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NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

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# KEJRIWAL KNOCKED OUT

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

After evading Central probing agencies for several months, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was finally arrested in the multi-crore liquor scam by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday amid high drama involving multi-layered security forces and Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party supporters.

Kejriwal is also implicated in another scam related to the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), which the ED is probing. The AAP chief had skipped a total of nine ED summons related to the investigation, which has led to several arrests, including that of K Kavitha, daughter of Bharat Rashtira Samiti's chief K Chandrasekhar Rao. She was arrested by the ED last week. After former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren, Kejriwal is the second sitting Chief Minister in the country to be arrested this year by the ED in a corruption case.

Kejriwal's arrest came after the Delhi High Court denied him protection relief earlier in the day. Later in the evening, after the ED reached the CM's residence, Kejriwal's legal team rushed to the Supreme Court for relief. Sources said the matter will be taken up on Friday. After two hours of interrogation and searches by a team of top ED sleuths,

Kejriwal was arrested from his residence on Flag Staff Road in Civil Lines and later taken to the ED headquarters at Lok Nayak Bhawan in the Capital. Officials said upon reaching the AAP leader's residence, the ED team informed the staff that it had a search warrant to raid Kejriwal's premises. They also mentioned that the team would serve summons and request Kejriwal to join the probe.

Sources said Kejriwal's mobile phone has been seized by the agency, and there has been no communication between him and his family. As ED officials carried out their operation inside the CM's residence, additional Delhi Police personnel, Rapid Action Force (RAF), and CRPF teams were deployed at the Chief Minister's residence. The additional deployment was made as the ED sought extra security measures in anticipation of protests by AAP supporters.

The Delhi Police stepped up security and deployed personnel in large numbers along with paramilitary force in anti-riot gear around the Chief Minister's residence in the Civil Lines area as an ED team reached there. "The deployment has been made in anticipation of a gathering and protest of AAP workers near his residence," a police officer said.



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal being taken away from his residence after he was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in an excise policy-linked money laundering case in New Delhi on Thursday

Barricades were put up on the lane leading to his official residence in Civil Lines in north Delhi and additional police personnel were deployed there, officials said. "Two companies of RAF (Rapid Action Force) with anti-riot gears have been deployed. The local police and force from the nearby

police stations have also called in," the officer said. Officers of the rank of deputy commissioner of police and assistant commissioner of police were also deployed. The area was being checked with the help of drones, the officials said. A senior police officer said security has also been increased near the ED

office and Union Home Minister Amit Shah's residence in central Delhi. Sources said restrictions under section 144 of the CrPC have been imposed near the ED office and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) headquarters in central Delhi. Police said security has also

been increased outside the residence of Delhi Lt Governor VK Saxena. The arrest of the 55-year-old leader, amid the Lok Sabha election campaign, elicited angry reactions from the AAP. The party said Kejriwal "will continue as the Chief Minister of Delhi. If

necessary, he will run the Government from jail". He shall join his former Cabinet colleagues Manish Sisodia, Satyender Jain, and the party's MP in Rajya Sabha, Sanjay Singh, in jail. Several Opposition parties, including those in the newly formed alliance INDIA Bloc, as well as the Trinamool Congress, rallied behind the Delhi CM, condemning his arrest. Congress leaders described it as a pure form of tyranny, while TMC spokesman Kunal Ghosh said this kind of vindictive politics is unacceptable. "A scared dictator wants to create a dead democracy. While capturing all the institutions including the media, breaking up the parties, extorting money from companies, and freezing the account of the main Opposition party was not enough for the 'devilish power', now the arrest of the elected Chief Ministers has also become a common thing. INDIA Bloc will give a befitting reply to this," Rahul Gandhi posted on social media.

The BJP demanded that Kejriwal step down as Chief Minister on moral grounds. Cabinet Minister Atishi, considered to be a close confidant of the AAP convener, is now likely to play a crucial role. Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj and Delhi Assembly Speaker Ram Niwas Goel also gathered

with their supporters in the Civil Lines area and raised slogans against the Modi Government. AAP leader and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann wrote on social media, "The political team of BJP (ED) cannot confine Kejriwal's ideology because the AAP alone can stop BJP. Ideology can never be suppressed." Reacting to the ED action, AAP MP Raghav Chadha termed the arrest of Kejriwal just before the Lok Sabha elections a "big conspiracy". Protests erupted outside Kejriwal's residence on Thursday night after his arrest. The Delhi Police has detained around two dozen Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) workers, including MLAs, who were trying to block the road near the chief minister's residence. Party leaders and workers started gathering in the area while the Enforcement Directorate (ED) was questioning Kejriwal at his residence. AAP leaders and workers raised slogans against the ED and the BJP-led Central Government. AAP MLAs Jarnail Singh, Ritu Raj, Jai Bhagwan and Abdul Rehman were detained by the police, the party alleged. Soon after ED reached Kejriwal's residence in the evening, AAP leaders and Cabinet Ministers gathered outside. They were stopped at the barricades.

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## Congress cries foul over frozen accounts



Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and party leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi during a media briefing at AICC headquarters in New Delhi on Thursday

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

With the Lok Sabha polls underway, the Congress on Thursday accused the BJP of a 'systematic effort' led by none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to financially cripple the grand old party and prevent it from mounting a tough contest amidst the palpable anti-incumbency against the 10-year-rule of the NDA. Addressing a Press conference after a long time, former Congress president Sonia Gandhi stepped up her party's demand for access to its bank accounts to ensure a level playing field in the run up to the Lok Sabha polls. The Press conference was addressed jointly by Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and another former party chief Rahul Gandhi who stressed

that all its accounts were frozen. The party leaders claimed that it's not just impacting the Congress' poll prospect but democracy in India. "...We can do no campaign work... Our ability to fight elections has been damaged," Rahul Gandhi said launching a scathing attack on the Government over the issue of freezing of the party's accounts due to an Income Tax returns issue. "All our bank accounts have been frozen. We can do no campaign work, we cannot support our workers, we cannot support our candidates, our leaders cannot fly from one part of the country to another... They can't take a railway train and this has been literally two months before the election campaign," Rahul said.

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## Alibi for imminent defeat in Lok Sabha, says BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Thursday dismissed the Congress' attack on the Government over freezing of its bank accounts as the Opposition party's "desperate" attempt to create an alibi for its imminent defeat in the Lok Sabha polls. BJP chief JP Nadda on Thursday dismissed the Congress' talk of financial helplessness as "comical", and said the party can use the money accumulated from "all the scams" that took place during its rule for electioneering. The BJP's reaction came after former Congress president Sonia Gandhi demanded that the party be given access to its bank accounts to ensure a level playing field for the Lok Sabha polls and accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of making a systematic effort to cripple the party financially. In a post on X, Nadda said the Congress is "conveniently blaming" its irrelevance on financial troubles while in reality, their bankruptcy is "moral and intellectual, not financial". "The Congress is going to be totally rejected by the people and fearing a historic defeat,



their top leadership addressed a Press conference and ranted against Indian democracy and institutions," he said. Instead of correcting their own errors, the Congress is blaming authorities for their troubles. Be it the ITAT or the Delhi High Court, they have asked the Congress to comply with the rules, pay the taxes due but the party never did so, Nadda said. "For a party which has looted from every sector, in every State and at every moment of history, to talk of financial helplessness is comical. The Congress can use the money accumulated from all their scams starting from jeep to chopper scam via Bofors for their electioneering," the BJP chief said.

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## EC uploads complete electoral bond data

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) on Thursday uploaded the complete electoral bond data given to it by the State Bank of India on orders of the Supreme Court. The data includes bond numbers that can link donors with the political parties they contributed to. As per latest data, Trinamool Congress got at least Rs 540 crore worth electoral bonds from Future Gaming, making it the biggest beneficiary of donations made by 'lottery king' Santiago Martin, who also donated to the DMK, the YSR Congress, the BJP and the Congress.



Ranjan Dimri / The Pioneer

and Sikkim Democratic Front also got some funds from the biggest purchaser of the electoral bonds, which was started by the Centre Government in March 2018 and scrapped last month. While a plethora of well-known corporates bought the bonds when the scheme was

alive, the biggest donor to political parties was Future Gaming, which purchased bonds worth Rs 1,368 crore. Besides Trinamool Congress, Future Gaming gave Rs 509 crore to Tamil Nadu's ruling party DMK, nearly Rs 160 crore to Andhra Pradesh's YSR Congress Party, Rs 100 crore

to BJP and Rs 50 crore to Congress. The two parties of Sikkim, one of the few States where lottery is legal, together got less than Rs 10 crore from Future Gaming. The second-biggest donor is known to be Hyderabad-based Megha Engineering, which has given Rs 966 crore to various parties including BJP, Bharat Rashtra Samiti and DMK. Qwik Supply, the third largest donor to political parties using electoral bonds, bought Rs 410 crore bonds between 2021-22 and 2023-24, and gave Rs 395 crore to the BJP and Rs 25 crore to the Shiv Sena.

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# Congress releases names for LS seats in Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Barring for a couple of seats there was conformity between the Left and the Congress in "more or less" all the seats, a CPI(M) leader on Thursday said after the Congress announced the list of its candidates for Bengal. According to Pradesh Congress president Adhir Chowdhury, the tri-colour party was fielding candidates from Raiganj, Malda North and South, Jangipur, Behrampur, Purulia. The biggest Left Front constituent CPI(M) would not make any official comment but they expressed their anguish on one or two seats saying, "this is for a bigger cause and so we will thrash out the difference if any privately."

According to sources the Left was loath to shed the Raiganj seat to the Congress though both the parties have a strong base in the constituency which was held by both the Left and the Congress' PR



Dasmunshi and subsequently his wife Deepa Dasmunshi alternatively until the BJP won from here taking advantage of a tri-cornered fight in 2019. CPI(M)'s Md Salim had won this seat by a meager 2000 votes in 2014. The third partner Indian Secular Front — in the non-BJP-non-TMC axis — floated mainly by the family of a Muslim cleric and presently led by its MLA Naushad

Siddiqui however has demanded eight seats making the question of the alliance a bit tricky. ISF has decided to contest from Murshidabad a Left-Congress stronghold — from where Salim is likely to contest this time round, — Malda North and South, Serampore (a seat that the Left has already announced its candidate from) Diamond Harbour, Joynagar and Barasat making it difficult for both the Congress and the

CPI(M), experts say. Meanwhile, TMC's Yusuf Pathan on Thursday started his campaign at Behrampur where sitting Congress MP Adhir Chowdhury will seek reelection for the seventh consecutive time. "I have come to Bengal because it is my second home as I have played for KKR for several years ... I will try to give a fight at Behrampur and work for the people here," Pathan said.

# Udhampur constituency to witness triangular contest

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The Udhampur-Kathua Lok Sabha constituency from where MoS PMO Dr Jitendra Singh Thursday filed his nomination papers, for the first phase of polling on April 19, is set to witness a triangular contest after the induction of Choudhary Lal Singh in the Congress party. The Congress party, so far, has not finalized the name of the party candidate for the seat but as per the grapevine, Choudhary Lal Singh is expected to throw his hat in the poll arena to resurrect his political image. He tasted defeat and figured at the number 4 position in the tally of total votes polled in the 2019 Lok Sabha seat. Ghulam Nabi Azad-led Democratic Progressive Azad Party is also keen on fielding senior party leader GM Saroori while the National Conference has decided to support the Congress candidate as part of their understanding in the INDIA bloc. To begin with, Dr Jitendra Singh is in the commanding position. After filing the nomination

papers in the office of the Returning Officer, Kathua, Dr Singh listed out a long list of achievements highlighting developmental projects and welfare schemes that benefitted the common masses on ground zero. The other candidates, who are likely to contest the seat, have to work hard in the coming days to give a tough fight to the sitting MP. Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat along with the wife of Dr Jitendra Singh accompanied him to the office of the Returning Officer. In 2019 Lok Sabha polls Dr Jitendra Singh garnered 7.24 lakh votes (61.24 percent votes) defeating Vikramaditya Singh of the Congress party with a sizable margin of over 3.52 lakh votes. Lal Singh had managed to secure a total number of 19049 votes (1.61 percent). Before filing the nomination papers, Dr Singh also took a rally that saw the participation of Dalip Singh Rana, better known as "The Great Khali" for his exploits in the World Wrestling Entertainment, and BJP J&K chief Ravinder Raina.

# Afraid of extradition post CAA, man kills self

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Smelling politics the Trinamool Congress on Thursday swung into action after a man apprehending extradition in the wake of the implementation of Citizenship Amendment Act committed suicide. TMC general secretary Abhishek Banerjee swiftly sent a five-member team comprising senior party leaders including minister Shashi Panja, Kunal Ghosh and others "to remain by the side of the aggrieved family" — and apparently to take control of the situation — while CPI(M) central committee member Sujana Chakrabarty said his party would "immediately take up the issue". Debashis Sengupta a resident of Netaji Nagar committed suicide at his maternal uncle's place at Subhas Gram off Sonarpur in southern suburbs of Kolkata, local TMC councillor Arup Chakrabarty said adding the man was disturbed for the past some days wondering whether he would be thrown out of the country or whether he would be sent to jail like it was in Assam.

The man's aunt said, "he lives with my eighty-year-old father and is the sole bread-winner of the family ... he was quite disturbed because his Aadhar and voters cards were not in order and other documents too were not in place as our father being an old and less educated man had misplaced some of them." Sengupta had been glued to newspaper or TV news saying for the past few days that being someone who has no property and no proper document how he would prove his citizenship, police said quoting the family that "the victim's father had migrated to India 60-70 years ago" and Debashis was born in India. When asked, his maternal aunt said he had no birth certificate as in those days there were none issued. "I have asked my party to remain by the side of the family in grief ... this is the beginning and today's sad incident shows what negative impact the CAA is capable of ... this is not only unconstitutional but also inhuman and should be protested tooth and nail," Banerjee said adding his party would never let CAA or NRC happen in Bengal.

# EC directs Centre to stop sending bulk WhatsApp messages under Viksit Bharat Sampark initiative

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) on Thursday directed the Centre to immediately stop delivering bulk WhatsApp messages to people under the "Viksit Bharat Sampark" initiative to highlight the government's achievements. The direction was issued to the Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, after the Commission received complaints about the matter. In another order, the EC has also transferred district police chiefs in Assam and Punjab, including the brother of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and shunted out "non-cadre" district magistrates and superintendents of police in some

states. The Commission said the non-cadre district magistrates (DMs) and superintendent of police (SPs) have been shunted out as the posts are meant for IAS and IPS officers. "The move is a part of a series of decisions taken by the Commission to ensure a level-playing field," the Commission said in its order on WhatsApp messages on Viksit Bharat Sampark. Asking the government to ensure there is "no further delivery" of the bulk WhatsApp messages to people, the Commission sought an "immediate" compliance report on the matter from the ministry. The ministry had informed the Commission that the messages along with a letter from Prime Minister Narendra Modi were sent before the Model Code of

Conduct came into force on March 16 with the announcement of Lok Sabha poll schedule. "... Due to system architecture and network limitations it is possible that some letters have a delayed delivery," the ministry said in a communication to the Commission. The EC had received several complaints that such messages highlighting the government's initiatives were being delivered on citizens' phones despite the announcement of parliamentary elections 2024 and the MCC coming into force. The Congress and the Trinamool Congress had raised objections to the message and requested the Election Commission to act against this "blatant violation" of the Model Code of Conduct. On Tuesday,

the Chandigarh Chief Electoral Officer had referred to the Election Commission for "appropriate action" a complaint regarding bulk WhatsApp messages. According to an official statement on Tuesday, after examination of the complaint, the

district media certification and monitoring committee found prima facie evidence of a violation of the Model Code of Conduct. The complaint was received through the cVIGIL mobile application of the poll panel. In a separate order issued on

Thursday, the EC said it has adopted a tough stance against posting of non-cadre officers at leadership positions by transferring eight non-encadred SPs/SSPs and five non-encadred DMs in Punjab, Odisha, Gujarat and West Bengal. It said some officials were transferred in view of their kinship or familial association with the elected political representatives, adding SSP Bathinda (Punjab) and SP Sonitpur (Assam) have been transferred. Officials pointed out that while SP Sonitpur Shushanta Biswa Sarma is the brother of state chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, SSP Bathinda Harnanbir Singh Gill is the brother of Congress MP from Khadoor Sahib Jasbir Singh

Gill. The EC said the officials in these two districts have been transferred as a "pre-emptive measure" to dispel any apprehensions of administration being biased or perceived to be compromised. The move comes ahead of the seven-phase Lok Sabha polls starting April 19. Earlier, the poll body had ordered removal of home secretaries in six states for holding dual charge in the office of their respective chief ministers. It had also transferred the West Bengal DGP to a non election related post. The decision on transfers was taken after the Commission convened a meeting chaired by Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar along with Election Commissioners Gyanesh

Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu. The officers to be transferred include SP of Chhota Udaipur and Ahmedabad Rural districts Gujarat; SSP of Pathankot, Fazilka, Jalandhar Rural and Malerkotla districts in Punjab. Similarly, DM of Dhenkanal and SPs of Deogarh and Cuttack Rural districts in Odisha have also been removed along with DM of Purba Medinipur, Jhargram, Purba Bardhaman and Birbhum districts of West Bengal. Under the directive, all respective state governments have been instructed to promptly transfer non-encadred officers from their current roles as DM and SP/SSP, with immediate effect, and submit a compliance report to the Commission.

