representations seeking reduction in GST on flex fuel vehicles. We are conducting meetings on this issue to

ascertain the views of various stakeholders and different ministries. But we are getting a mixed response. Some people say that GST and cess should be reduced on FFVs because the government is promoting their adoption. Currently FFVs attract GST rate of 28 per cent, plus 15 per cent cess," the official added.

"We have been asked to review whether or not the GST on FFVs needs to be brought down," the official said requesting anonymity.

Flex fuel is an alternative fuel made of a combination of petrol and methanol or ethanol. FFVs come equipped with internal combustion engines designed to run on more than one type of fuel.

BUSINESS BRIEF



LIC PRESENTS INTERIM DIVIDENDS CHEQUE TO FM

New Delhi: Siddhartha Mohanty, Chairperson, LIC of India, today presented the ₹2441.44,91.124 cheque of interim dividend to Nirmala Sitharaman, Union Finance & Corporate Affairs Minister. Dr. Vivek Joshi, Secretary, Financial Services, Ministry of Finance, GOI, M P Tangirala, Additional Secretary, Financial Services, Ministry of Finance, GOI were present along with JPS Bajaj, Zonal Manager (I/C), Northern Zone on this occasion. Sitharaman also virtually inaugurated 'LIC International Business Centre' at GIFT City, Gandhinagar. This strategic move is aligned with LIC's commitment to providing world-class insurance and financial services on a global scale.

ANNUAL RESEARCH DAY CELEBRATED AT SRM

New Delhi: Research has been an integral part of humanity since the dawn of civilisation, and this spirit of seeking helped him survive and reach the current level of sophistication and technological advancements, said Dr P Sathyanarayanan, Pro-Chancellor (Academics), SRM Institute of Science and Technology. Presiding over the 13th Annual Research Day celebrations at SRM IST at Kattankulathur on Monday, Dr Sathyanarayanan said scholars should contribute to society and the nation through original research. "The government allocation to research from its GDP is low compared to Israel, South Korea, USA, and China. Until the 18th century, India was among the world top economies but suffered a setback. India's economy is growing, and research funding is also rising with increasing Foreign Direct Investments.

Paytm founder Sharma acknowledges crucial role of regulatory engagement

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In his first-ever public engagement after the Paytm Payments Bank issue, fintech firm One97 Communications founder and CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma on Tuesday acknowledged the crucial role of regulatory engagement and shared his vision to establish the company as a leader at the Asia level. While speaking at an event in Japan, Sharma said that ambiguity brings stress to the business. "Things become very big and systemically important, very fast. We have been able to very happily see our regulator engage," Sharma said.

Recently, banking regulator RBI barred Paytm Payments Bank Limited, in which Sharma has 51 per cent interest, from carrying out new transactions with customers after March 15.

The regulator, however, clarified that Paytm services like UPI etc that are not linked to PPBL can continue to operate.

Sharma emphasised the importance of clarity amid ambiguity, stressing the significance of perseverance in achieving the company's

mission.

"Ambiguity brings stress. When you are clear, when you know, then it is the perseverance on the mission that you are in. This is a great day when I have new lessons to learn and new opportunities to address," he said.

Paytm announced a strategic collaboration with Axis Bank to facilitate seamless and secure merchant settlements through trustee-based escrow accounts.

One 97 Communications, which owns the Paytm brand, operates a subsidiary Pay Pay in Japan.

Sharma reaffirmed the company's commitment to maintaining a significant role in the digital payment ecosystem.

He expressed his ambition to establish Paytm as a leader in Asia's financial landscape. "Asia has an opportunity to build a financial system for the next generation. Make Paytm an Asia leader -- in my lifetime, I would like to do that," he said.

The fintech firm is actively engaging with leading banks to forge partnerships aimed at enhancing customer experiences and expanding its payment solutions.

Admin raises concern over low cash deposit ratio in Noida banks

PTI ■ NOIDA

Gautam Buddh Nagar District Magistrate Manish Kumar Verma on Tuesday raised concern over low cash-deposit ratio in several banks of Noida and Greater Noida, directing officials to send letters to regional managers of all such branches.

The DM raised the concern at a meeting with the bankers in Surajpur held to discuss the various government schemes and loan facilities extended to the eligible beneficiaries, according to an official statement.