# Carnatic singers outraged over honour to Krishna

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI

The divine ambience created by the serene rendering of Carnatic music has given way to a high pitched cacophony following the decision of Madras Music Academy at Chennai to honour TM Krishna, well known musician, with the Sangita Kalanidhi Award for 2024. Aficionados were shocked by the move by Music Academy, one of the oldest cultural institutions in the city, to honour Krishna who they allege have slandered, insulted and humiliated the icons of Carnatic music starting from Saint Thyagaraja to MS Subbulakshmi, the diva of Indian classical music. "TM Krishna, through his write-ups and speeches, has slandered the Carnatic musicians who are adored, admired and loved by connoisseurs of music. He is nowhere near the great maestros of Carnatic music like MSS, D K Pattammal etc," said R Ananthanarayanan, honorary secretary, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Puthucode, who is engaged in the prop-



agation of Sanskrit, Vedic Science and Carnatic Music. GenerationNext artists, shocked by the derogatory comments made by Krishna decided to return the Sangita Kalanidhi Award conferred on them by Music Academy. The artists include Chitravina Ravikiran (winner of 2017 award) and Ranjani-Gayatri who declared that they were withdrawing from Music Academy's 2024 conference when the Sangita Kalanidhi award would be conferred on Krishna. The duo of Srikrishna Mohan and Ramkumar Mohan (known as Trichur Brothers) scheduled to perform on December 19 at Music Academy too made it known that they would not participate in an event which was

being presided over by Krishna. "He believes and propagates a value system that is diametrically opposite to our core values. To participate in a conference presided over by Krishna would make us outright hypocrites in our own eyes," said Trichur Brothers in a release. The root cause of the latest controversy is an interview given by Krishna to an evangelist-Maoist periodical in 2015 where he described MS Subbulakshmi as the greatest hoax of the 20th century. "It was packaging and marketing that made MS Subbulakshmi the global face and voice of Carnatic music; her music was otherwise intrinsically hollow and lacked stuff. She was stage managed," said Krishna in the article. He also belittled the people who considered MS as a divine star and questioned their credentials to make such a comment. It was eight years after the demise of the diva he wrote this article for the said magazine which had a track record of publishing fabricated and fictitious stories masqueraded as reports.

# Congress releases third list of 56 candidates

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress on Thursday released its third list of 56 candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, fielding Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury from Behrampur, party chief Malikarjun Kharge's son-in-law Radhakrishna from Gulbarga and former Union minister Sushilkumar Shinde's daughter Praniti Shinde from Solapur. The Congress has left the Sikar Lok Sabha constituency in Rajasthan for the Communist Party of India (Marxist). With this, the party has declared a total of 138 candidates for the polls. In its third list, the Congress declared candidates for two seats in Arunachal Pradesh, 11 in Gujarat, 17 in Karnataka, seven in Maharashtra, five in Rajasthan, five in Telangana, eight in West Bengal and one in Puducherry. Former Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Nabam Tuki has been fielded from Arunachal West. In Gujarat, the party has named Sonal Patel from Gandhinagar, Prabhaben Taviyad from Dahod (ST) and Nilesh Kumbhani from Surat, among others. In Karnataka, it has fielded Priyanka Jarkiholi from Chikkodi, Radhakrishna from Gulbarga (SC), Vinod Asotki from Dharwad, M Rajeev Gowda from Bangalore North, Sowmya Reddy from Bangalore South and Mansoor Ali Khan from Bangalore Central, among others. The party has again fielded Chowdhury from Behrampur, setting up the much-anticipated clash between the veteran Congress leader and cricketer-turned-politician Yusuf Pathan, who has been fielded by the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal. Also, the Congress has fielded Isha Khan Choudhury, son of Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury, from Maldaha Dakshin. Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury is the incumbent MP from the seat.

# Congress cries foul...

From Page 1

"Defreeze our accounts to ensure a level playing field in polls," Kharge demanded. The three senior leaders were flanked by Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh and AICC treasurer Ajay Maken at the Press conference. Sources said eight of the 11 accounts of the party are frozen. Rahul said 20 per cent of India votes for the Congress which is not even able to pay Rs 2 for anything. "We have already lost a month. We are unable to get slots for advertising, we are unable to put advertisements in newspapers, so what sort of democracy is this," he said. Sonia said the issue being taken up today is "very, very serious" and affects not just the Congress but "impacts our democracy itself most fundamentally." "A systematic effort is underway by the Prime Minister to cripple the Indian National Congress financially. Funds collected

from the public are being frozen, and money from our accounts is being taken away forcibly," she said. "However, even under these most challenging circumstances, we are doing our best to maintain the effectiveness of our election campaign," she said. "On the one hand, there is the electoral bond issue, which has been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The electoral bonds have benefitted the BJP hugely. On the other hand, the finances of the principal Opposition party, the INC, are under a determined assault," she said. This is truly unprecedented, Sonia said. "Terminating the freezing of accounts a criminal action against the Congress by the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, Rahul said there is no democracy in India today and the idea that India is the world's largest democracy is a complete lie. "There are institutions that are supposed to protect the democratic framework but

nothing is happening," he said. Kharge appealed to constitutional bodies to allow the Congress to access bank accounts if they want free and fair polls and added that holding fair polls is essential. The party in power, he said, amassed funds through electoral bonds while freezing the Congress' accounts to create hurdles for it in fighting polls. "Those in power should not have direct or indirect control over constitutional bodies," he said, adding that those in power should not have monopoly over resources. "The BJP has looted donations given to the Congress party by the common public by freezing our accounts and forcibly withdrawing Rs 115.32 crore from them," Maken alleged. "It has been orchestrated to cripple us in the elections. Even if our bank accounts are unfrozen today, a huge amount of damage has been done to Indian democracy," Rahul claimed.

# Alibi for...

From Page 1

"The Congress part time leaders say India being a democracy is a lie — may I remind them that India was not a democracy only for a few months between 1975 and 1977 and that time the PM of India was none other than Indra Gandhi," he said. BJP leader and former Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad accused former Congress president Rahul Gandhi of lying on the issue and also targeted Sonia, saying both of them shamed Indian democracy globally with their "irresponsible" comments. Prasad said the Congress did not file income tax returns in time, leading to the freezing of its accounts. The Opposition party did not get any judicial relief and has now gone to the Supreme Court, he said, accusing Congress leaders of lying over the issue. He said the Congress was even pulled up by the High Court over the issue. "We wish the Congress well and our gentle advice to the party is the more you allow Rahul to speak the more ground you lose," Prasad said. If people don't want to vote for the Congress, the BJP cannot help it, he said.

# KEJRIWAL KNOCKED...

From Page 1

Speaker Goel said there was such heavy deployment of security personnel outside Kejriwal's residence that it seemed as if "they had come to wage a war against Pakistan." "Our stand is clear. The whole party wants that he will run the government from jail," he told reporters. Media persons who were present outside the residence were also asked to step out of the lane. AAP workers protested and raised slogans against the ED. BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra slammed protests by AAP leaders and supporters following their leader's arrest, and said the drama amounts to a "celebration of corruption." Neither people nor courts will accept this, Patra said, adding, "Kejriwal, you are corrupt. People of Delhi and people of India know you are corrupt." Noting that Kejriwal was served many summonses by the Enforcement Directorate, the BJP leader said the arrest has followed a protracted course of action. Reiterating the BJP's charges against the Delhi chief minister, Patra asked why the Kejriwal government gave the excise policy its nod without the approval of its Cabinet and then scrapped it overnight. "Cartelisation was allowed, liquor manufacturers were allowed in wholesale and black-listed firms were allowed in the business at a huge cost to the exchequer," the BJP spokesperson alleged. He is reaping what he showed, Patra said. "It is but natural that if you have evaded the law of the land, ultimately the law will catch up with you," he said. Despite all the drama and protests by their supporters, various other AAP leaders arrested in the case, including Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh, have not got any relief from the courts they approached, Patra added.

# EC uploads...

From Page 1

Qwik Supply Chain Private Ltd, a little-known company with a registered address at Navi Mumbai's Dhirubhai Ambani Knowledge City (DAKC) and having links to Reliance Industries, is described as a manufacturer of warehouses and storage units, and gave no money to any other political party. The BJP was the major receiver of funds from big corporate groups like Vedanta, Bharti Airtel, Muthoot, Bajaj Auto, Jindal group and TVS Motor. Electoral bond purchases and donations by Qwik Supply accounted for Rs 1,368 crore

of Future Gaming and Hotel Services—another little-known lottery company—and Rs 966 crore of Hyderabad-based Megha Engineering & Infra. Qwik Supply bought electoral bonds worth Rs 360 crore in 2021-22 to donate to political parties. Despite this, its net profit for the same year was only Rs 21.72 crore. It purchased an additional Rs 50 crore worth of bonds in 2023-24. Honeywell Properties Private Ltd purchased bonds worth Rs 30 crore on April 8, 2021, and allocated all of them to the BJP. Two separate lists of donors and recipients were published by the poll panel on its website after receiving the details from the State Bank of India earlier in the day, following a Supreme Court order. The Election Commission said it uploaded the electoral bond data on its website as

received from SBI, on an 'as is where is' basis. The new details show the name of the purchaser of the bond, its denomination and specific number, the name of the party that encashed it, the last four digits of the bank account number of political parties that redeemed the bond and the denomination and unique number of the bond encashed. What was missing were the hidden alphanumeric codes on bonds that can help match donors with parties — a section that has caused huge concern about the end to the anonymity promised by the Government. The codes can be seen only under ultraviolet light. Details from earlier lists have revealed Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR, Megha Engineering & Infrastructures Ltd, Qwik Supply Chain Pvt Ltd, Vedanta and Bharti

Group among the top donors. The top recipient was the BJP, followed by Trinamool Congress, Congress and the BRS. It also appeared that some South parties, including DMK, AIADMK and JD(S) have sent information about the donors to the Election Commission. The bank had earlier given two lists to the Commission, which were released on the poll panel's website on March 14. They contained information on donors, the bonds purchased and their dates, political parties and the bonds they encashed. Earlier, the State Bank of India told the Supreme Court that it has provided the Election Commission all details of electoral bonds, including the unique bond number that would reveal the link between the purchaser and the recipient political party.



# Kejriwal arrest: Decade long AAP, BJP tussle reaches its crescendo

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The decade-long rivalry between the AAP led by Arvind Kejriwal and the BJP ruling at the Centre reached a crescendo on Thursday with the arrest of the Delhi chief minister by the ED in an excise policy-linked money laundering case.

The tussle between the two sides began with their almost simultaneous rise to power with the BJP led by Narendra Modi receiving a massive mandate in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls and the AAP forming the government in Delhi with a historic victory a year later by winning 67 assembly seats out of 70.

2029 Lok Sabha polls. The confrontations between the Kejriwal government and the Centre over governance related matters assumed political overtones and blame-game with both the AAP and the BJP joining their respective sides.

The Aam Aadmi Party dispensation since coming to power in Delhi in 2015 has been involved in frequent run-ins with the office of lieutenant governor.

It began with the Kejriwal government confronting the then Lt Governor Najeeb Jung over the issues of control over Anti Corruption Branch, transfer and posting of senior officers, and movement of official files, just after coming to power.

The AAP vociferously attacked Jung, who formed a three-member committee headed by former Comptroller and Auditor General of India V K Shunglu to look into 400 files of the Delhi government. Another controversy erupted when Jung appointed an IAS officer chief secretary who was asked by Kejriwal not to take charge and even locked his office over the matter.



continued even after Jung resigned in December 2016 and former Union home secretary Anil Bajjal replaced him. Bajjal's more than five-year tenure as Delhi LG witnessed numerous face-offs, the most

remarkable being Chief Minister Kejriwal accompanied by his cabinet colleagues staging a dharna inside Raj Niwas in 2018, alleging that city bureaucrats were not listening to the ministers.

The AAP dispensation also clashed with Bajjal over appointment of special public prosecutors for trial of cases related to Delhi riots in 2020 and anti-CAA protests. In July 2021, the then deputy

chief minister Manish Sisodia objected to Bajjal holding meetings with officers and instructing them on works that directly came under the purview of the elected government.

A more bitter face-off ensued after incumbent Lt Governor V K Saxena took charge in May 2022. Within two months, Saxena recommended a CBI probe into alleged irregularities and procedural lapses in formulation and execution of the Kejriwal government's excise policy 2021-22.

This opened up an altogether new chapter of fraught relations between the AAP dispensation and the other side, with the Enforcement Directorate (ED) arresting Sisodia and party MP Sanjay Singh in connection with the alleged liquor scam. After the ED's summonses to Kejriwal in connection with the excise policy linked money laundering case and also in a separate case related to Delhi Jal Board (DJB), the AAP has sharpened its attack on the BJP and its government at the Centre.

The AAP leadership has accused the BJP of trying to break the party by sending the Delhi chief minister behind the bars and toppling his government in Delhi.

The BJP, on the other hand, is having a field day slamming AAP and Kejriwal over alleged corruption in the Delhi gov-

ernment. The Delhi LG empowered by implementation of

Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act in August 2023, has assumed a more proactive role in governance related matters evoking strong protests by the Kejriwal government and AAP.

The power tussle between the Kejriwal government and the Centre has its genesis in a notification issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs in May 2015, stipulating Delhi LG will have jurisdiction in services, public order, police and land matters.

The notification paved the way for a long legal battle between the two sides in the Delhi High Court as well as the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court on May 11, 2023, ruled in favour of the Delhi government extending its executive powers over the services matters involving transfer and posting of senior officers. Within days of SC verdict, the BJP-led Centre brought an ordinance that was later turned into an Act restoring power balance in favour of its representative LG.

## AAP faces leadership crisis after Kejriwal arrest

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal Thursday night could not have come at a worse time for the Aam Aadmi Party, which is already grappling with the absence of its top leadership from action. The party is eyeing an expanding its footprint across the country and has tied up with the Congress to contest the Lok Sabha polls against the BJP in Delhi, Haryana and Gujarat.

Kejriwal is the fulcrum of the party's Lok Sabha campaign and its star campaigner. The party is already feeling the pinch of the absence of its senior leaders like Manish Sisodia, Satyendar Jain and Sanjay Singh. Now the arrest of Kejriwal has landed the ruling party of Delhi in the doldrums. On earlier occasions, whenever this question rose, the party maintained a tough stance saying it will fight it out, but there is no denying the fact that AAP's think tank won't find it easy to wriggle out of this problem.



where it is contesting on four seats and in Gujarat, where it has fielded candidates on two seats, is centred around Kejriwal. In Delhi, the party's campaign is titled, 'Sansad Mein Bhi Kejriwal, Toh Dilli Hogi Aur Khush Haal' while in Gujarat, it is being run as 'Gujarat Mein Bhi Kejriwal'. In Punjab, while the campaign is centred around state chief minister Bhagwant Mann, Kejriwal had been frequently travelling to the state,

where the AAP is contesting all the 13 seats without an alliance with Congress. At a press conference on March 19, Delhi Cabinet minister Saurabh Bharadwaj had alleged that there was a conspiracy to arrest Kejriwal since his questions were making the BJP uncomfortable. Inevitably, a question arose, 'If Kejriwal is arrested, how will the party's Lok Sabha campaign proceed in his absence?' Earlier this week, Bharadwaj

said that "The face will be Arvind Kejriwal. He is the only face that people trust and love. The strategy will be formed once we reach that stage."

Before Kejriwal's arrest, the party, somewhere, at the back of its mind, was also hoping that he is not arrested considering his mass appeal and popularity, especially among the people of Delhi.

"The BJP also has a fear that their plan to arrest Kejriwal might backfire. Kejriwal's arrest could lead people to revolt against the BJP in the polls," a senior party leader had said when Kejriwal was being issued multiple summonses by the ED in an excise policy linked money laundering case. Not only does Kejriwal's arrest threaten to derail the party's Lok Sabha campaign, it could have long standing repercussions on governance in Delhi and the Assembly polls next year. For now, the party is maintaining a brave face and saying, 'Ladenge, Jeetenge' but the truth is that a bumpy road in the coming days awaits the 12-year-old party.

## Huge conspiracy, claims AAP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) alleged on Thursday that there was a "huge conspiracy" behind Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest ahead of the Lok Sabha polls and accused the BJP of stooping to any level to make him bow down.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) arrested Kejriwal from his residence here on Thursday evening, officials said, shortly after the high court refused to grant the AAP leader protection from coercive action in an excise policy-linked money-laundering case.