"During the review process in the meeting, the District Magistrate found that the cash-deposit (CD) ratio of the district was 66.19 per cent in the last quarter, for which he appreciated the work of the officers concerned but also noted that the CD ratio of many bank branches is 'very less' -- even less than 60 per cent," the statement said.

"In this regard, he has given strict instructions that a letter should be sent by the district administration to the regional manager of the banks whose CD ratio is less," it added.

The CD ratio indicates the proportion of a bank's total deposits held in the form of cash or cash equivalents.

Survey shows investors returning to housing market for profit making

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Investors are returning to housing market, with 36 per cent of respondents looking to buy homes from an investment perspective, according to FICCI-Anarock survey released on Tuesday.

At a real estate event here, FICCI-Anarock Consumer Sentiment Survey (H2 2023) was released which suggested that prospective homebuyers are considering to buy bigger homes and also not averse to buying flats in newly launched



projects.

"With the rise in disposable income, COVID-19 interlude, and work from home (WFH), homebuyers are looking for spacious homes. This has significantly increased demand for bigger and luxury homes

across the country. Yet another perceptible shift in trends noticed is the shift from renting to homeownership," Raj Menda, Chairman of FICCI Real Estate Committee, said.

Menda, who is Chair of Supervisory board of Bengaluru-based realty firm RMZ Corporation, said the realisation of the importance of owning a home, coupled with the favourable buying environment will continue to drive a strong homebuying sentiment.

Animation, gaming policy to facilitate investments: Official

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The proposed policy related to animation, visual effects, gaming and comics (AVGC), once implemented, will facilitate investments, foster innovation and contribute to building world-class infrastructure in the country, Secretary in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Sanjay Jaju said on Tuesday.

Speaking at 24th edition of the media and industry event 'Ficci Frames' here, Jaju also said the government's focus will be on

creating a conducive environment for the industry to thrive. "I can assure you that this (AVGC) policy is not only going to facilitate investments within our country and the states but will also foster innovation," he said and added that the policy is in the advanced stages.

The policy, when in place, will ensure skill development, help protect intellectual property and will also contribute to building world-class infrastructure, he said.

"We also envisage setting up a national centre of excellence for

animation, VFX, and extended reality sector along with setting up incubation centres," he added.

He said the government recognises the pivotal role that the Indian media and entertainment (M&E) sector plays in shaping our society, influencing our perspectives, and reflecting our collective efforts.

"India is going through a digital transformation phase and the sector is also witnessing rapid shifts with the availability of content which is online," he added.

MANIPUR OUTCLASS ASSAM TO CLINCH SEMIFINALS BERTH IN SANTOSH TROPHY

PTI ■ ITANAGAR
Wangkheimayum Sadananda Singh slammed a hat-trick as former champions Manipur stormed into the Santosh Trophy semifinal with a resounding 7-1 win over Assam, here on Tuesday. Sadananda struck thrice in 11th, 16th and 70th minute whereas skipper Phijam Sanathoi Meetei (4th), Ngangbam Pacha Singh (19th-penalty), Maibam Deny Singh (82nd) and Imarson Meitei (88th) were the other scorers for the Manipur. Joydeep Gogoi scored the only goal for Assam in the 64th minute. Meetei opened the scoring



with an assist from Sadananda's pass outside the box to sneak the ball past Assam goalkeeper Abhinash Mech. This was his 11th goal in this edition, making him the leading scorer in the 77th Santosh Trophy for the 2023-24 season. The early goal set the tone for Manipur's dominance, with Meetei relentless in his attacks. Sadananda scored with a diving header in the 11th minute, capitalising on a precise pass from Ngathem Imarson Meitei from the left flank. Manipur continued to pound their rivals, with Sadananda securing his brace after a well-coordinated set-up from Sanathoi Meitei. Assam's fortunes were further dented in the 20th minute when Manipur was awarded a penalty after Urjoy Brahma of Assam fouled the Manipur captain, Sanathoi Meitei, inside the box. Ngangbam Pacha Singh made no mistake from the spot kick, confidently slotting the ball into the top corner of the net to extend Manipur's lead to 4-0. Assam scored their only goal from substitute Joydeep Gogoi's brilliant finish. Sadananda then completed his hat-trick with a header from inside the box before Manipur's left full-back, Deny Singh, calmly found the back of the net off a pass from Singam Subash Singh. Imarson Meitei then completed the seven-goal rout with two minutes left on the clock.



Lakshya knocked out of World Olympic Boxing Qualifier

PTI ■ BUSTO ARSIZIO (ITALY)
Resigning national champion Lakshya Chahar became the fourth Indian boxer to crash out in the opening round of the first World Olympic Boxing Qualifier here. Competing in the men's 80kg event, Chahar was knocked out in the third round by 2021 Asian Championships silver medalist Gheslaghi Meysam of Iran here on Monday. Having lost the first round 2-3, Chahar got himself back in the game by taking the second round 3-2. He was level on three cards heading into the final three minutes. However with 20 seconds left for the bout to end, Meysam, who was playing in close proximity, connected a powerful right hook to knockout the Indian. All four Indian boxers, who have taken the ring here, have failed to move to the second round. World Championships bronze medalist Deepak Bhorla (51kg), Asian Games bronze medalist Narender Berwal (+92kg) and Commonwealth Games bronze medalist Jaismine Lamboria (60kg) all lost their respective first rounds. Five Indian boxers, including world championships bronze medalist Mohammed Hussamudin and six-time Asian Championships medal winner Shiva Thapa, are still in the fray for earning Paris Olympic quotas here. A semifinal finish will ensure a quota here. Thapa will open his campaign against reigning world champion Ruslan Abdullaev of Uzbekistan in the opening round of the men's 63.5kg category, while Dev will go up against 2022 European Championships silver medalist Lewis Richardson of Great Britain in the 71kg division. India have secured four 2024 Olympic quotas so far with Nikhat Zareen (50kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg), Parveen Hooda (57kg) and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) clinching their entry to Paris at the Asian Games last year. India had nine boxers competing in the Tokyo Olympics. Boxers who fail to earn quotas here will get a final chance to seal their passage to the Paris Games during the second World Olympic Boxing Qualifier, scheduled to be held in Bangkok from May 23 to June 3.



Satwik-Chirag, Treasa-Gayatri win opening round

PTI ■ PARIS
Star Indian pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty advanced to the second round of French Open Super 750 badminton tournament with a hard-fought straight-game win against Malaysia's Ong Yew Sin and Teo Ee Yi here on Tuesday. Satwik and Chirag, ranked world no. 1, had claimed the title in 2022. The Asian Games champions on Tuesday made a fine start to the tournament by outwitting the world no. 12 Malaysian combination 21-13 24-22 in 47 minutes for their fifth win in last 8 meetings. Satwik and Chirag, who finished second best in their last three tournaments, will face another Malaysian pair of Man Wei Chong and Kai Wun Tee in the next round. Commonwealth Games bronze medalists Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand also progressed to the second round after claiming a 16-21 21-19 21-17 win over Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto in an all-Indian opening match in women's doubles. The two pairs are fighting to qualify for the Paris Olympics. While Tanisha-Ashwini are ranked 11th, Treasa-Gayatri are placed at 14th spot in the Olympic Games qualification ranking. Treasa and Gayatri are in red-hot form, having played a vital role in the Indian women's side epic win at the Badminton Asia Team Championships in Shah Alam, Malaysia last month.

Arsenal demolishes Sheffield United 6-0

AP ■ SHEFFIELD (UK)
Arsenal delivered another statement win in its English Premier League title challenge by thrashing last-placed Sheffield United 6-0 to stay in touch with Liverpool and Manchester City. Some home fans left their seats and were seen heading to the exits inside Bramall Lane after 25 minutes when Kai Havertz made it 4-0 on Monday, adding to strikes from Martin Odegaard and Gabriel Martinelli either side of an own-goal by Jayden Bogle. With supporters in the away end singing "We're gonna score in a minute," Declan Rice slotted home a fifth in the 39th minute. It meant Arsenal scored five goals in three straight away league games - after West Ham (6-0) and Burnley (5-0) - and tied the record for most goals scored in the first half of a league game. The visitors weren't finished

there, with right back Ben White becoming the sixth different scorer when lashing a left-foot shot into the far corner in the 58th. At that stage, Arsenal looked a good bet to threaten the most goals scored by a team in a league game and the competition's biggest margin of victory, with three clubs - Liverpool, Leicester and Manchester United (twice) - having won 9-0 down the years. However, Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta's decision to make a raft of substitutions - including removing Bukayo Saka at halftime and others like Rice and Jorginho later on - broke his team's rhythm and Sheffield United's players could breathe slightly easier. Still, it was a good night for Arsenal's goal difference, which is now far superior to that of Liverpool and Man City. Arsenal stayed in third place, two points behind Liverpool and a point adrift of