Delhi ministers Saurabh Bharadwaj, Atishi and other AAP leaders and workers gathered outside the chief minister's residence. Security was beefed up around Kejriwal's Civil Lines residence in the evening with the deployment of Rapid Action Force

(RAF) and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) units, along with Delhi Police personnel, as ED officials reached there.

The leaders and workers raised slogans like "AAP zindabad", "Arvind Kejriwal zindabad" and "Arvind bhai tum sangharsh karo, hum tumhare sath hain". "This entire episode shows how scared Prime Minister Narendra Modi is of Kejriwal. He has hatched a conspiracy to send him to jail before the Lok Sabha election," Atishi told reporters. She alleged that the ED has become a "political tool" of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "It is no longer an independent agency. It has become a political tool. Modi knows that if there is any alternative to him in the country, it is only Kejriwal. Delhi's residents consider Kejriwal as their family member and that is why Modi is scared," Atishi said.

In a series of posts on X, the AAP said: "ED reached the house of Delhi's son

@ArvindKejriwal! BJP should know that it is trying to move the mountain in whose support the entire country stands today. The people of Delhi are watching everything. No one will sit silent today."

Using the hashtag #IStandWithKejriwal, it said, "The BJP can stoop down to any level to make Arvind Kejriwal bow down. The people of the country including entire Delhi are standing with their hero Arvind Kejriwal today. This dictatorship of yours will not last. And a Kejriwal will emerge from every house." Bharadwaj said the ED carried out searches at Kejriwal's residence.

"No one in CM house has access to phone now. More police force has arrived. All preparations for arrest of Arvind Kejriwal ji are being made," he said in a series of posts on X. Bharadwaj also shared a video of police placing barricades outside the chief minister's residence.

"Media has also been removed from outside Kejriwalji's residence. Why? If you want to arrest, then do it openly," he said in another post on the microblogging platform. AAP's Rajya Sabha MP Raghav Chadha said Kejriwal has the blessings of crores of people.

"Just before the Lok Sabha election, a big conspiracy is on to arrest Arvind Kejriwal ji.... The wonderful work done in Delhi and Punjab is being discussed all over the world. You can arrest Kejriwal's body but not Kejriwal's thinking," he said in a post in Hindi on X. Delhi Assembly Speaker Ram Niwas Goel, who was also present outside Kejriwal's residence, said everyone is in agreement over the fact that the chief minister will run the government from inside the jail. Delhi Mayor Shelly Oberoi echoed similar sentiments as other AAP leaders and said "it is a political conspiracy and the residents of the city love him"

## Kejriwal journey so far

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

From leading the 'India Against Corruption' movement to becoming the chief minister of Delhi thrice in a row, Arvind Kejriwal, arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on Thursday, has had a chequered career as a bureaucrat-turned-activist-turned-politician.

Kejriwal's arrest comes at a time when his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is making a serious foray into electoral politics through a tie-up with its opposition INDIA bloc partner Congress for the Lok Sabha polls in Delhi, Haryana and Gujarat.

The 55-year-old AAP national convener's arrest may have serious repercussions on the poll fortunes of the party since he has been at the centre of its plans and strategy for the Lok Sabha election. In his absence, the party stares at uncertainty as many of its other senior leaders are either in jail or in political obscurity. His trusted aides -- Sanjay Singh and Manish Sisodia -- are in prison in connection with the excise policy case, while another trusted aide Satyendar Jain is in jail in a separate money laundering case. An IIT graduate, Kejriwal first led AAP to form the government in Delhi in 2013 with outside support from the Congress. He faced off with former Delhi chief minister Sheila Dikshit in the New Delhi constituency and defeated her by a margin of 22,000 votes in his poll debut. The Aam Aadmi Party-Congress government lasted only 49 days as Kejriwal resigned since he was unable to pass the Jan Lokpal Bill in the Delhi Assembly. Buoyed by the party's electoral gains in its first-ever elections in Delhi, Kejriwal announced



his decision to face off with the BJP's Narendra Modi in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections from Varanasi, only to face a crushing defeat. The next year, Kejriwal led AAP to victory on 67 seats in the national capital, restricting the Modi wave, to only three seats while the Congress drew a blank. In the run-up to the 2015 Assembly polls, he had constantly apologised for his actions during the 49-day tenure in 2013 and promised not to quit again.

Emerging from the anti-corruption movement of 2011, AAP was founded in the national capital by Kejriwal and his closest associates on Gandhi Jayanti (October 2) the next year. Within a short span of 12 years, Kejriwal has single-handedly led AAP's rise as the third largest national party of the country, following the BJP and the Congress, having its footprints not only in Delhi and Punjab but also in faraway Gujarat and Goa. Kejriwal, who was challenged by politicians during his 'India Against Corruption' days to take a plunge into active politics to taste realpolitik, managed to keep issues like health, education, water and electricity supply as the core of his politics and governance, even as his detractors slammed him for giving up on his promise for Lokpal.

Kejriwal, who rose to prominence as an activist riding on the widespread public anger over big-ticket corruption charges on the then Congress-led UPA regime in 2011, still maintains the streak, slamming politicians over the dilapidated condition of health and education in the country.

In his over a decade-long political journey, Kejriwal has shown a variety of moves, be it joining the INDIA bloc of opposition parties, whose leaders he earlier slammed over corruption issues, or adopting a "soft Hindutva" approach exemplified by his free pilgrimage scheme and the recent chanting of "Jai Sri Ram" slogans in the Delhi Assembly. Once he had demanded to put photos of Ganesha and Lakshmi on currency notes for the economic prosperity of the country. AAP's claim of pursuing corruption-free governance and alternative politics receives a big dent as Kejriwal goes to jail in connection with the liquor scam case.

While defending Sisodia, Singh and Satyendar Jain, Kejriwal used to call corruption "treason" and assert that AAP follows the path shown by Bhagat Singh. The arrest of Kejriwal in a corruption case is indeed a big departure from his earlier persona as an AAP leader holding a 14-day fast in 2013 to put pressure on the then Sheila Dikshit government for action over "inflated" water and electricity bills. Having positioned himself among the top politicians in the country, Kejriwal has come a long way in a relatively short span of his political journey that began as a thin, bespectacled, muffer-clad leader of a fledgling party around 2014-15 that earned him the "mufferman" nickname.

## JNU students hold debate ahead of poll

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid chants of 'Jai Bhim,' 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai,' and 'Lal Salam', candidates vying for president's post in the upcoming JNU students' union elections, delivered passionate speeches on national and international issues, including the violence in Manipur and the electoral bonds. A large crowd of students gathered at the Jhelum Lawn on Wednesday night to witness the highly anticipated presidential debate, setting the tone for the JNUSU polls scheduled for March 22. Retired Supreme Court Justice V Ramasubramanian presided over the debate to ensure fairness and transparency. He was appointed by the Delhi High Court as an observer for this year's JNUSU elections last week. The student union's polls will be held on March 22 and results will be declared on March 24.

A large crowd of students gathered at the Jhelum Lawn, amid the sound of 'dhols' and trumpets, in the campus to witness the highly anticipated presidential debate, setting the tone for the JNUSU polls scheduled for March 22, which has not been held since four years,



delayed due to Covid-19 and not held thereafter.

Women safety on campus, opening new hostels, turning the health centre to a hospital, increasing the stipend amounts and improving opportunities for Bahujan community student -- these were some of the promises made by the candidates at the presidential debate for Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union (JNSU) polls, ahead of the March 22 students union polls. They also raised university-related issues in their appeal to voters.

The United Left Alliance's presidential candidate Dhananjay initiated his speech with 'Lal Salam' and raised concerns about the increased fees due to Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) loans taken by universities.

He also raised the issue of unemployment, commercialisation of education through the entry of foreign universities in India, among other issues while pledging to tackle water, health, and infrastructure related issues on campus and demanded the release of student leaders detained under sedition charges. Meanwhile, the main contender of the left parties, whose candidate Aishe Ghosh won in 2019, RSS-affiliated ABVP's presidential candidate, Umesh Chandra Ajimira, expressed confidence of a victory in the polls. He highlighted the developments under the student outfit's governance and its efforts in advocating for student rights. Congress' student outfit NSUI's candidate Junaid Raza and an Ambedkarite student union BAPSA's Biswajit Minji also delivered impassioned speeches, criticising both the left and right-wing groups and appealed to the students community to vote for them.

Aradhana Yadav, from the Samajwadi Party's student wing Samajwadi Chhatra Sabha and the only female presidential candidate, began the debate speaking on the issues of campus safety, discrimination against women, among others.

## AAP shielding sexual assault accused: BJP

NEW DELHI: BJP Delhi president Virendra Sachdeva and former president MLA Vijender Gupta accused the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Government of protecting sexual assault accused Dr Salim Sheikh, an Assistant Professor at Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Memorial College and Hospital. Gupta said the incident, reported to have occurred on January 31, was brought to the immediate attention of Dr. Ishwar Singh, the

Principal of the College. Despite this, the necessary action has been glaringly delayed. The Chief Secretary recommended the removal of Dr Singh on February 14, forwarding the file to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for his approval. Nevertheless, the file has been pending since then, with no action taken despite several reminders, pointing at how the Delhi government is trying to protect the accused, he said. SR

## Vibrant hues of Holi embraced at Korean Culture Centre



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

While the celebration of the festival of colors 'Holi' is deeply rooted in Indian culture and tradition, it has gained popularity and recognition beyond India's borders. The Korean community is no exception as was evident at the Korean Cultural Centre India (KCCI) here on March 20, where the vibrant hues of India's festival of colors were embraced with much fervor and joy.

Amidst the rhythmic beats of traditional Indian music and the jubilant laughter of participants, Korean students and staff, alongside their Indian counterparts, came together to participate in the festivities. The air was filled with excitement as they applied vivid colors on each other, marking the onset of their first Holi experience for many Korean citizens. They danced to popular Holi songs such as "Rang Barse" and "Balang Pichkari". To add a Korean twist to the celebrations, songs such as "Gangnam Style" by Psy and "That That" by artists Psy and Suga were also played and danced upon. The highlight of the event was the collective effort to delve

deeper into Indian traditions through culinary exploration, with Gujiya, a quintessential Indian sweet associated with Holi festivities seemed to be everybody's choice. Guided by skilled chefs, Umesh Chaudhary and Kishan, participants had hands-on experience to prepare the Indian culinary heritage.

A group of 25 students, all of them enrolled in the Korean language class that is taught at the KCCI, enthusiastically participated in the event. The joyous occasion also saw six Korean language lecturers, Korean and Indian staff members celebrate the festival of colours with a lot of fervour. Once everyone was soaked in the colours of Holi, the staff and the students of KCCI were divided into eight groups. The participants were first explained about the significance of the festival of Holi and were told about the traditional practice of making 'gujiya' during the Holi festivities. This was to give them a chance to understand Indian culture better. After that, the in-house chefs did a live demonstration for the participants and explained the significance of each ingredient that goes into making the 'gujiya'.



# BJP names picks for nine LS seats in Tamil Nadu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Thursday named its candidates for nine Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu, fielding former Telangana Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan from Chennai South and party State unit chief K Annamalai from Coimbatore. The party fielded former DMK leader and sitting MP TR Paarivendhar from Perambalur, Union Minister L Murugan from Nilgiris, Former Union minister Pon Radhakrishnan will contest from Kanniyakumari, former Telangana Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan will contest from Chennai South, K Annamalai from Coimbatore, Vinoj P Selvam from Chennai Central, A C Shanmugam from Vellore, C Narasimhan from Krishnagiri, and Nainar Nagendran from Thoothukudi. Signalling a potential return to electoral politics, Tamilisai Soundararajan, the Governor of Telangana and Lieutenant-Governor (L-G) of Puducherry, tendered her resignation Monday. The BJP is expecting to get few seats on the huge popularity of its state unit president K Annamalai. The former IPS officer had however been resisting the high com-



mand's plan to field him in the Lok Sabha elections by stating that his focus was on the 2026 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. The BJP, sensing an opening, entrusted 36-year-old Annamalai to lead the state unit, springing a surprise as he had joined the party only a year ago. Annamalai, who was known for being a tough police officer, earning the tag "Singham Anna", was a perfect fit for the BJP as it wanted a hands-on leader to make its foray into the Southern state. The BJP drew a blank in the state in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. However, BJP's 'angry young man' had humble beginnings and hails from an agricultural family in Thottampatti of Karur district. Annamalai

belongs to the Gounder community, which has pockets of influence in the Kongu region of the state. Annamalai had done a benchmark survey in Pollachi and Coimbatore constituencies. The survey said that he would get 14% of the votes in Pollachi and 18% in Coimbatore. Radhakrishnan has been a former minister in the Modi government and an ex-MP from Kanniyakumari. He will face a tough challenge in the constituency against Congress candidate Vijay Vasanth and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (AIADMK) Nazerath Pasilian. The BJP also decided to give tickets to AC Shanmugam, the Puthiya Needhi Katchi (PNK) chief, from Vellore and also the sitting MP TR Paarivendhar

from the Perambalur Lok Sabha constituency in Tamil Nadu on its symbol. TR Paarivendhar is the leader of the Indhiya Jananayaga Katchi (IJK). Paarivendhar contested on MK Stalin-led Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) symbol in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls and won the constituency. He will take on AIADMK's ND Chandramohan and DMK candidate Arun Nehru in the constituency. Polling in the state's 39 Lok Sabha seats will be held in the first phase on April 19. The BJP did not win a single seat from Tamil Nadu in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Ever since Annamalai took over as state BJP chief in 2021, he has been working aggressively to bring an electoral turnaround for his party in Tamil Nadu. The former IPS officer often became the talking point of political discourse in the state, though it remains to be seen if his party could get translated into votes, its work on the ground to garner support. Especially, the western region of the state is under sustained focus of the BJP and it has fielded Annamalai from Coimbatore, the hub of the western belt. Presently, Coimbatore is represented by

DMK ally CPI (M). Annamalai will take on DMK's Ganapathi P Rajkumar and AIADMK's Singai G Ramachandran in what is being viewed as a battle of prestige. Union Minister Murugan has all along been focusing on building the party in the Nilgiris and has been working to get support from various sections of people there. For at least a year now, it is an open secret that Murugan would be fielded by the BJP from Nilgiris to take on the incumbent MP, DMK heavyweight, A Raja. Tamilisai Soundararajan Tamilisai, who unsuccessfully contested against Kanimozhi in Thoothukudi in 2019 LS polls, has been named as its candidate in south Chennai, where the BJP has pockets of influence. Mild-mannered, Tamilisai, is popular among people. She had resigned as Governor of Telangana on March 18. Pon Radhakrishnan A former union minister, he was the BJP's lone winning candidate from Tamil Nadu in 2014 as the state overwhelmingly voted for the J Jayalalithaa-led AIADMK, which won 37 of the 39 seats that year. The saffron party had put up a spectacular show that year, winning 282 seats.

# MoU inked to raise awareness on peaceful use of nuclear power



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

National Cadet Corps (NCC) and Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) on Thursday here signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to conduct various awareness programmes throughout the country to change public perceptions on peaceful use of nuclear power and disseminate scientific and authentic information. The MoU was signed between Director General NCC Lt General Gurbirpal Singh and Executive Director (Corporate Communication & Corporate Planning), NPCIL B V S Shekhar.

The NPCIL will be providing resource persons in this initiative for field engagements with the NCC during the camps and various activities by educating the cadets. The MoU also facilitates a unique opportunity to the cadets to visit various facilities of NPCIL across the country, thereby giving a first-hand experience on peaceful use of nuclear energy, its technical and technological aspects. The DG NCC described the MoU as one of the initiatives by the NCC to broaden the horizon of cadets, which will lead to a more aware and responsible youth. He asserted that 1.5 million NCC cadets have the ability to influence the thinking of youth across the world.

# Delegation leaves for Geneva to attend 148th IPU Assembly



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A Parliamentary delegation led by Rajya Sabha chairman Harivansh left for Geneva, Switzerland to attend the 148th Assembly of Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) this weekend. The IPU has a membership of 180 countries. The delegation led by Harivansh, is accompanied by five Rajya Sabha members namely S Niranjan Reddy, Kartikeya Sharma, Dr Ashok Mittal, Dr Prashanta Nanda, Sumitra Balmik along with PC Mody, Secretary General, Rajya Sabha. During the Conference, Harivansh will participate in discussion on different items of agenda concerning Parliamentary Diplomacy: Building Bridges for peace and understanding. Harivansh will also participate in the meeting of BRICS Parliamentary Coordination Forum along with other bilateral meetings on the side line of IPU.