City, and has won seven straight games in the league. "A great performance and a big result for us again with the amount of goals we scored and the clean sheet," Arteta said. "The team shows signs of wanting more. That's very positive." The only negative on the night was the sight of Martinelli being helped off with a right ankle injury in the 64th. Arteta said Martinelli sustained a cut, while Saka was removed because he was feeling sick. Arsenal could climb into first place - if only briefly - by beating Brentford on Saturday, ahead of Liverpool hosting Man City on Sunday. "The energy is really good at the moment," Arteta said. "When you are winning, everything is easier. We have to maintain momentum now." Sheffield United, which has already lost 8-0 to Newcastle and 5-0 to Brighton at home this season, stayed in last place, 11 points adrift of safety with 11 games remaining in its first season back in the top-flight. "It's a painful season - the boys are a damaged group of players," said Sheffield United manager Chris Wilder, whose team has conceded 72 goals in 27 games. "It's a long season and we've taken some big hits." Wilder said he might start giving some of his squad's younger players a chance with the team's survival prospects looking bleak.

Domestic tournaments give national players a chance to rediscover basics: Tendulkar

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The legendary Sachin Tendulkar on Tuesday said playing in the Ranji Trophy provides national players an opportunity to go back to basics while also elevating the level of the domestic tournament. The BCCI recently made it mandatory for its centrally contracted players to play domestic red-ball cricket if they aren't on national duty or in the NCA. The BCCI excluded Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer from its central contract list after they missed their state teams' respective Ranji Trophy games. "When India players turn up for their domestic teams, it raises the quality of play for youngsters and sometimes new talent is identified. It also gives the national players a chance to sometimes rediscover the basics," Tendulkar posted on X. "Throughout my career, I remained passionate about playing for Mumbai whenever I had the opportunity. Growing up, we had almost 7-8 India players in our dressing room, and it was fun to play alongside them," Tendulkar added. The 25-year-old Kishan did not



turn up for Jharkhand throughout the team's campaign in Ranji Trophy despite not being on national duty after leaving the tour of South Africa in December citing personal reasons. He instead focussed on preparing for the IPL for his franchise Mumbai Indians. Iyer, on the other hand, did not make himself available for Mumbai's Ranji quarterfinal against Baroda after being excluded from the Indian team after the second Test against England. He, however, played Mumbai's Ranji semifinal against Tamil Nadu. Tendulkar feels the participation of star Indian players turning out for their state teams will also generate more interest in domestic tournaments. "With top notch players participating in domestic tournaments, over a period of time, fans will also start following and supporting their domestic teams much more. Wonderful to see @BCCI give equal priority to domestic cricket." Mumbai have qualified for their 48th Ranji Trophy final. The 41-time champions will take on either Vidarbha or Madhya Pradesh, who are engaged in a thrilling semifinal, in the summit clash. "The Ranji Trophy semi-finals have been riveting! @MumbaiCricAssoc's march into the finals was aided by a brilliant batting recovery, while the other semi-final hangs in the balance going into the last day - Madhya Pradesh need 90+ runs to win, Vidarbha need 4 wickets," Tendulkar added.

Lanning, Jemimah slam fifties as DC post 192/4 against MI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Blistering fifties by skipper Meg Lanning and Jemimah Rodrigues powered Delhi Capitals to a commanding 192 for four against Mumbai Indians in a top-of-the-table clash in the Women's Premier League here on Tuesday. Lanning hit the ball across the ropes six times and twice over it en route to a 38-ball 53, her third half-century, and added three useful partnerships to anchor the DC innings for the most part. Jemimah then provided the late charge, smashing 8 fours and 3 sixes in 33 balls to take DC close to the 200-mark. Shafali Verma (28) and Alice Capsey (19) too chipped in with quick cameos. For MI, Pooja Vastrakar was the standout bowler with figures of 4-0-20-1, while Saika Ishaque (1/29), Shabnim Ismail (1/46) and Hayley Matthews (1/23) were the other wicket-takers. After the roaring success of the first leg in Bengaluru, the