# Centre issues fresh categorisation of LWE hit districts

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Home Ministry has issued a fresh categorisation of the districts affected by Left Wing Extremism (LWE) across 10 States after their number came down by almost half in the past nine years, officials said on Thursday. Sharing the list with the director generals of police concerned, the officials said a total of 38 districts across these 10 States are categorised as LWE-affected with effect from April 1, 2024 compared to 75 in 2015. The categorisation of the LWE-affected districts in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha,

Telangana and West Bengal provide the basis for deployment of resources under the National Policy and Action Plan, approved in 2015, to combat LWE holistically. The Centre and the state governments have been working closely to tackle this problem. A number of interventions are being made, both security and development related, as a result of which there has been a marked improvement in the LWE scenario, the officials said. Chhattisgarh still topped the chart with LWE-affected 15 districts, followed by Odisha (seven districts), Jharkhand (five), Madhya Pradesh (three), Kerala, Maharashtra, Telangana (two each), and West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh (one each), the offi-



Of these, 12 districts - seven in Chhattisgarh, two in Odisha and one each in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra - are categorised as "most affected districts", and nine - four in

Jharkhand, two in Odisha and one each in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana - are categorised as "districts of concern", the officials said. The 'most affected district' section was created in 2015 with 35 districts to ensure focused deployment of resources, the officials said, adding subsequently following a review in 2018, the number of such districts was brought down to 30 and thereafter to 25 in 2021, the officials said. The 'districts of concern' group was added to address the resource gap where the LWE influence is waning. Eight districts were kept in the list for two years from 2021-22 to 2022-23 and all of these districts have been excluded from the list and nine new districts have been included, the officials said. In addition, they said eight districts in Bihar, six in Jharkhand, three in Odisha and one each in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and

Telangana are categorized as "legacy and thrust" districts. The officials said these districts have a legacy of supporting the LWE and therefore, support to states is required for consolidating the position and continued support in respect of security and development measures for some more time. The 'thrust districts' are the districts which are prospective sites of LWE expansion and therefore, continued support would be required for continued capacity building. The officials said the evolving LWE situation necessitates a periodic review of the districts in order to ensure that the focus of anti-LWE efforts remains aligned to the ground realities.

# SSC to reconduct constables recruitment examination on March 30

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Citing technical reasons, the Staff Selection Commission (SSC) has decided to reconduct a re-examination for recruitment of constables in Central Armed Police Forces, Secretariat Security Force and rifleman in Assam Rifles for 16,185 candidates on March 30. The computer-based examination for constable (general duty) in Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs), Secretariat Security Force (SSF) and rifleman (general duty) in Assam Rifles examination, 2024 was conducted by the Commission from February 20 to March 7. "However, due to the venue

specific technical reasons noticed in the review of aforesaid examination, a need has been felt to hold re-examination of candidates of the certain venues/dates/shifts," the SSC said in a notice. It also shared details of venues and candidates who are eligible to appear in the re-examination. The re-examination will be held for as many as 16,185 such candidates from Patna, Gaya, Lucknow, New Delhi, Ghaziabad, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Meerut and Varanasi among others, according to the notice. The Commission has decided to reconduct the re-examination on March 30 for these candidates, it said.

# Caste census cannot be solution to unemployment: Sharma to Kharge

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Former Union Minister and senior Congress leader Anand Sharma has written to party president Mallikarjun Kharge saying a caste census cannot be a panacea nor a solution for unemployment and inequalities in society. Sharma's letter comes at a time the Congress has intensified its demand for a nationwide caste census and promised to carry out the exercise if elected to power in the Lok Sabha elections. In his letter to Kharge, Sharma said the Congress has never engaged in nor endorsed identity politics and the departure from the historic position of the party is a matter of concern for many. He also said that the articulation of party position should be balanced and should



eschew the radical posturing of regional and caste-based organisations. It needs mention that the last census to enumerate caste differentiation was in 1931 during the British colonial regime, he wrote. After independence, a conscious policy decision was made by the government not to canvass caste-related questions in the census, except for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which is collected by the states. "All Census Commissioners,

after independence, have recorded their reasons and disapproval of a National Caste Census citing overlap, duplication, data lacking in accuracy and doubtful authenticity. In my considered view, a caste census cannot be a panacea nor a solution for unemployment and prevailing inequalities. A fundamental departure from time honoured policy on this critical and sensitive subject has major long-term national implications," Sharma said. As a party with inclusive approach, Sharma said, "The Congress should strive to reclaim its role as builder of national consensus and build a harmonious society. The articulation of party position should be balanced and eschew the radical posturing of regional and caste based organisations."

# DGCA finalises summer schedule for flights

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has finalised the summer schedule - which will be in from March 31 to Oct 26, 2024, - of domestic and international flights. As per the summer weekly schedule, Indian airlines will operate a total of 24,275 weekly domestic flights during the summer schedule starting from March 31, a nearly 6 per cent increase compared to the year-ago period and 2.3 percent more than ongoing winter's weekly schedule's 23,732 (which will be ended on March 30). This is despite over 75 IndiGo planes being grounded due to Pratt & Whitney's unending engine issues; GoAir not flying since last may; less operations by SpiceJet and slower than expected supply of new planes from Boeing and Airbus due to global supply chain constraints. Out of these 125 airports,



Azamgarh, Aligarh, Chitrakoot, Gondia, Jalgaon, Moradabad and Pithoragarh are added to the new airports proposed by the scheduled airlines while Ziro and Hindon airports will not be included in the Summer Schedule 2023. According to DGCA, in the summer schedule, Indian carriers will connect 37 countries, including the US, the UK, Uzbekistan, Maldives, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The international flights will be operated

from 27 domestic airports. IndiGo, Air India and Vistara will operate more flights while SpiceJet will reduce departures during the 2024 summer schedule that spans from March 31 to October 26. Domestic carriers will be operating 1,922 weekly international flights, a rise of 5.1 percent compared to the 2023 summer schedule. In comparison to the ongoing winter schedule where the count of international weekly flights is

1,892, the increase is only 1.6 per cent. According to the schedule, IndiGo plans to operate the highest number of departures with 13,050 flights per week followed by Vistara with 2,324 weekly flights. Air India, SpiceJet, Air India Express, IAX Connect, Akasa Air and Alliance Air are going to operate 2,278 flights, 1,657 flights, 1,239 flights, 1,198 flights, 903 flights and 896 flights on a weekly basis, respectively. The combined entity of Air India Express and AIX Connect - will operate 31.6 percent more flights in the upcoming summer schedule. IndiGo plans to operate 0.5 percent fewer flight or around 70 fewer weekly flights, Air India plans to operate 3.8 percent less capacity or 89 fewer weekly flights, SpiceJet plans to operate 22 percent less capacity or 475 fewer weekly flights and Alliance Air plans to operate 2 percent lower capacity or

18 fewer weekly flights, as per DGCA data. In the international segment, Air India will operate 455 weekly flights, an increase of 5.1 per cent compared to the year-ago period. IndiGo will have 13.5 per cent more international flights at 731 while Vistara will increase its weekly overseas departures by 50.8 per cent to 184. Air India Express' departures will rise 20.8 per cent to 371 flights. However, SpiceJet will be reducing its international flights by 12.6 per cent to 174. In the last summer schedule, Go First was to operate 120 weekly overseas flights. Alliance Air will operate 7 weekly international departures in the latest summer schedule compared to 4 in the year-ago period. Air India, Air India Express and Vistara are part of the Tata Group, and Vistara is in the process of getting merged with Air India.

# Helmets, airbags go a long way in preventing brain injury: Doctors

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Simple interventions like helmet usage, seatbelt compliance, installing good quality airbags in vehicles, protective balcony features to safeguard kids from falling can go a long way in cutting down traumatic brain injuries which at present is taking a fatal toll on 2 lakh lives while requiring nearly 10 lakh people to undergo rehabilitation services in India, country's top neurosurgeons said. "Wearing helmets while riding or pillion riding, using seat belts in front and rear seats and high quality airbags in vehicles can help the driver and occupants tremendously," Dr Daljit Singh, Neurosurgeon, Head of Department at the Super Specialty hospital, GB Pant Hospital, Delhi on the occasion of the World Head Injury Awareness Day on March 20, 2024.



He stressed that despite cautious driving, the unpredictable nature of speeding vehicles poses a constant threat, making protective gear essential for all road users. Dr Krish Sridhar, Professor Neurosurgery, Kauvery Hospital, Radial Road, Chennai, echoed similar concerns and suggestions while

driving even as Dr Deepak Gupta, neurosurgeon from AIIMS, Delhi drew attention to the alarming rate of children sustaining brain injury from balcony falls, underscoring the urgency of implementing protective measures in residential areas. A recent report by AIIMS Trauma Centre, Delhi too has

revealed that 74 kids were brought to the hospital between October 2022 and April 2023 who had fallen from a balcony and suffered severe brain injury. Falls from balconies constituted 60% of all cases of children falling from a height, requiring hospital attention. Dr Roopesh Kumar, a consultant neurosurgeon called upon women riding two-wheelers as well as pillion riders to strictly ensure wearing helmets for their safety. The experts stated that head injuries disproportionately affect the economically deprived, younger population (ages 20-45 years), and carry a heavy economic burden due to lost productive days. A qualitative study performed in 2021 identified several factors that contributed to the large burden of road traffic related TBI—namely, the lack of public awareness about road safety, limited helmet use,

motorway infrastructure, minimal law enforcement, unavailability of pre-hospital care, and inadequate neurosurgical capacity in hospitals. These incidents can be avoided if people adopt simple preventive strategies like wearing seatbelts and helmets respectively while using a car or two wheelers, said Dr Manjul Tripathi, neurosurgeon from PGIMER, Chandigarh. Adding to the discussion, Dr. Manjul Tripathi, a prominent neurosurgeon from PGIMER, Chandigarh, highlighted the multifaceted nature of the problem, citing factors such as limited public awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and enforcement of safety regulations. He also stressed that the adoption of simple preventive measures, such as seatbelt and helmet usage, could substantially reduce the incidence of road traffic-related TBIs and their associated economic burdens.

# Detrimental health benefits of smoking far outweigh any perceived benefits: Study

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Smoking has long been associated with weight management due to its appetite-suppressing effects. However, the detrimental health consequences of smoking far outweigh any perceived benefits, a recent research has suggested, highlighting that smoking, while potentially suppressing appetite, can lead to the accumulation of unhealthy abdominal fat, particularly visceral fat, which is linked to serious health risks such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and dementia. Visceral fat is hard to see; you can have a flat stomach and still have unhealthy amounts of it, raising your risk of serious illness, said the researchers at the NNF Center for Basic Metabolic Research, University of Copenhagen as they used a

form of statistical analysis called Mendelian randomization (MR) to determine whether smoking causes an increase in abdominal fat. MR combines the results from different genetic studies to look for causal relationships between an exposure (in this case, smoking) and outcome (increased abdominal fat). This new study combined multiple genetic results from European ancestry studies of smoking exposures and measures of body fat distribution (e.g., waist-hip ratio and waist and hip circumferences). The two underlying European ancestry studies were large in scale: the smoking study looked at 1.2 million people who started smoking and over 450,000 lifetime smokers, and the body fat distribution study included over 600,000 people. First, the researchers used previous genetic studies to identify

which genes are linked to smoking habits and body fat distribution. Second, they used this genetic information to determine whether people with genes associated with smoking tend to have different body fat distributions. Finally, they accounted for other influences, such as alcohol consumption or socioeconomic background, to ensure that any connections they found between smoking and body fat distribution were truly due to smoking itself and not other factors. Lead author Dr. Germán D. Carrasquilla explained: "This study found that starting to smoke and smoking over a lifetime might cause an increase in belly fat, as seen by measurements of waist-to-hip ratio. In a further analysis, we also found that the type of fat that increases is more likely the visceral fat, rather than the fat just under the skin."



# AIADMK names nominees for 32 LS seats

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu's main opposition AIADMK on Thursday released its final list of 16 candidates for the Lok Sabha polls and also named its candidate for the lone Puducherry Parliamentary constituency. The AIADMK has completed the exercise of naming nominees and allotting seats to allies, and party chief Edappadi K Palaniswami is all set to launch his election campaign from Tiruchirappalli on March 24. In total, the AIADMK will contest in 32 segments and it has allotted seven constituencies to allies, the DMDK, Puthiya Tamizhagam and SDPI. Tamil Nadu has 39 Lok Sabha constituencies. For the Tirunelveli LS seat, Palaniswami announced Simla Muthuchozhan who was formerly with the DMK. She had unsuccessfully contested in 2016 against late AIADMK matriarch J Jayalalithaa from the RK Nagar Assembly constituency. Daughter-in-law of former DMK leader SP Sarguna Pandian, Muthuchozhan joined the AIADMK recently. An advocate, she is also the only woman candidate announced by the AIADMK



for the Lok Sabha polls. For the Vilavancode Assembly bypoll, the main opposition party has named a woman candidate. The ruling DMK, out of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, it is contesting, has given tickets to three women candidates. Kanimozhi (Thoothukudi), Tamizhachi Thangapandian (South Chennai) and Rani Sri Kumar (Tenkasi-Reserved). Palaniswami named G Premkumar, a medical doctor, as his party candidate

for Sriperumbudur and S Pasupathi, also a doctor for the Vellore seat. The ruling DMK has named veteran leader T R Baalu and Kathir Anand, son of top leader and Water Resources Minister Duraimurugan for Sriperumbudur and Vellore constituencies respectively. The AIADMK top leader named G Tamizhvendan and U Rani for Puducherry Lok Sabha seat and Vilavancode Assembly constituency respectively.

Bypoll to the Vilavancode segment in Kanniyakuram district will be held on April 19 alongside the Lok Sabha polls. The vacancy was caused due to the resignation of Vijayadharani, who joined the BJP after quitting her MLA post. Besides Sriperumbudur and Vellore, Palaniswami announced candidates for the Lok Sabha segments of Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai, Kallakurichi, Tirupur, Nilgiris (SC), Coimbatore, Pollachi, Tiruchirappalli, Perambalur, Mayiladuthurai, Sivaganga, Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli and Kanniyakuram. In the first list released on March 20, Palaniswami named nominees for 16 constituencies. It includes former MP Jayawardhan (Chennai south) and ex-MLA, Dr P Saravanan (Madurai). Tiruvallur (SC), Central Chennai, Cuddalore, Thanjavur and Virudhunagar are the five seats earmarked for the DMDK. Two other allies, the Puthiya Tamizhagam (Tenkasi) and SDPI (Dindigul) will fight one seat each. The All India Forward Bloc also supports the AIADMK alliance. Elections to 39 Lok Sabha seats in the state will be held on April 19.

# ISIS India head arrested: Assam Police



PTI ■ GUWAHATI

It was 15 days of meticulous analysis of intelligence inputs, scouting for local links, foolproof planning, raising a solid team and no-error execution that led to the arrest of ISIS India head from Assam, a senior police officer said on Thursday. The ISIS India head Haris Farooqi alias Harish Ajmal Farukhi and his associate Anurag Singh alias Rehan were arrested in Assam's Dhubri district on Wednesday after they had crossed over from Bangladesh. Addressing a press conference here, Assam Police's Special Task Force (STF) Inspector General Parthasarathi Mahanta, who led the entire operation, said the two dreaded ISIS cadres have already been handed over to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for further legal action. "We got information from a central agency around 15 days back that there could be possible movement of top-rung ISIS leaders in certain parts of Dhubri. The input was credible and so the STF was involved," he added. The STF then started working on probable areas of movement, trying to find local links if any and prepared a plan accordingly to arrest them, Mahanta said. "By March 18, we narrowed down our

focus and we got very specific information on March 19 on their likely movement. We immediately rushed to Dhubri's Dharmasala. We saw two men walking on the road at around 4 am on March 20 looking for transportation to go to their destination," he added. The police already had the pictures of ISIS cadres and two of them matched with the men walking on the road, the IGP said. "We arrested them and immediately brought them to Guwahati. We handed them over to the NIA last night itself. The NIA will take them to Delhi and other places, where scores of cases are registered against the duo," he added. Assam DGP G P Singh termed the arrest as an outcome of the inter-agency synergy in the national effort to counter violent terrorism in the country. "Compliments to the team of officers involved in the operation," he said in a post on X. Without sharing details, Mahanta said interrogation of the two fundamental extremists are going on to find out their network, local contacts, funding source and information on explosives. "There are two parts of the investigation. If anything is found related to Assam, it will be taken care of by us. For the rest of India developments, the NIA will look into it.

"Assam has always been vulnerable and we have been alert constantly. That is the reason we could arrest them immediately when they entered India from a neighbouring country," Mahanta said. Another senior official, who did not wish to be named, said both the ISIS cadres are wanted in the NIA case related to the Delhi module, covering

incidents in Delhi, Mumbai and Lucknow. "The last date of the stipulated period of filing the charge sheet in the Delhi module case is tomorrow and if they were not found, the NIA would have to declare them absconding and file the charge sheet accordingly. So, it is a big success for the security agencies," he added.

**MEDICAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT**  
**NEW DELHI MUNICIPAL COUNCIL**  
 CHARAK PALIKA HOSPITAL

**EMPLOYMENT NOTICE**

Applications are invited for filling up the vacant posts of **JUNIOR RESIDENTS (JR)** from **22.03.2024** to **10.04.2024** in NDMC at email address **cphresidents@gmail.com**.

**1. JUNIOR RESIDENT (DENTAL) NO. OF POSTS - 04**  
**2. JUNIOR RESIDENT (MEDICAL) NO. OF POSTS - 08**

Note: All the details are available on the NDMC web portal i.e. **www.ndmc.gov.in**

Director (Medical Services)

**ICICI Bank** Branch Office: ICICI Bank Ltd, 3rd Floor, Plot No- 23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005

**PUBLIC NOTICE: Builder Cancellation**

This is to bring to your notice that **MAMTA BRAHMA / TAPAN JOSHI** (borrower/s) has availed Home loan facility vide facility agreement number **LBDEL0000246144** located at **COMMERCIAL SPACE NO. G-27, GROUND FLOOR, LIVIN' LIFE SERVICE SUITES, COMMERCIAL PLOT NO. 1, SECTOR 5, VASUNDHARA PLAZA, VASUNDHARA, GHAZIABAD, UP**. The borrower/s has failed to pay the contractual amount to the builder as per the terms and conditions of the agreement. The Bank had informed the same to the borrower through letter dated **MARCH 07, 2024**, informing that **MASS CON (INDIA) PVT. LTD.** has cancelled the allotment of the above mentioned property. You are therefore requested to resolve this matter with the builder within 7 days from the date of this publication. Please take further notice that post cancellation of the allotment of the said property ICICI Bank shall not be bound and/or responsible for any other allotment done by the builder.

Dated: **March 22, 2024** For ICICI Bank Limited  
 Place: **Delhi/NCR** Sd-

**ICICI Bank** Branch Office: ICICI Bank Ltd, 3rd Floor, Plot No- 23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005

**PUBLIC NOTICE: Builder Cancellation**

This is to bring to your notice that **PAPPU KUMAR SINGH / PINKY SINGH** (borrower/s) has availed Home loan facility vide facility agreement number **LBDEL0000264837** located at **COMMERCIAL SPACE NO.G 123, GROUND FLOOR, LIVIN' LIFE SERVICE SUITES SITUATED AT COMMERCIAL PLOT NO. 1, SECTOR 5, VASUNDHARA, GHAZIABAD, UP**. The borrower/s has failed to pay the contractual amount to the builder as per the terms and conditions of the agreement. The Bank had informed the same to the borrower through letter dated **MARCH 07, 2024**, informing that **MASS CON (INDIA) PVT. LTD.** has cancelled the allotment of the above mentioned property. You are therefore requested to resolve this matter with the builder within 7 days from the date of this publication. Please take further notice that post cancellation of the allotment of the said property ICICI Bank shall not be bound and/or responsible for any other allotment done by the builder.

Dated: **March 22, 2024** For ICICI Bank Limited  
 Place: **Delhi/NCR** Sd-

**SRF LIMITED**  
 Regd. Office: The Galleria, DLF Mayur Vihar, Unit No. 236 & 237, 2nd Floor, Mayur Vihar Phase, Noida Link Road, Mayur Vihar Phase I Extn, Delhi-110091  
 Corporate Office: Block-C, Sector 45, Gurugram, Haryana-122 003  
 Tel. No (Regd office) : (+91-11) 49482870; Fax : (+91-11) 49482900  
 E-mail: cs@srf.com, Website: www.srf.com; CIN: L18101DL1970PLC005197

**NOTICE**

Notice is hereby given that Share Certificates pertaining to shares of the Company detailed below have been reported lost and request(s) for issue of duplicate Certificates in lieu thereof have been received by the Company :-

Sl. No.	Folio No.	Name of the Share Holder / Legal Heir (Claimant)	Cert.No.	Dist.No.	Lost Shares
1	R 0000292	RAM SHARAN SHARMA (deceased shareholder)	2666	1203641-80	40
		Ashok Sharma(Claimant)	74533	3534984-5000	17
			139631	5694046-73	28
			1135516	295934774-5613	840
2	K 0003735	KRISHNAPAL SINGH (deceased shareholder)	1124401	307923126-765	640
		ATUL MATHUR (Claimant)			
			10961	1604826-50	25
			15507	1739551-75	25
3	A 0003764	AMRITLAL BAJAJ (deceased shareholder)	10961	1604826-50	25
		SAPNA BAJAJ (Claimant)	15507	1739551-75	25
			21878	1917001-25	25
			32852	2233076-100	25
			36586	2338776-800	25
			36592	2338926-50	25
			44330	2549901-25	25
			49806	2697976-8000	25
			96267	4112455-91	37
			149792	5944360-409	50
			975143	18545245-319	75
			1135560	295942322-6329	4008
4	SRF0142983	SOHAN SINGH JOSHI (deceased shareholder)	575483	26322001-50	50
		ANJALI SHARMA (Claimant)	1133531	295540218-617	400
			90165426	12684055-104	50
5	SRF0039197	KRISHNA DEVI RUNGTA (deceased shareholder)	1130784	310326634-7333	700
		PRAKASH KUMAR RUNGTA (Claimant)			
			51177	2735051-75	25
			85069	3716462-69	8
			153261	6049569-84	16
6	V 0002393	VIJAY CHANDRA VERMA (deceased shareholder)	51177	2735051-75	25
		NIDHI VERMA (Claimant)	85069	3716462-69	8
			153261	6049569-84	16
			1133778	295590646-941	296
			90179659	14349115-39	25
			90179659	14349115-39	25
7	SRF0027719	LAL CHAND MALHOTRA (deceased shareholder)	363144-47	16942328-45	18
		SUDHA VADHERA (Claimant)	512144-47	24962120-37	18
			1134226	295683654-917	264
			90060465	8754106-25	20
			90187454	14844850-59	10
8	L 0001280	LAL CHAND MALHOTRA (deceased shareholder)	78462	3596033-43	11
		SUDHA VADHERA(Claimant)	130172	5434308-12	5
			321704-06	16143129-51	23
			470704-06	24162921-43	23
			1135679	295973718-5285	1568
			90026068-71	7074274-433	160
9	SRF0027724	L C MALHOTRA (deceased shareholder)	363152-55	16942364-81	18
		SUDHA VADHERA (Claimant)	512152-55	24962156-73	18
			1136522	296136642-905	264
			90060470	8754226-45	20
			90187456	14844870-79	10
			90162875-77	12576520-629	110
10	SRF0042486	JUTHIKA SETT (deceased shareholder)	380798-99	17230278-77	100
		SONJOY SETT (deceased shareholder)	529798-99	25250070-169	100
		SWAPAN SETT (Claimant)	1138013	296447722-9221	1500
			90088903-05	9627826-925	100
			90197671-72	15222140-214	75
11	SRF0129566	JAYESH KHANDHAR	609434-36	42771642-82	41
		ARIEZ KHARAS	1137908	296429730-893	164
12	S 0003018	SAVITA KAPUR SETHI	144477	5808881-96	16
			976898	18600546-78	33
			1136571	296147510-705	196

Public is hereby cautioned against dealing with the aforesaid share certificates.

for SRF LIMITED  
 Sd/-  
**RAJAT LAKHANPAL**  
 Sr. VP (Corporate Compliance)  
 & Company Secretary

Place: Gurugram  
 Date: 21-03-2024

**LOST & FOUND**  
 Be it known to all that I, **Apratim Barua, S/o Mr. Hemanga Kumar Barua, R/o 5, Gresham Road, Edgware, HA8 6NU England** have lost Original 'Allotment Letter dated 21/03/1997', 'Fourth copy of 4 Bank Challans of SBI Bank', 'R.K Puckam w.r.t my DDA Flat No. 685, Pocket 3, Sector 19, Dwarka, South West Delhi, New Delhi 110075. Use of these documents by anyone would be illegal.

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
 Notice is hereby given on behalf of Mrs. Babita Devi W/o. Mr. Ganendra Pal Singh who is purchasing the Land area measuring 89 sq. Yds. situated at Kharsa no 35/13, Plot no. 13, Waka Majja-Gauchi Tehsil-Balajigudi District-Faridkot, from Mrs. Seema Madan W/o. Mr. Lehit Madan, who is owner on the aforesaid property vide Sale Deed dated 24.03.2017, (vide Document No.316) at concerned Sub-Registrar, and intend to mortgage against the financial assistance from India Shelter Finance Corporation Limited. The original(s) Sale Deed dated 29.12.1983 (vide Doc. No.1081782) Sale Deed dated 17.01.2000 (vide Doc. No.5297) are Lost/Misplaced/Not available. To comply the requirements of BANK/NFC, we give this public notice that if any Person having any type of claim in right/interest/creating mortgage over the said property, may inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 07 days from today, failing which it shall be presumed that the said property is free from all type of Encumbrances, lien etc.

Lucem Legal LLP  
 Plot No.136, (Basement) Uday Park,  
 New Delhi-110049, Contact # 011-40846316

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
 Notice is hereby given to the general public that Mr. Bakaran Singh S/o. Late Mr. Gurtej Singh is the owner of A BUILT UP PROPERTY AREA MEASURING 150 SQ YARDS OUT OF KHARSA NO. 142 BEARING PROPERTY NO. C-11442 SITUATED IN THE AREA OF VILLAGE KHARSA, IN THE ABADI OF GALT NO. 29, KHARSA KHAS, DELHI, vide Notarized Family General Power of Attorney AND Gift Deed & Will Deed Dated 24.05.2022 and same to be sold to Mr. Ravi S/o. Mr. Wajid Mohammad and same mortgage the said property with SMFG INDIA HOME FINANCE COMPANY LTD. if anybody has any charge/interest in the said property or any kind of dispute kindly inform the undersigned in writing on the below mentioned address within 07 days of the present. Mrs. Prasen Lata, Advocate SG Associates (Law Firm) FF 18, Lotus Pad Plaza Vastha Khad, Indraprastha, New Delhi-110028, Contact # 911177294, 83200837

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
 Notice is hereby given to the General Public that Mrs. Ishwari Kaur W/o. Mr. Gurnam Singh is the owner of FRONT SIDE THIRD FLOOR WITH ROOF RIGHTS BUILT UP PROPERTY NO. C-21, AREA MEASURING 150 SQ YARDS OUT OF KHARSA NO. 133.33 SQ. YDS. OUT OF KHARSA NO. 1623 SITUATED IN THE AREA OF VILLAGE NILOTHI COLONY, KNOWN AS RAUSET VIHAR, NEW DELHI, vide notarized GPA & ATS dated 26.08.2011 executed by S. Surjeet Singh S/o. S. Atar Singh and same to be sold to intending Borrower /Mr. Aneel Singh & Mrs. Naninder Singh and same mortgage the said property with SMFG INDIA HOME FINANCE COMPANY LTD. if anybody has any charge/interest in the said property or any kind of dispute kindly inform the undersigned in writing on the below mentioned address within 07 days of the present. Mrs. Prasen Lata, Advocate SG Associates (Law Firm) FF 18, Lotus Pad Plaza Vastha Khad, Indraprastha, New Delhi-110028, Contact # 911177294, 83200837

**LOST & FOUND**  
 I, Digambar Prasad Jain son of Shri Sultan Singh Resident of Flat No. 2004, Imperial Court, Tower-3, Jaypee Wishtown, Sector-128, Noida, Gautam Buddha Nagar, UP-201304, do hereby solemnly affirm and declare that I am the Owner of Property No. 151, Situated in the layout plan of the Rashtriya Janata cooperative house building society Ltd., known as Savita Vihar, Delhi-110092. I, have been lost/misplaced my original Two Agreements to Sell dated 03.01.1986 & 04.06.1984 alongwith other documents of Property No. 151, Savita Vihar, Delhi-110092. That I have also filed a complaint in respect of lost/misplaced of above said documents vide SO No. 430/03.2024 and I.R. No. 1562657/2024 dated 19.03.2024.

Digambar Prasad Jain

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
 It is informed to the Public at large that The Jamia Co-op. Bank Ltd., Zakir Nagar Branch, New Delhi, is desirous of sanctioning Housing Loan Facility in favour of Mr. Sayed Akram Ali S/o Mr. Sayed Amjad Ali, for purchasing Flat No. 119A, DDA Flats, Pocket-A, Sukhdev Vihar, New Delhi, measuring 66.75 sq. mts. from Smt. Sangeeta W/o. Sh. Raghubir Singh Malharu, (presently the owner), R/o Flat No. 119A, DDA Flats, Pocket-A, Sukhdev Vihar, New Delhi. If anyone has any objection or claim the titles /rights over the said property, please contact the undersigned, within 5 (five) days of this Public Notice. For Jamia Co-Operative Bank Ltd. Branch Manager

THE BRANCH HEAD  
**THE JAMIA CO-OP. BANK LTD.,**  
 Zakir Nagar Branch, New Delhi,  
 Tel.: 26981135

**LOST & FOUND**  
 It is a Public notice that I, undersigned is intend to purchase a Property No.151, Measuring Area 188.87. Sq.Yds. Savita Vihar, Delhi-110092, from Shri Digambar Prasad Jain S/o Sultan Singh R/o Flat No.2004, Imperial Court, Tower-3, Jaypee Wishtown Sector-128, Noida, he represent himself as the absolute owner of the property by Virtue of Conveyance Deed. he informed us that previous some chain of documents i.e. Agreements to Sell dated 03.01.1986, and 04.06.1984 alongwith other transfer documents has been lost/misplaced somewhere and not traceable by the best efforts of them. (Lost Report No.1562657/2024, Dated 19.03.2024). If any person have any objection/Claim for any type such as any Loan, Mortgage, Surety, Security etc. over the said property regarding the above said original documents, then contact to the undersigned within 15 days of this Notice. Otherwise, it will be presumed that the said property is free from all encumbrances, claim, charges against lien, etc. and I, will be free to purchase the said property from the above named seller. Contact: Mr. Manoj Kumar Jain, 11/1760-A, B.F. Sd, Main Muskan Road, Panchsheel Garden, Balbir Nagar, Delhi-110032.

Manoj Kumar Jain  
 9625247886

**SYMBOLIC POSSESSION NOTICE**

**ICICI Bank** Branch Office: ICICI Bank Ltd, 3rd Floor, Plot No- 23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005

Whereas The undersigned being the Authorized Officer of ICICI Bank Limited under the Securitisation, Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of the powers conferred under section 13 (12) read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) rules 2002, issued demand notices upon the borrowers mentioned below, to repay the amount mentioned in the notice within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice. As the borrower failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken Symbolic possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him/ her under Section 13(4) of the said Act read with Rule 8 of the said rules on the below-mentioned dates. The borrower in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of ICICI Bank Limited.

Sr. No.	Name of the Borrower/ Loan Account Number	Description of Property/ Date of Symbolic Possession	Date of Demand Notice/ Amount in Demand Notice (Rs.)	Name of Branch
1.	Jatinder Kumar/ Shanti Lal Dogra/ LBLUD00005736156/ LBLUD00005558391	House Comprised In Kharsa No. 21/11/7, Khata No. 58/65, As Per Jamabandi Year 1998-1999, Situated At Bhambian Kalan, Hadbasat No. 181, Tehsil & District Ludhiana, Punjab/ March 19, 2024	September 29, 2023 11,44,586/-	Ludhiana/ Noida

The above-mentioned borrowers(s) guarantors(s) are hereby given a 30 day notice to repay the amount, else the mortgaged properties will be sold on the expiry of 30 days from the date of publication of this Notice, as per the provisions under the Rules 8 and 9 of Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules 2002.