two teams received lukewarm response in the national capital with only a sparse crowd turning up in the beginning to watch the 2023 finalists in action at the Arun Jaitley stadium here. It, however, didn't dampen DC's spirit openers Lanning and Shafali once again sent the bowlers on a leather hunt. Returning to action after

in an eventful fourth over which yielded 14 runs. Shafali then joined the party, clobbering Ismail for back-to-back sixes but the bowler had her revenge as she had Shafali caught behind. Delhi reached 56 for one in six overs. Capsey joined hands with Lanning and added another 31 with the help of three boundaries before dragging one on to the stumps while trying a reverse slap in the 10th over off Hayley Matthews. Lanning exploded in the 12th over with two fours and a six off Amelia Kerr, who conceded 20 runs in that over, as DC crossed the 100-mark. The skipper soon completed her fifty in 36 balls with a four off Vastrakar in 13th over but perished a ball later with Kerr claiming the vital catch. Mumbai tried to pull things back thereafter but Jemimah upped the scoring rate with a flurry of boundaries as DC scored 69 in last five overs. She reached her fifty with a six off Sciver-Brunt in the 19th over.

Rise in ACL injuries in women soccer highlights gender inequality, UK report says

AP ■ LONDON
Rise in anterior cruciate ligament injuries in women's soccer highlights "systemic gender inequality in sports," a UK parliament report said on Tuesday. The Women and Equalities Committee said there was a "lack of understanding of the health and physiological needs of women and girls across sport." In its report "Health barriers for girls and women in sport," it cited a lack of footwear specifically designed for the needs of female soccer players as an area of concern and called on the government to assemble a task force to

address the issue. "It is symptomatic of gender inequality and sexism in the sports sector that the first football boot in the world designed around female feet came to the market less than four years ago," committee chair Caroline Nokes said. ACL injuries to high-profile players have cast a spotlight on that specific issue. Chelsea and Australia striker Sam Kerr suffered ACL damage in January. Other leading players Alexia Putellas, Beth Mead and Leah Williamson have also sustained ACL injuries. The committee said the response from the sports science sector had been



"disparate and slow" and sports and exercise research was "overwhelmingly" conducted by men. "We have no doubt that a health issue of similar magnitude affecting elite male footballers would have received a faster, more thorough, and better-coordinated response." In a report last year, world players' union FIFPRO found that increased demands in the women's game had seen a "notable" rise in injuries, including the ACL. It said players who competed and travelled more with their club and national teams were more susceptible to lower limb injuries.

The report by the Women and Equalities Committee has highlighted concerns around sportswear and wants brands to be involved in a task force to help improve the physiological health of players. "While female footballers in the UK have enjoyed great success at club and national level, they have done so wearing ill-fitting footwear. Few football boots designed for women are available, and those that do exist are rarely stocked or promoted by the UK's leading high street sports retailers." The report said the issues go beyond the professional level and called for schools to "drastically" improve teaching

about girls' physiology, including the menstrual cycle, when it comes to sport and exercise. Again, it was an area of concern. "There is overwhelming evidence that school PE and sports kit can have a devastating impact on girls' confidence to participate in and enjoy school sport," the report said. Away from soccer, the report said "deplorable" and "harmful" coaching practices that included "public weighing, fat-shaming, and bullying in swimming and wider sport have damaged trust in sports governing bodies."

ASHWIN, BAIRSTOW SET FOR CENTURY OF TESTS TOGETHER

RARITY IN CRICKET



PTI ■ DHARAMSALA

Test cricket will see two players featuring in their 100th game together for only the fourth time when India off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin and England batter Jonny Bairstow take the field here on Thursday. The first such occasion was when former England captain Michael Atherton and Alec Stewart reached the landmark

against the West Indies at Old Trafford back in 2000. The second instance involved three players as South Africa's Jacques Kallis, Shaun Pollock and Stephen Fleming played their 100th Test in the South Africa-New Zealand game in England in 2006. The third was Alastair Cook and Michael Clarke in the England-Australia Ashes contest in Perth in 2013. Ashwin and Bairstow will be representing their respective

teams in the fifth and final Test here from Thursday. It will also mark only the second occasion when two players from the opposing teams will be playing their 100th Test in the same game. Just a day after the India-England game begins, New Zealand captain Tim Southee and his predecessor Kane Williamson will play their 100th Test together during the second match against Australia.

Ashwin, who recently became only the second Indian after Anil Kumble to cross 500 wickets in the game's longest format, made his Test debut in 2011 and has enjoyed more highs than lows during a 13-year journey. In this hill town, the 34-year-old Bairstow will become the 17th Englishman to get a 100th Test cap, having made his debut in 2012. India have already secured an unbeatable 3-1 lead in the ongoing series.

2012 series against England was turning point of my career: Ashwin

PTI ■ DHARAMSALA

On the cusp of completing 100 Tests, India's premier off-spinner R Ashwin on Tuesday said he would not have become the bowler that he is now without the learnings from an underwhelming home series against England in 2012, at the end of which he was a "bit nery". That series loss remains India's last defeat at home and Ashwin's performance in the four-match rubber left a lot to be desired as the likes of Alastair Cook and Kevin Pietersen played him with ease. Twelve years later, Ashwin looked back at the turning point of his remarkable career, which now features 507 Test wickets. "It is a pretty big occasion. More than the destination, the journey has been very special. It is a journey of ups and downs and a lot of learnings," said Ashwin, who will become only the 14th Indian to reach the 100-Test milestone when the final Test begins here on Thursday. "One of the turning points of my life was the England series when Cook came here and made all those runs. It has been talked about a lot but to me that and what led to the next home series against Australia (changed a lot for me). "There was lot of noise about me being left out of the team, one of the selectors had a chat with me. At that time I was a bit nery though I don't know where it came from as I had done well previously," he recalled. The criticism of his



performance — 14 wickets at an average of 52.64 in four Tests — is still fresh in his mind but more importantly, he hasn't forgotten the lessons. "When I went back and reflected on it after all those articles written about me, it dawned upon me that what was wrong with me. That is a wonderful lesson that has been kept with me all these years down the line. "When I look back it, it taught me what I had to correct. Some

of those questions were raised by me largely," said the 37-year-old. **ONE OF HIS FINEST SPELLS CAME IN BIRMINGHAM IN 2018:** A majority of Ashwin's 507 wickets (354 to be precise) have come in favourable conditions and perhaps that is why he cherishes his effort in Birmingham on the 2018 tour of England. Ashwin picked up seven wickets in that Test, including the important ones

of England run-machine Alastair Cook and Joe Root. "It is Test wins that always stand tall. After having given it a thought, one of the finest spells that I have bowled has to be Birmingham, 2018. I bowled in both the innings. I bowled on the morning of day three and got three wickets. "I got seven in the game and thought I had almost bowled India bowled to victory but didn't happen," he said referring to the game India lost by 31 runs. "Then it was a Test match in Bangalore, where I bowled a spell on day two morning not for many rewards. Day one, Centurion in 2018-19 again, got a four for and could have been six for. These are the spells that stand out." Due to his superior batting skills, Ravindra Jadeja has been preferred over him at times in overseas conditions but the champion spinner has now made peace with the past. "It's always disappointing to not play a particular game for your country, especially when you were doing well. But you got to make peace with it because it was in the best interest of the team. I don't think any captain or player wants to leave out a player that they feel can be of use in that particular game. "Not many teams in the world has what India has got. Ravindra Jadeja has been batting pretty well and if you see his averages, you can see that's where he has outscored me. Bowling might not be a big factor given the pitches that we play on in England and South Africa," he reasoned.

In nippy Dharamsala, England and their fans feel at home

PTI ■ DHARAMSALA

The results may not have gone their way on the tour of India but England have had no shortage of fan support and it is set to reach its peak this week in the picturesque town of Dharamsala. The fifth and final Test is still two days away but thousands of English fans have flocked to the hill station. The Barmy Army has provided constant support through the series but the prospect of watching Test cricket amid the stunning backdrop of the Himalayas has attracted even more fans from England. Three early morning flights from Delhi Airport to Dharamsala were packed with English fans and a handful of locals including Indian captain Rohit Sharma, giving the impression that the game was being played in the UK. Upon their arrival at the Gaggal Airport, the fans were left in awe of the snowcapped mountains in the background. The weather, unusually cold for this time of the year, is also making the English fans feel right at home. "This is the kind of weather we see in England in April and