Date: **March 22, 2024**  
 Place: **Noida**

Authorized Officer  
**ICICI Bank Limited**

**ICICI Bank** Branch Office: ICICI Bank Limited, 3rd Floor Shal Tower, Plot No.23, New Rohtak Road, Karol bagh Delhi- 110005

**PUBLIC NOTICE - TENDER CUM E-AUCTION FOR SALE OF SECURED ASSET**

[See proviso to rule 8(6)]  
**Notice for sale of immovable assets**

E-Auction Sale Notice for Sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8 (6) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002. Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower(s) and Guarantor(s) that the below described immovable property mortgaged/charged to the Secured Creditor, the **Physical possession** of which has been taken by the Authorised Officer of ICICI Bank Ltd. will be sold on "As is where is", "As is what is", and "Whatever there is" as per the brief particulars given hereunder;

Sr. No.	Name of Borrower(s)/ Co-Borrowers/ Guarantors/ Loan Account No.	Details of the Secured asset(s) with known encumbrances, if any	Amount Outstanding	Reserve Price/ Earnest Money Deposit	Date and Time of Property Inspection	Date & Time of E-Auction
(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)
1.	Suman Singhal (Borrower), Mohit Singhal (Co Applicant) Lan No. LBGHZ00002865036 and LBGHZ00002891317	Plot No. III-F-1/21, Ground Floor (without roof rights) Nehru Nagar Ghaziabad. (Admeasuring an area of 102.17 Sq Mt.	Rs. 37,87,902/- as on March 13, 2024	Rs. 65,000/- From 03:00 PM to 05:00 PM	April 02, 2024 From 11:00 AM Onwards	April 18, 2024, From 11:00 AM Onwards

The online auction will take place on the website of e-auction agency **M/s NexXen Solutions Private Limited (URL Link- <https://disposalhub.com>)**. The Mortgagors/ Guarantors/ notice are given a last chance to pay the total dues with further interest till **April 17, 2024** before **05:00 PM** else this secured asset will be sold as per schedule. The Prospective Bidder(s) must submit the Earnest Money Deposit (EMD) Demand Draft (DD) (Refer Column E) at **ICICI Bank Limited, 3rd Floor Shal Tower, Plot No.23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh Delhi- 110005** on or before **April 17, 2024** before **05:00 PM** and thereafter they need to submit their offer through the above mentioned website only on or before **April 17, 2024** before **05:00 PM** along with scan image of Bank acknowledged DD towards proof of payment of EMD. Kindly note, in case prospective bidder(s) are unable to submit their offer through the website then signed copy of tender documents may be submitted at **ICICI Bank Limited, 3rd Floor Shal Tower, Plot No.23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh Delhi- 110005** on or before **April 17, 2024** before **05:00 PM**. Earnest Money Deposit DD/PO should be from a Nationalised/Scheduled Bank in favour of "ICICI Bank Limited" payable at "Delhi". For any further clarifications with regards to inspection, terms and conditions of the auction or submission of tenders, kindly contact **ICICI Bank Limited on 9828935040, 8584874809**. Please note that Marketing agencies 1. **NexXen Solution Private Limited 2. Augeo Asset Management Pvt. Ltd. 3. Hecta Proptech Pvt. Ltd.** have also been engaged for facilitating the sale of this property. The Authorised Officer reserves the right to reject any or all the bids without furnishing any further reasons. For detailed terms and conditions of the sale, please visit **www.icicibank.com/n4p4s**

Date: **March 22, 2024**  
 Place: **Ghaziabad**

Authorized Officer  
**ICICI Bank Limited**

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

**Countrywide Promoters Private Limited**  
 Registered Office : OT-14, Third Floor, Next Door, Parklands, Sector -76, Faridabad, Haryana-121004  
 Phone No.: 0120-4492-650 website: [www.bptp.com](http://www.bptp.com)

This Public Notice is being issued in compliance with Memo No. LC-2330-E/JE(AK)-2024/9962 dated 16.03.2024 issued by Director Town & Country Planning, Haryana Chandigarh ("DTCP").

Whereas, Countrywide Promoters Private Limited and others are in the process of developing the residential plotted colonies on the land measuring 133.70525 acres situated in Sector 102 and 102A, Gurugram Haryana by the name of "Amstoria", "102 Eden Estate" and "102 Eden Estate-II" ("Colonies") as per the terms of license nos. 58 of 2010 dated 03.08.2010, 45 of 2011 dated 17.05.2011 and 41 of 2021 dated 23.07.2021 granted by DTCP along with consolidated Layout Plan. Now, DTCP has issued the Letter of Intent (LOI) vide its memo no. LC-2330-E/JE(AK)-2024/9962 dated 16.03.2024 for the grant of licence for setting up of residential plotted colony over an additional area measuring 9.903 acres situated in Sector-102, Gurugram, Haryana in addition to aforesaid licenses, whereby the existing earlier approved layout plan of the colony stands revised.

And whereas, DTCP has also issued the provisional Layout Plan collectively for 143.60825 acres after merging the above additional areas (i.e. 9.903 acres + 133.70525 acres). The planned development of 0.43 acres has been changed and the undetermined usage of 0.45 acres has been converted into the planned development area. There is no change in the existing green area of the Colonies and an additional green area of 0.604 acre is being provided.

And whereas, several individuals/allottees have made bookings/entered into purchase agreements for allotment of plots/floors/shops/properties in the aforesaid residential colonies.

And whereas, the DT





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## The peacemaker

Modi talks to Putin and Zelensky, advocates diplomacy to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Steadily, especially after it assumed the G20 presidency, India has emerged as an important global player whose voice is heard and opinion heeded. Building upon it and advocating a diplomatic solution, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has initiated a peace process to end the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Amid growing global concern over the crisis, Modi's diplomatic efforts have taken the centre stage as he engages in a dialogue with Russian supremo Vladimir Putin and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky. In a series of high-level discussions, Modi has emphasised the urgency of resolving the conflict through peaceful means, underscoring the importance of dialogue and negotiations in preventing further bloodshed and instability in the region. His intervention comes at a critical juncture when the world is grappling with the implications of one of the most significant geopolitical crises in recent history. Speaking to President Putin, Modi reiterated India's stance on the crisis, emphasising the need for de-escalation and dialogue to achieve a peaceful resolution. Similarly, in his conversation with President Zelensky, Modi reaffirmed India's commitment to upholding the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference into the affairs of other nations. Modi emphasised the importance of respecting international law and the UN Charter in resolving the crisis, underscoring the need for a negotiated settlement that safeguards the interests of all parties involved.



Modi's diplomatic outreach reflects India's longstanding commitment to promoting peace and stability in the global arena. As a key player in international affairs, India has consistently advocated for multilateralism and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. Modi's proactive engagement demonstrates India's willingness to play a constructive role in addressing complex geopolitical challenges and fostering dialogue between the dissenting parties. India, known for its non-aligned foreign policy, has maintained a balanced approach, urging the parties involved to exercise restraint and prioritise diplomatic solutions over military confrontation. Modi's diplomatic overtures come against the backdrop of mounting international pressure on Russia to cease military operations in Ukraine and engage in meaningful dialogue with the latter. With the humanitarian toll of the conflict mounting and the spectre of a broader regional crisis looming, the need for diplomatic solutions has never been more pressing. Amid the complexities of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Modi's diplomatic initiative serves as a timely reminder of the indispensable role of diplomacy in averting catastrophic outcomes and fostering peace and stability. His engagement with Presidents Putin and Zelensky underscores India's proactive approach to addressing global challenges and reaffirms its commitment to fostering peace globally. By advocating for diplomacy to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Modi has exemplified India's role as a responsible global actor dedicated to promoting peace and security across countries.

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### PICTALK



Parsi community members visit a fire temple on the occasion of 'Navroz', the Parsi New Year, in Mumbai

# False narrative of the North-South divide

The recent narrative of India not being one entity is based on historical distortions, designed to undermine India's unity by sowing seeds of division



ASHWANI MAHAJAN

From north to south, from east to west India is one. All the people living in this sub-continent consider themselves to be Indians with diverse religions, castes, languages, regions, dress and food. Vishnu Purana states: 'Uttaram Yat Samudrasya Himadreshchaiva Dakshinam. Varsham Tad Bharatam Naam Bharati Yatra Santatih.' Its meaning is that the land situated north of the sea and south of the Himalayas is called the land of Bharat and the people living in this sacred land of India are called Bhartiya.

Different regions in India were indeed ruled by different rulers at different times. However, an unbreakable bond remained between all the people living throughout India. Our Jyotirlingas, pilgrimages and Dharmas, situated in different parts of the country are witness to the fact that all the Indians have been considering the entire nation as their Rashtira, and linguistic, regional, food and other diversities have never been any hindrance to the same.

During the foreign rule, such literature was published by the British government and false narratives were deliberately created by way of history writing, which poisoned the minds of the people of South India against the people of North India. Hostility towards the Hindi language was promoted in the southern states, more violently in Tamil Nadu. It is said that this false story was started by a German orientalist and philologist. Today there is abundant scientific evidence that proves that the Aryan invasion theory is a complete myth. Recently, a US magazine named *The Economist* has tried to create new definitions of division between North and South. The magazine tries to make a case that South Indian states are class apart, as just 20 per cent of India's population lives in five southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana, but these states receive 35 per cent of the total foreign investment coming into the country. These states have developed more than other parts of the country and whereas in 1993 these states generated 24 per



cent of the country's GDP, it has now increased to 31 per cent. 46 per cent of tech unicorns are from South India and 46 per cent of India's electronics exports come from five southern states. Not only this, 66 per cent of IT services exports come from southern states, the magazine writes. The magazine links the issue to politics and says that the ruling Bharatiya Janata party lacks a strong base in the southern states. The magazine also argues that therefore it can be said that the present government does not have the mandate of the entire country. It is noteworthy that in the country where *The Economist* magazine is published, no Prime Minister has ever received a similar mandate from the entire country in the elections. Does that mean that the Prime Minister lacks the mandate of the entire country? In the history of democracy across the world, there are very few examples of a government being formed after receiving majority votes from all regions equally. Similarly, some political leaders from south India are also promoting their separatist politics by putting forward similar arguments. We know that the development of many states was hampered due to some corrupt and incompetent leaders in the country, which included Southern states.



INDIA IS LIKE A FAMILY AND ALL THE STATES ARE ITS MEMBERS. NO ONE IS BIG OR SMALL IN THE FAMILY; THERE IS NO CONSIDERATION OF RICH OR POOR AND EVERYONE WORKS TOGETHER AND MAKES OUR INTEGRAL FAMILY, WHICH IS BHARAT PROSPEROUS

As far as development is concerned, among the ten states and union territories with the highest per capita income in the country, only two are from the South and that too at fifth and sixth position, and that too due to the IT sector, where people from all parts of India are working. While the northern states have a significant contribution in providing food grains in our country, similarly the contribution of the southern states in providing industrial production, especially electronic and IT products, cannot be underestimated. In this way, India is like a family and all the states are its members. No one is big or small in the family; There is no consideration of rich or poor, and everyone works together and makes our integral family, that is Bharat, prosperous. People with political motives have now given yet another dimension to the North-South divide, by raising the issue of so-called unfair devolution of tax money to the Southern states. Notably, the tax share is decided based on recommendations from the Finance Commission. During the proceedings of the 15th Finance Commission, these states expressed their grievance to the central government for having given the terms of reference, according to which the commission was given the direction for using population as per the 2011

Census, instead of 1971, used by previous finance commissions. They alleged that this would go against southern states since they controlled their population better than many other states. To address these worries, the 15th Finance Commission also gave weight to demographic performance. Moreover, the share of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala in total devolution of central taxes remained more or less the same in the 15th Finance Commission recommendations as compared to previous ones. However, the share of Karnataka came down to 3.64 per cent from 4.71 per cent and Kerala to 1.92 per cent from 2.5 per cent over these periods. But apart from a share in central revenues, these states were given significant revenue deficit grants. This comes to Rs 30,497 crore in the case of Andhra Pradesh for 2021-22 to 2023-24, and Rs 1,631 crore for Karnataka for 2021-22. For Kerala, it was Rs 37,814 crore for 2021-22 to 2023-24 and Rs 2,204 crore for Tamil Nadu for 2021-22. Therefore, data doesn't in any way prove the alleged bias by the Finance Commission. We must understand that on the issues of national integration and regional harmony, we should avoid such utterances. (The writer is a professor at PGDAV College, University of Delhi, views are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### SBI, A PLIANT ORGANISATION

Sir — It is a no-brainer that the SBI was being used (misused rather) as the cat's paw by the ruling dispensation. Ostensibly, the electoral bonds were introduced to curb black money. However, things played out differently, with the result that the very institution chosen for this purpose (the SBI) had no other option but to do the bidding of the government of the day. An important lesson from the electoral bond fiasco is that the government of the day's transparency and efficiency are directly proportional to the free hand given to its institutions.

The SBI boss lacked spine or else he would have red-flagged the electoral bond scheme in the first place. If the government of the day is serious about doing good to the last man in the queue, it must loosen the stranglehold it has on various institutions and give them a free hand to do what is right rather than what is dictated by political masters. The Supreme Court has done well to call the government's bluff by declaring the EB scheme unconstitutional. Further, it has also pulled up the SBI which was trying hard to defend the indefensible.

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

#### NARI SHAKTI

Sir — Rahul Gandhi in his speech talked about "Shakti" the pressure and power which has captured India's voice, India's institution, CBI, ED, Income tax, Election Commission, media, electoral bonds and how the Modi Government is using electoral bonds to blackmail industrialists. But instead of answering on real issues, our PM has twisted Rahul Gandhi's speech by using the word "Shakti" and linked it with Nari Shakti and Shiv Shakti. Rahul Gandhi didn't talk about any religious Shakti or Nari Shakti nor did he talk about any Shakti related and affiliated to religion. PM Modi by twisting Rahul Gandhi's comments is trying to project Rahul Gandhi as Anti-Women and Anti-Hindu. What a pity the man who maintained the stoic silence on the horrors of Manipur, women's being paraded naked in Manipur, the I'll treat-

#### Sonam Wangchuk's protest march



Sonam Wangchuk, once an engineer and innovator, has transitioned into an educationist and environmental activist. Recently, he announced that approximately 10,000 individuals from Ladakh will embark on a march towards the border with China this month and the next. Their objective is to highlight the substantial loss of Indian territory to China during the present BJP regime. Wangchuk, amidst sub-zero temperatures in Leh, has been on a hunger strike for 14 days,

advocating for Constitutional safeguards for Ladakh. Unlike his previous week-long fast in June last year, Wangchuk suggests that this protest may be prolonged, potentially becoming indefinite. Citing grievances from local shepherds who have been restricted from their traditional grazing grounds, Wangchuk emphasises the urgency of their cause. The planned march, set for 27th March and 7th April, aims to commence from strategic points along the Line of Actual Control with China. Wangchuk asserts that over the years, significant portions of Ladakh's land have been encroached upon by China, resulting in the loss of prime grazing lands. Protesters blame the BJP-led Central government for failing to address their demands. This unrest poses a significant challenge for the Central Government.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

ment meted out to women wrestlers, who was silent on releasing of Bilkis Bano rapists, who gives repeatedly parole to rape and murder accused Ram Rahim Baba for his electoral benefits, who never raised his voice on rapes in Hathras, Unnao, Kathua and about increased rapes and atrocities on women in his ten years rule is now talking about Nari Shakti. Our PM Modi just before the elections talked about 400 plus seats, brought CAA and talked about Modi Parivar, but neither of them has shown any impact on the public. Now Modi saying that he will sacrifice his life for the security of mothers and sisters is nothing but a very big, Hypocrisy.

Zakir Hussain | Kazipet

#### HAPPINESS IS A STATE OF MIND

Sir — The definition of "happiness" varies from person to person. Common knowledge says happiness is a state of mind. Propagating and promoting global happiness on a large scale is of utmost importance, and world leaders are up to it. The then UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was convinced by special advisor Jayme Ilien to mark a day for happiness that culminated in the announcement of the twen-

tieth day of March as the Universal Happiness Day. Happiness encompasses a wide gamut of physical and mental emotions. Emotion is a central theme to happiness because many philosophers have simultaneously compared "emotion", "happiness" and "experience". A Finish proverb has aptly put happiness as "something between too much and too little". No medicine can make a person happy since there is no panacea for happiness. What makes an individual contented perhaps is the key to happiness. Work, love and hope are inspirations to a happy life. Quite often we fail to count our happiness, and dwell on unhappiness, forgetting only a past unhappiness will make the present happiness sound real. It is understood, therefore, that what is "happiness" for one individual may not be so for the other. The responsibility of being happy is thrust on the individual. Perhaps, the best definition of happiness is "not getting what you want but wanting what you get."

Ganapathi Bhat | Akolap

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## Harnessing the power of short films for learning



TANMAY SHAH

Short films have emerged as potent tools in the pursuit of holistic education, introducing students to socio-emotional learning and inculcating life skills

In the continually evolving education system, the quest for innovative approaches to ensure comprehensive development at every learning stage remains a priority. The objective is to foster a profound connection within students, deepening their understanding of themselves and their societal roles. In this pursuit, short films emerge as powerful tools, introducing students to socio-emotional learning (SEL) and imparting essential life skills. Traditional pedagogical models typically present facts and theories in a classroom setting, followed by practical sessions demonstrating the application of these theories. However, the nuanced experience of emotions related to the subject often remains unexplored, limited to the pursuit of a predefined result. Short films prove potent in enabling students to engage with emotions, cultivate empathy, and develop relationship skills, fostering long-term growth mindsets. The process of viewing and creating short films also brings self-awareness and self-management to the forefront. As a medium, short films dis-



tinguish themselves as one of the most powerful forms of communication. They allow practitioners to simultaneously experience audio-visual, read-write, and kinesthetic forms of learning, transforming the experience into a deeply personal memory rather than a mere task. The utilisation of short films to address social issues further enhances their impact and effectiveness. The cultivation of socially responsible citizens in both the present and future is imperative, involving a critical understanding of individual rights, responsible resource use, sensitivity, and an unwavering commitment to equality. Creating short films compels learners to introspect, connect with their surroundings, demonstrate compassion towards experiences not their own, and cultivate sensitivities when working with subjects, treating

them with due respect. Taking a cause to a broader audience through short films allows for the powerful dissemination of stories that need to be told. It fosters the integration of diverse perspectives on a social issue, compelling students to collectively make decisions aligned with their shared goals. This collaborative approach not only deepens comprehension but also establishes a cohesive team structure. It inculcates a sense of community and teamwork, imparting valuable life skills. Short films are a great enabler of creativity, allowing learners to find engaging ways to tell a story. They support individual voices while making the overall experience personal in creation and collective in viewing. The stories created, characters enacted, or engaged in making the film become an emotional journey, imprinting lifelong collective wisdom. Additionally, short films serve as mirrors reflecting the intricacies of real-life challenges. By presenting relatable characters grappling with adversity, ethical dilemmas, or personal growth, these films

become catalysts for developing resilience and problem-solving skills. Witnessing on-screen struggles prompts students to reflect on their decision-making processes and consider the consequences of their actions. Short films thus become invaluable tools for instigating thoughtful self-reflection, essential for character development and life skills growth. In conclusion, the art of teaching finds a powerful companion in short films. This medium enables holistic learning, making learners aware of personal emotions and inspiring them to convert those into thought-provoking narratives. Educators can utilise short films to create discourse around challenging subjects, turning them into a language of their own. Properly crafted short films bring forth local stories to a global audience, making the effort part of a larger goal. Creating these films also serves the purpose of practising art and craft for a larger, collective purpose beyond self-expression. (The writer is the founder of Friday Fiction Films; views are personal)





## FIRST COLUMN

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND ELECTORAL DYNAMICS

With media and AI at play, India's electoral system is poised for transformation



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

One of the biggest exercises on the world democratic stage has been activated, with India's Election Commission announcing the poll dates for electing members of the 18th Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian Parliament). A gargantuan exercise representing the democratic will of more than 969 million registered voters, with a giant shift in electoral demographics, is now live. The general elections of 2024 are easily one of the largest public exercises globally, with numerous variables at play, including but not restricted to the tough summer conditions in India for voting, new technologies such as AI having a disproportionate reach through popular digital channels, and the democratic choices of a new young India in the 21st century.

Some statistics come in handy: the number of registered voters has increased by 8% since 2019, and the largest chunk of these numbers comes from women, youth, and people with disabilities (PwDs). The number of registered women voters for 2024 exceeds males in at least 12 states, and more than 20 million new voters added are below the age of 30. These newly registered voters, i.e., youth, women, and PwDs, even though numerically smaller, can hold the swing value in tricky scenarios. They also represent the changing will of voters and therefore the backward integration of their aspirations into the election manifestos of various political parties.

It may be argued that the current ruling party has successfully managed to assimilate many of these aspirations without ever leaving its core religion-based ideology and has perfected it to deliver a tailor-made concoction to the voters, leading to huge electoral gains since 2024 both at the centre and state levels. Meanwhile, the opposition seems to fumble



and revert to bygone era economic policies (including reservation, quotas in jobs, and loan waivers, etc.) for favourable outcomes. Prime Minister Modi seems to have mastered the art of finding a new constituency to address every time there is an anti-incumbency factor at play. From reaching out to sections within the marginalised and minority communities to addressing concerns of the youth through his regular communication to creating special tailor-made welfare schemes for women, he seems to have the magic formula for winning. However, unlike in the past, at least for the time being, the PM is sending out a huge message of confidence in continuity.

A couple of senior bureaucrats, this author spoke to, also reiterated that most of them are engaged in several policies or decisions, the intent of which has already been sounded out or notified, so that they can be fully equipped when the new government starts functioning from the middle of June. The Prime Minister has also reached out to all his outgoing cabinet colleagues to prepare a 100-day action plan for the new government.

In the run-up to the announcement of election dates and just before the model code of conduct was set in, the government moved quickly to activate some of its recently stated economic targets for India to become a developed country in the next two decades. Key among them is plugging India into the global technology supply chain, including high-end semiconductor manufacturing, thus creating new jobs and business opportunities. The other aspiration of creating prosperity through trade has progressed, with India recently announcing one of its first trade deals with the Western block of nations. Some others like a UK and EU free trade agreement are in various stages of progress, with the government hoping to pick up negotiations from June onwards. As of now, it looks like the policy framework and outlook for India are likely to stay the course with a new government in place.

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

## A discernible paradigm shift in the Valley

Multifaceted transformation ushered in by the abolition of Article 370 is reshaping the contours of Kashmir's destiny and offering a glimmer of peace



SHISHIR CHOUDHARY

Although the recent Bollywood release Article 370 has received rave reviews from movie-goers and critics alike, the discourse around the film in the power circles of Delhi has not been equally charitable. The reason behind the discomfiture is the film's scanty representation of the role played by India's political leadership in making the audacious legislation and its implementation a reality.

Bureaucrats privy to the machinations that went on behind the scenes to abrogate Article 370 complain of a raw deal accorded to the Modi-Shah duo by the film while depicting their parts. The film allegedly curtains much of the insights, contemplations, arguments and painstaking efforts of the Union Home Minister Amit Shah that went into making the law that ended an era in the valley.

To be fair to the Yami Gautam starrer movie and the team behind it, the film facilitates a surgical view of the politics coupled with Islamism that wreaked havoc in the valley for decades. It is also precise in manifesting the post-apocalyptic gloom and hopelessness that ruled the social psyche in the region. However, the portrayal of the entire gamut of firefighting efforts that went on in Delhi's power corridors is a bit too much to expect from a Bollywood flick. The abrogation of Article 370 is only a part of the systemic shift in Delhi's view of the Kashmir issue.

The effect of the new shift in the Kashmir paradigm led by the Modi-Shah duo in dealing with the issue is much more widespread and layered than it appears. They invariably touch every life in the valley. Paradigm shifts occur in societies when the existing ones fail to resolve anomalies. This was true also about the new paradigm in Kashmir that surfaced during the Modi regime. While assuming office in 2014, the Modi government had to deal with the existing perspective on Kashmir which in itself was afflicted with the proverbial Stockholm syndrome.

The fear that any change in Kashmir's status would lead to wanton bloodshed in the valley had by then taken policy and lawmakers hostage. However, instead of dealing with the burning issue a policy to nurture it was adopted. The earlier successive governments justified Article 370 on grounds of protecting the state's distinct demographic character as the only Muslim-majority state in India. Despite its highly discriminatory nature, they were against the principle of "One Nation, One Law and One Head of the Nation." Rather the governments repeatedly pampered the state with more funds while in its restive condition, giving the bruise the reason to burgeon every time.

Government data shows that during the second five-year plan between 1957-58 and 1961-62, the state received the highest per capita grant-in-aid of Rs 41.7, which was almost seven times the average of all the states which was only Rs 6. Similarly, the per capita central assistance for J&K was the highest and double the average of the rest of the states. J&K also got Rs 117 per head for its population against an average of Rs 57 for the remaining states.

To put the figures in perspective,



THE MAIN REASON FOR ITS POOR GROWTH AND RECURRING VIOLENCE IN THE HIMALAYAN STATE WAS THE IMPOSITION OF ARTICLE 370, WHICH RESULTED IN CORRUPTION, NEPOTISM AND MISAPPROPRIATION OF FUNDS BY THOSE IN POWER

between 2000 and 2016, J&K with 1% of the total Indian population received 10 per cent (Rs 1.14 lakh crore) of the total central funds, the highest among the 10 special states in India.

However, despite such largess from the government for the past 70 years, its economy continued to remain in the doldrums with large deficits showing up on its annual budget. A significant part of the problem was the inability of the state government to properly utilise the funds, which were diverted to different non-developmental projects. Moreover, regular organised insurgent violence perpetrated by resurgent military groups both within the country and those across the border, mass strikes, shutdowns, etc meant that J&K failed to keep pace with the growth trajectory of other states. A detailed analysis shows that the main reason for its poor growth and recurring violence in the Himalayan state was the imposition of Article 370, which resulted in corruption, nepotism, and misappropriation of funds by those in power.

Moreover, there is enough evidence to suggest that the appeasement and pampering of separatists by the ruling party to stay in power. It has also meant giving a free hand to separatists and extremists to propagate an anti-India narrative, diverting youth's energy into destructive activities instead of building the state.

The absence of local self-government over the years—the last municipal elections were held in 2005—meant that locals were not a participant in the development

process. Socially weaker sections such as SC, and STs never got the benefits of central government policies.

The abolishing of Article 370 put an end to the entire ecosystem that perpetuated violence, injustice and gloom in Kashmir and extended the rule of the Indian constitution to the valley. Now every institution in the valley is bound to uphold the sanctity of the constitutional values of equality, justice and fraternity. Now, no Kashmiri is dependent for their rights on the local political lords who splashed on the pool of development funds with complete impunity granted by Article 370. Five years after the abrogation of Article 370, J&K is being described as a Valley of peace, prosperity, and all-round development, thanks to a well-crafted strategy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and ably implemented by the Home Minister Amit Shah.

With bandhs, street violence and acts of terrorism brought under control by security forces, courtesy of the zero-tolerance policy, the local economy has got the much-needed boost with new incentives, development of state-of-the-art educational infrastructure, and empowering the poor with welfare benefits.

Moreover, the Narendra Modi government announced several far-reaching measures, including the implementation of a reconstruction scheme of around Rs 80,000 crore known as the Prime Minister's Development Package, on November 7, 2015, to strengthen the socio-economic infrastructure and for the development of

Jammu & Kashmir. It also announced a new transparent and target-oriented Jammu and Kashmir Industrial Policy 2021-30, whose aim is to attract fresh investments, create employment opportunities, develop backward regions and nurture existing businesses. To help entrepreneurs, a single window portal has been launched. It is a single point of contact for end-to-end facilitation for setting up businesses.

Till November 2023, Investments worth Rs. 2326.65 crore have flowed into the Union Territory. Handloom and handicraft exports have doubled, and tourism has reached unprecedented levels, further boosting the economy. The year 2023, saw a record 4.45 lakh Amarnath visitors in J&K without a single incidence of violence.

Social welfare schemes too have seen transformational changes. It has seen the launch of the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY-SEHAT) on December 26, 2020, which provides universal health insurance cover of up to Rs 5.00 lakh per family to all families of Jammu and Kashmir. Reservation for non-gazetted police ranks has been implemented, promoting gender equality. Now the canonical dialogue, "Kashmir is a lost case," delivered by Zooni Haksar, the protagonist of the film Article 370 played by Yami Gautam is no longer the case.

(The writer is an economist & retired HoD, Economics Department, St. Xavier's College, Ranchi. Views are personal)

## Waiting for the public distribution system to work

The National Food Security Act 2013 intends to ensure food security for weaker sections and faces formidable challenges in rural areas

Under the National Food Security Act, (NFSA) 2013, the Central Government is providing free rations to approximately 80 crore people in the country. It is believed that this scheme has addressed the issue of food security among the economically marginalised sections of our society.

The Act legally entitles up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population to receive subsidised food grains under the Targeted Public Distribution System. However, even before this, the country has been providing ration to the economically weaker and marginalised sections through the Public Distribution System (PDS). Presented as a remedy to the food security



SHAITAN REGAR

concerns in a vast nation like India, such schemes frequently encounter hurdles in their execution at the grassroots level, particularly when communities lack familiarity with the digital aspects involved. One such region is the Manoharpura village in the Udaipur district of Rajasthan. The village, located just 4 kilometres from the district headquarters, has an approximate population of around

1000. Mostly inhabited by scheduled castes and tribes, many families in this village have migrated to settle here, hoping to find employment opportunities in nearby cities. Most men work as daily wage labourers in the city, while women engage in household chores in urban homes. The major problem faced by this village is the lack of complete access to ration through the PDS. Due to migration, most families do not possess valid identity documents. Some families used to benefit from the system until two years ago. However, despite continuous efforts, the ration has not been resumed.

Mohan Harijan, a 45-year-old resident, shares his daily struggle of going to Udaipur City for labour. Being the sole

earner in the family, they often face food scarcity when work is unavailable. Ration from the public distribution system was a blessing for his family. Still, with its discontinuation, managing meals for the family has become challenging. Despite multiple attempts, going through various offices, from e-Mitra to the Panchayat, Block, and the Collector's office, he has not received any benefit, and his ration has not been reinstated. Every time, he is returned with new technical issues cited as reasons. Mithun Kalbeliya, another resident of the village, mentions that his family has been residing in Manoharpura for the past 40 years. Earlier, they used to receive rations through the PDS, which

helped avoid food scarcity issues. However, for the last two years, they have been deprived of this ration. Upon inquiry from the village Panchayat, he found out that their entire family's Aadhar card was not linked to the PDS, leading to the discontinuation of the ration. "Since then, I have been making rounds of the office to get the Aadhaar cards for the children. However, because the children were born at home, their birth certificates could not be obtained, making it very difficult for their Aadhaar cards to be made. Until their Aadhar cards are ready, the ration cannot be resumed," shares Mithun. On the other hand, Sona Devi and her family, despite having all the necessary doc-

uments and ration cards, are deprived of the benefits of the PDS. Sona Devi explains that her family migrated from Bihar to Manoharpura in search of employment ten years ago. Even with all the correct documents, they have not been receiving ration. She mentions that she has approached the Sarpanch, Labour Department, and even the Collector's office, but despite her efforts, her family has not received ration to date.

The village of Manoharpura falls under the jurisdiction of Badgaon Panchayat. According to the village head, Sanjay Sharma, all necessary documents must be uploaded to the central government's Food Security website for the distribution of rations.

However, for the past three years, the uploading process on the website has been non-functional, causing significant challenges. Consequently, new ration cards are not being issued, and existing cardholders are unable to update their information. Even those whose Aadhaar cards have been updated are not receiving their ration entitlements due to the lack of uploads. He has made numerous attempts by submitting applications to the District Collector's office to address this issue. However, without a functional uploading process on the website, little progress can be made. He emphasized that beneficiaries whose documents are successfully uploaded are receiving their full ration entitlements.

Sona Devi emphasizes that, despite having all the required documents, many families in Manoharpura are deprived of the benefits of the public distribution system due to bureaucratic hurdles. These families, despite being eligible, are left out of the facilities. The question arises as to whether the digital aspects of such initiatives aimed at enhancing people's lives are inadvertently excluding the needy from government benefits or if they are genuinely established to connect the underprivileged with these services. Who bears responsibility for this situation?

(The author is a grassroots worker working with migrant and brick kiln labourers in Gujarat. Charkha Features)



# Ukraine intercepts all 31 missiles fired by Russia at Kyiv

AP ■ KYIV

Russia fired 31 ballistic and cruise missiles at Kyiv before dawn Thursday in the first attack on the Ukrainian capital in six weeks, officials said. Air defenses shot down all the incoming missiles, though 13 people including a child were injured by falling wreckage, they said. Residents of Kyiv were woken up by loud explosions around 5 am as the missiles arrived at roughly the same time from different directions, said Serhii Popko, head of the Kyiv City Administration.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched two ballistic missiles and 29 cruise missiles against the capital.

Kyiv has better air defenses than most regions of the large country. The missile interception rate is frequently high, rendering Russian attacks on the capital significantly less successful than during the early days of the war. Even so, Ukrainian officials warn that they need considerably more Western weapons if they are to



Firefighters work at the site after a Russian attack in Kyiv, Ukraine, Thursday.

prevail against Russia's invasion. Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened Wednesday to "respond in kind" to Ukrainian aerial attacks in recent days on Russia's Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine.

At an event in the Kremlin, Putin said Russia "can respond in the same way regarding civilian infrastructure and all other objects of this kind that the enemy attacks. We have our own views on this matter and our own plans. We will follow what we have outlined." An 11-year-old girl and a 38-year-old man were hospitalized in Kyiv, the city administration said. Eight other people sustained light injuries, according to Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

Ukraine's Emergency Service said around 80 people were evacuated from their homes. Falling wreckage from the intercepted missiles set fire to at least one apartment building, burned parked cars and left crates in streets and a small park. Some streets were

littered with debris, including glass from shattered windows. Survivors, some of them in tears and visibly shaken as emergency workers treated them in the street, recounted narrow escapes.

Raisa Kozenko, a 71-year-old whose apartment lost its doors and windows in the blast, said her son jumped out of bed just in time. "He was covered in blood, in the rubble," she said, trembling from shock. "And all I can say is ... the apartment is completely destroyed."

Mariia Margulis, 31, said a decision to stay in the corridor throughout the attack saved her family.

"The blast wave blew out all the windows on the side where everything happened," she said. "My mom was supposed to sleep in that room, but I asked her to move to the corridor in time, which saved us." The attack occurred hours after a visit to Kyiv by President Joe Biden's top foreign policy adviser, Jake Sullivan. On Thursday, five people were injured in the latest attack on the Belgorod

region, which damaged homes and the city sports stadium, Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said. Russia's Ministry of Defense said it stopped 10 rockets over the region. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged the country's Western partners to send more air defense systems so they can be distributed across the country where missile strikes have become more common.

"Every day, every night such ... terror happens," he said on Telegram after Thursday's attack on Kyiv.