May. It feels like start of the summer for us and we are loving it. The place is absolutely stunning. However, it would have been nicer if teams were locked at 2-2 going into the game," said a fan who has flown in from Liverpool. **ENGLAND CRICKETERS TOO CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF SPECTACULAR VIEWS:** England's opening practice session here had a very relaxed vibe to it. With 'Paradise City' from Guns N' Roses being played from the speakers kept outside the nets, the England batters went through their paces. In their break time, they were seen marvelling at the majestic mountains. Jonny Bairstow, who is set to play his 100th Test, rates the Newlands in Cape Town as his favourite venue but on Tuesday, he had to concede that there is nothing more picturesque than the HPCA Stadium in Dharamsala. "It's absolutely stunning here, I don't think there's a more picturesque ground in the world. Cape Town is one of my favourite places but when you take a moment, look up at the mountains with the snow and everything that goes with



it up here in Dharamsala, it's quite incredible," said Bairstow. The England batter also commended the groundstaff for fixing the re-laid outfield which received scathing criticism during the ODI World Cup in October-November. "They've done a brilliant job with the field for a start, if you look back at the field from the World Cup, the transition that

has been made to produce something like that has been amazing." **LOOKS LIKE A NICE WICKET:** The surface, which looked flat 48 hours before the game, has been a topic of intense discussion with the cooler conditions bringing the seamers into the game. "Obviously, the moisture will be there at the start on all days for the seamers to exploit, that is the nature of the surface

here. Spinners will come into play later on," said an HPCA official. Bairstow feels the surface will not provide an undue advantage to either side. "They are favourable for both teams, I don't think there's one side it favours...Look at the seam attack India have, world class and the spinners... I think it will be a great game. It's a used pitch from the Ranji trophy, so let's see how it plays

out...It looks a nice wicket," he said. In the only Test played here in 2017, the spinners played an important role with debutant Kuldeep Yadav picking four wickets in the first innings and Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja sharing six wickets in the second innings. Ashwin, who like Bairstow will be featuring in his 100th Test, said both teams are heading into unknown territory. "It's pretty cold here. It will take a bit of time for the fingers to adjust. This is a little colder than what it usually is in March. We haven't got a lot of practice here. That's the beauty. There are a lot of unknowns. Sometimes even when you are playing in India, it looks like an away game for you," said Ashwin. Rohit, who reached Dharamsala via Delhi in the morning, had more travel in store as he needed to attend a sports event in Bilaspur. The captain and head coach Rahul Dravid joined their teammates in the nick of time with a helicopter ride back from Bilaspur. The whole of India's squad attended the training session.

RANJI TROPHY SEMIFINAL



Vidarbha close in on thrilling win over Madhya Pradesh

PTI ■ NAGPUR

Vidarbha took command of their Ranji Trophy semifinal with the key wicket of Yash Dubey (94) late on day four as they inched closer to a thrilling victory over Madhya Pradesh here on Tuesday. Heading into the final day on Wednesday, hosts Vidarbha are a mere four wickets away from setting up a date in the summit clash with Mumbai, while Madhya Pradesh, who still need 93 runs to win, will hope their tailenders can produce an inspired fightback. The game tilted in favour of hosts Vidarbha in the penultimate over of the day when Aditya Sarwate (2/51) had Dubey caught by Aman Mokhadde, dealing a body blow to Madhya Pradesh's hopes of making it to their second final in three years. Chasing 321 to win, Madhya Pradesh reached 228 for six at stumps on the fourth day with their last recognised batter in Saransh Jain (16 not out) joined by Kumar Kartikeya, requiring a huge effort with the bat with not much left in the tank. To his credit, Dubey battled hard for Madhya Pradesh with a fine knock even as wickets kept tumbling at the other end. The right-handed batter showed grit and composure in a tough chase with a long haul, consuming 212 balls to get his 94 runs with 10 fours. Dubey forged a crucial 106-run stand for the second wicket with Harsh Gawali (67 from 80 balls, 11x4s), but once the pair was separated, Vidarbha kept making regular inroads to leave Madhya Pradesh in trouble. Madhya Pradesh lost the first-innings' centurion Himanshu

Mantri for a mere eight in the second essay, but it was the failure of their middle-order trio of Sagar Solanki (12), Shubham Sharma (6) and Venkatesh Iyer (19) which hurt the visitors the most. Akshay Wakhare was the star for Vidarbha accounting for these three batters to bring his side back into the contest, while Sarwate's late strike to dismiss the dangerous Dubey put the two-time winners in the pole position. The day, however, began with Vidarbha needing as many runs possible to set a big target for MP. From 343 for six, the hosts managed 402 all-out with 59 runs coming for the last four wicket, thus setting up a target of 321 runs for the visitors to win here at the VCA Ground. Yash Rathod brought up his century on the fourth day and finished with a high score of 141 off 200 balls, hitting 18 fours and two sixes in the process to lead the way. Rathod's late surge was crucial in dragging Vidarbha as far as 402 in their second innings, which was certainly an improved performance from their first innings wherein they were bowled out for 170. For MP, Anubhav Agarwal returned 5/92. Madhya Pradesh had taken a lead of 82 runs in the first innings as they had responded with 252. **BRIEF SCORES:** Vidarbha 170 & 402 in 101.3 overs (Aman Mokhadde 59, Yash Rathod 141, Akshay Wadhkar 77; Anubhav Agarwal 5/92) lead Madhya Pradesh 252 and 228/6 in 71 overs (Yash Dubey 94, Harsh Gawali 67; Aditya Sarwate 2/51, Akshay Wakhare 3/38) by 93 runs.

Neil retirement was forced: Taylor

PTI ■ WELLINGTON

New Zealand's former star batter Ross Taylor has suggested that fast bowler Neil Wagner's retirement was "forced", hinting at the possibility of unrest in the Kiwi camp. Told that he would not be picked in the XI in the series against Australia, Wagner recently announced his retirement during an emotional press conference before the start of the first Test. The 37-year-old Wagner, however, did take the field during the first Test as a substitute fielder and carried the drinks on occasions. "I think it all makes sense a little bit now. There's no sugarcoating it. I think it's a forced retirement. If you listen to Wagner's press conference, he was retiring, but it was after this last Test match. So he did make himself available," Taylor said while speaking on ESPN's Around the Wicket podcast. "And to see that he isn't selected... I think I do like and you do need to plan for the



future, but a one-off Test against Australia in a must-win situation, I wouldn't be looking much further than Neil Wagner. And I'm sure the Australian batters are sleeping easy that he's not in the side," Taylor added. Wagner last week called time on his 64-Test career, bowing out as the country's fifth highest wicket-taker with 260 victims. Wagner was picked in the squad for the two home Tests against Pat Cummins's

Australia but was told by head coach Gary Stead that he would not play in either match. He fought back tears as he confirmed his retirement from international cricket alongside Stead. Born and raised in Pretoria, South Africa, Wagner migrated to New Zealand in 2008 and played a key role in his adopted nation's rise to the world No 1 ranking and the inaugural World Test Championship title win in 2021.

Indian blind cricket team wants BCCI recognition

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian blind cricket team is banking on BCCI's support to take the game for the disabled athletes to the next level and wants the national board to treat the cricketers at par with able-bodied players. India blind cricket team coach Mohammad Ibrahim on Monday said in order to take blind cricket to the next level, BCCI's recognition is a must. He said not only BCCI's recognition but the blind players need to be given central contracts by the national board. "If we look at Pakistan, a team that has done consistently well in blind cricket they are contracted players of the Pakistan Cricket Board. PCB has supported them really well, players come under player contracts," he said. "Like what the BCCI has for normal cricketers — A category, B category and C category, and all the players are getting paid every month so they play cricket all 365 days of the year, they have to play. In India that has to happen. "Now-a-days players are playing just before the series or domestic season like the Nagesh trophy, which is a big tournament here. In Pakistan they are playing round the year. Pakistan cricketers are contracted players and I have seen their fitness levels, their energy, their



game," Ibrahim added. General Secretary of Cricket Association for the Blind in India Shailender Yadav said appreciation and recognition for blind cricketers have increased in recent times. "Ex-captain of our blind team Shekhar Naik was conferred with the Padma Shri Shri, ex-captain Ajay Reddy became Arjun Awardee in January this year. "Hope the BCCI would recognise blind cricket soon, just like other countries like Pakistan, Australia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, New Zealand, England and Zimbabwe," he said. "Players are receiving financial grants from the Government of India and the state governments, some have got government jobs in Haryana, Kerala, Odisha. We are expecting government job announcements for some more players," he added.