"World unity is capable to stop it by helping us with more air defense systems," Zelenskyy said. Russia doesn't have missiles that can evade US-made Patriots and other advanced air defense weapons. European Union leaders were considering new ways to help boost arms and ammunition production for Ukraine at a summit in Brussels on Thursday. Russia has largely turned its attention to other Ukrainian cities, targeting them with drones and ballistic missiles.

## Pro-Khalistan Sikh activist jailed in UK

**London (PTI):** A 26-year-old pro-Khalistan Sikh activist who pleaded guilty to causing injury to two Indian-origin men and a female police officer at an Indian Independence Day related community event in west London last year has been sentenced to 28 months' imprisonment. Gurpreet Singh appeared at Isleworth Crown Court on Wednesday after pleading guilty in January to the unlawful wounding of victims Aashish Sharma and Nanak Singh and causing actual bodily harm (ABH) to Police Constable (PC) Justine Nicolle Farrell, as well as a fourth count of affray.

The incident occurred during an Indian Independence Day related community event in Southall on August 15 night last year, with videos circulating on social media showing a clash involving some pro-Khalistan extremists and police officers chasing suspects.

"Gurpreet Singh was sentenced to 28 months' imprisonment after he entered guilty pleas in respect of four counts on the indictment on January 12," a court official said.

The court heard that the Indian national was carrying his religious kirpan, which was used as a "weapon of offence". Singh could face deportation to India at the end of his sentence.

"I recognise the enormous concern this incident will have caused, both in Southall and in the Sikh communities around London and further afield, in what was an otherwise largely peaceful and celebratory event," said Metropolitan Police Superintendent Sean Lynch, responsible for neighbourhood policing in west London at the time of the incident last year.

"We are aware of footage circulating on social media, with people also commenting on what they think happened. We would urge people to avoid echoing or adding to speculation. Fortunately, none of those injured were seriously hurt and there were no fatalities," he said.

PC Justine Farrell was involved in detaining Singh and sustained a small cut to her hand, which the Met Police said did not require hospital treatment.

## Aus, UK sign defence & security treaty to meet 'contemporary challenges'

AP ■ SYDNEY

Australia and the United Kingdom signed a new defence and security cooperation agreement with the defence ministers of both countries saying it was required to meet 'contemporary challenges' to maintain a global rules-based order.

The treaty was signed by Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles and his UK counterpart Grant Shapps following annual bilateral ministerial defence talks at Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday, as part of the Australia-UK Ministerial (AUKMIN) meeting, which was first held in 2006.

"Australia's relationship with the UK is dynamic and enduring," Marles said in a written statement on Thursday. "From the UK's leadership of support for Ukraine and efforts to address the Houthi threat, to increasing contributions in the Pacific and the Indo-Pacific, we continue to work closely together to support



a global rules-based order."

"As the world becomes more complex and uncertain, we must modernize our most important partnerships," the statement said. Refreshing the bilateral defence treaty was a commitment made at the AUKMIN conference held last year in the UK. Shapps said the treaty formalises how the two countries will consult on issues that affect each other's sovereignty and regional security.

"I think one of the most important elements is it describes a mechanism by which we consult when either of our countries are under threat and we have those discussions more formalized than it is at the moment," Shapps said at a joint press conference with Marles at Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday. "We do already cooperate very significantly on defense matters, it should be said."

## Blinken adds Israel stop to Mideast tour as tensions rise over Gaza war

AP ■ JEDDAH

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Israel this week as part of his sixth urgent mission to the Middle East since the Israelis' war with Hamas began in October, as relations between the two countries have soured dramatically in recent weeks.

The visit comes amid a flurry of calls, planned trips by US and Israeli officials and public airings of severe disagreements over the state of the conflict — notably Israeli plans to mount a major military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah and what will happen to Gaza after the war ends.

The State Department said the Israel stop would cap Blinken's latest Mideast tour that started in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday and will continue in Egypt on Thursday. The top US diplomat will be in Tel Aviv on Friday after talks with Arab leaders and foreign ministers in Jeddah and Cairo focused on the war in

Gaza. "In Israel, Secretary Blinken will discuss with the leadership of the government of Israel the ongoing negotiations to secure the release of all hostages," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said. "He will discuss the need to ensure the defeat of Hamas, including in Rafah, in a way that protects the civilian population, does not hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and advances Israel's overall security."

Tensions between the US and Israel over the prosecution of the Gaza war have been mounting for months over rising civilian casualties. And they have intensified as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly said he will ignore President Joe Biden's warnings not to start a large-scale ground operation in Rafah without credible plans to protect innocent Palestinians who have sought refuge there.

Biden, facing a tough re-election campaign ahead of November's

presidential election, is under growing domestic pressure to rein in Israel's military response to the October 7 Hamas attacks in Israel. Opposition to the war in the United States, Arab nations and much of the rest of the world has shaped the evolution of Blinken's frequent trips to the region since October.

His first two visits were largely focused on re-affirming US support for Israel in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks, but as civilian Palestinian casualties began to multiply and humanitarian conditions in Gaza deteriorated, his emphasis shifted to boosting humanitarian assistance and protecting innocents. Since late last year, Blinken has also used his visits to stress the importance of Arab support for "day after" plans for Gaza and trying to coax Israeli leaders into accepting a status for the Palestinians that could help ensure Israel's long-term security. As that shift has taken place, though, the situation in Gaza

has gotten worse and relations between the US and Israel have nosedived. Public disagreements between Biden and Netanyahu have become more frequent and more intense.

In a phone call with Biden on Monday, their first in more than a month, Netanyahu agreed to send a high-level delegation to Washington to discuss plans for the proposed Rafah operation, and the Pentagon said Tuesday that Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant would visit the US capital next week. In his talks in Jeddah, Cairo and Tel Aviv, Blinken is expected to focus on attempts to negotiate a cease-fire and hostage release deal, increase humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza by land, air and sea and plan for the territory's post-conflict future. In the Red Sea city of Jeddah, Blinken met with Saudi Arabia's de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan.

## UK PM Sunak's flagship bill to fly migrants to Rwanda hits deadlock

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's flagship legislation aimed at flying illegal migrants to Rwanda has hit another set of parliamentary hurdles after the House of Lords delivered multiple defeats on the draft bill, sending it back to the Commons. The Safety of Rwanda Bill will return for members of Parliament to vote on in mid-April after the Easter recess as the Upper House peers rejected the changes of the House of Commons in seven votes, with majorities ranging between 30 and 55, on Wednesday night.

They expressed support for amendments to water down the hardline legislation that seeks to deem the East African country safe in law to block legal challenges to migrants being flown out to Rwanda while their asylum claims are assessed.



While the Opposition Labour Party has branded the scheme a costly "gimmick", the Conservative government has said it is a key tool to tackle soaring illegal migration via dangerous small boats crossing the English Channel. "It is crystal clear, as we are seeing from the Labour Party's opposition in this House, that while we are committed to stopping the boats, the Labour Party would keep them coming," said Sunak in the Commons, when questioned about his Rwanda scheme on

Wednesday. "Since I became Prime Minister, the number of small boat crossings is down by over a third. That is because we have doubled National Crime Agency funding and we have increased illegal immigration enforcement raids by 70 per cent. We have closed 7,500 bank accounts, deported 24,000 illegal migrants and processed over 112,000 cases — more than at any point in the last two decades," he claimed.

Labour Leader Keir Starmer accused the government of wasting taxpayer's money on the scheme, which has a reported bill of around GBP 600 million.

"The tragedy is we know the Prime Minister does not even believe in the Rwanda gimmick... His great hope is to placate those in his party with a couple of empty planes, praying they will not notice when the flights stop going, the boats

are still coming and the costs keep mounting," said Starmer. The Rwanda bill, meanwhile, remains in a deadlock phase between the two Houses of Parliament until an agreement can be reached on the final wording. The government is expected to hold consecutive days of votes in both Houses once Parliament is back in session post-Easter next month until a consensus can be found.

This means the likelihood of the first flights of migrants taking off for Rwanda is not before June at the earliest after the bill clears its parliamentary journey and receives the King's royal assent to become law. The legislation is crucial to Sunak's stated priorities ahead of a general election, with his "stop the boats" pledge hinging on this flagship policy to fly asylum seekers out to Rwanda and show he is cracking down on illegal migration to the UK shores.

## S Korea to take final steps to suspend licenses of striking junior doctors

AP ■ SEOUL

South Korea's government will take final steps to suspend the licenses of striking junior doctors next week as they refuse to end their weeklong walkouts that have burdened the country's medical services, officials said on Thursday. More than 90 per cent of the country's 13,000 medical interns and residents have been on strike for about a month to protest the government's plan to sharply increase medical school admissions. Their strikes have caused hundreds of cancelled surgeries and other treatments at hospitals.

Officials say it is urgent to have more doctors because South Korea has a rapidly aging population and its doctor-to-population ratio is one of the lowest in the developed world. But doctors say schools can't handle an abrupt, steep increase in students, and that it would ultimately undermine the country's

medical services.

The government has been taking a series of administrative steps required to suspend their licenses after they missed a government-set, February 29 deadline to return to work. The steps include sending officials to formally confirm the absences of strikers, informing them of possible license suspensions and giving them chances to respond. Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo told a briefing Thursday that the government is expected to complete those steps for some of the striking doctors next week and will send them notices about its final decision to suspend their licenses.

Park earlier said that under South Korea's medical law, the striking doctors could face at a minimum three-month suspensions and even indictments by prosecutors for refusing the government's back-to-work order.

He urged the striking doctors to

return to work immediately, suggesting those who end their strikes could receive softer punishments.

"They should return as soon as possible not only for patients but also for their future careers. This kind of exhaustive walkout from hospitals must not continue any longer," Park said. "As we've said many times, we won't treat those who return swiftly as equally as those who return late." It's unclear whether and how many striking doctors would return to their hospitals at the last minute. According to Park, none of the strikers who were informed of their possible license suspension has responded.

Senior doctors at major university hospitals recently decided to submit resignations next week in support of the junior doctors. Still, most of them will likely continue to report to work. If they walk off the job, that would hurt South Korea's medical ser-

vices severely. Two senior doctors, who lead an emergency doctors' committee for the walkouts, were recently given government notices that their licenses would be suspended for three months for allegedly inciting the junior doctors' walkouts.

The striking junior doctors account for less than 10 per cent of South Korea's 140,000 doctors. But in some major hospitals, they represent about 30-40 per cent of the doctors, assisting senior doctors during surgeries and dealing with inpatients while training.

The government aims to increase the country's medical school enrollment cap by 2,000 starting next year, from the current cap of 3,058 that has been unchanged since 2006. On Wednesday, the government announced detailed plans on how to allocate those additional 2,000 admission seats to universities, a sign that it won't back down its plan.

## Apple has kept an illegal monopoly over smartphones in US, Justice Department says

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The Justice Department on Thursday announced a sweeping antitrust lawsuit against Apple, accusing the tech giant of engineering an illegal monopoly in smartphones that boxes out competitors and stifles innovation.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in New Jersey, alleges that Apple has monopoly power in the smartphone market and uses its control over the iPhone to "engage in a broad, sustained, and illegal course of conduct."

The lawsuit — which was also filed with 16 state attorneys general — is the latest example of the Justice Department's approach to aggressive enforcement of federal antitrust law that officials say is aimed at ensuring a fair and competitive market, even as it has lost some significant anticompetition cases. Apple called the lawsuit "wrong on the facts and the

law" and said it "will vigorously defend against it."

President Joe Biden has called for the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission to vigorously enforce antitrust statutes. The increased policing of corporate mergers and business deals has been met with resistance from some business leaders who have said the Democratic administration is overreaching, but it's been lauded by others as long overdue. The case is taking direct aim at the digital fortress that Apple Inc., based in Cupertino, California, has assiduously built around the iPhone and other popular products such as the iPad, Mac and Apple Watch to create what is often referred to as a "walled garden" so its meticulously designed hardware and software can seamlessly flourish together while requiring consumers to do little more than turn the devices on. The strategy has helped make Apple the world's most pros-

perous company, with annual revenue of nearly USD 400 billion and, until recently, a market value of more than USD 3 trillion. But Apple's shares have fallen by 7 per cent this year even as most of the stock market has climbed to new highs, resulting in long-time rival Microsoft — a target of a major Justice Department antitrust case a quarter-century ago — to seize the mantle as the world's most valuable company.

Apple said the lawsuit, if successful, would "hinder our ability to create the kind of technology people expect from Apple — where hardware, software, and services intersect" and would "set a dangerous precedent, empowering government to take a heavy hand in designing people's technology."

"At Apple, we innovate every day to make technology people love — designing products that work seamlessly together, protect people's privacy and

security, and create a magical experience for our users," the company said in a statement. "This lawsuit threatens who we are and the principles that set Apple products apart in fiercely competitive markets. Apple has defended the walled garden as an indispensable feature prized by consumers who want the best protection available for their personal information. It has described the barrier as a way for the iPhone to distinguish itself from devices running on Google's Android software, which isn't as restrictive and is licensed to a wide range of manufacturers.

Fears about an antitrust crackdown on Apple's business model have contributed to the drop in the company's stock price, along with concerns that it is lagging Microsoft and Google in the push to develop products powered by artificial intelligence technology. But antitrust regulators made it clear in their complaint that

they see Apple's walled garden most as a weapon to ward off competition, creating market conditions that enable it to charge higher prices that have propelled its lofty profit margins while stifling innovation.

"Consumers should not have to pay higher prices because companies violate the antitrust laws," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement. "We allege that Apple has maintained monopoly power in the smartphone market, not simply by staying ahead of the competition on the merits, but by violating federal antitrust law. If left unchallenged, Apple will only continue to strengthen its smartphone monopoly."

With the attempt to rein in Apple's dominance, the Biden administration is escalating an antitrust siege that has already triggered lawsuits against Google and Amazon accusing them in engaging in illegal tactics to thwart competition, as well as unsuccessful

attempts to block acquisitions by Microsoft and Facebook parent Meta Platforms.

Apple's business interests are also entangled in the Justice Department's case against Google, which went to trial last fall and is headed toward final arguments scheduled to begin May 1 in Washington, D.C. In that case, regulators are alleging Google has stymied competition by paying for the rights for its already dominant online search engine to be the automatic place to handle queries on the iPhone and a variety of web browsers in an arrangement that generates an estimated USD 15 billion to USD 20 billion annually. Now that the Justice Department is mounting a direct attack across its business, Apple stands to lose even more. The Justice Department is following up on other recent attempts to force Apple to change the way it runs the iPhone and other parts of its business.

Epic Games, the maker of the

popular Fortnite video game, filed an antitrust lawsuit against Apple in 2020 in an effort to break down the barriers protecting the iPhone App Store and a lucrative payment system operating within it. Apple has long collected commissions ranging from 15 per cent to 30 per cent on digital transactions completed within apps, a setup that Epic alleged was enabled by an illegal monopoly that drives up prices for consumers. After a month-long trial in 2021, a federal judge ruled mostly in favor of Apple with the exception of deciding that links to competing payment options should be permitted inside of iPhone apps. Apple unsuccessfully resisted that portion of the ruling until the US Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal in January, forcing the company to relent. But the concessions that Apple made to comply with the ruling are still facing a "bad faith" challenge from Epic, which is seek-

ing an April 30 hearing to ask US District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers to order more changes. Apple also had to open up the iPhone to allow apps to be downloaded and installed from competing stores in Europe to comply with a new set of regulators called the Digital Markets Act, or DMA, earlier this month but its approach is being pilloried by critics as little more than an end-around the rules that will enable it to continue to muscle out real competition. European Union regulators already have vowed to crack down on Apple if it finds the company's tactics continue to thwart true consumer choice. All of this comes on top of a USD 2 billion (1.8 billion euro) fine that European regulators slapped on Apple earlier this month after concluding that the company had undermined competition in the music streaming through the iPhone, despite Spotify being the leader in that market.



# Two Pak soldiers, 8 Baloch terrorists killed in attack

PTI ■ KARACHI

At least two soldiers of the Pakistani Army were killed and eight Baloch terrorists were "sent to hell" when security personnel foiled an attempt by heavily armed Baloch insurgents to storm the Gwadar Port Authority complex in the restive Balochistan province, the military has said. The port complex hosts several government and paramilitary offices and the strategically located Gwadar Port remains one of the focal points of the billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. A press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the military's media wing, said a group of terrorists attempted to enter the Port Authority Colony but were successfully thwarted by security forces personnel on Wednesday. "Own troops employed for security responded immediately and effectively engaged the terrorists, and in ensuing fire exchange, all eight terrorists were sent to hell," the statement said late on Wednesday. Two sepoys were killed in the exchange of fire, the statement said. A large quantity of arms, ammunition and explosives was also recovered from the militants from the separatist Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). Balochistan, bordering Iran and Afghanistan, is home to a long-running violent insurgency. Baloch insurgent groups have previously carried out several attacks targeting the USD 60 billion CPEC projects. The BLA is opposed to China's investments in Balochistan and accuses Beijing and Islamabad of exploitation of the resource-rich province, a charge rejected by the authorities. Thousands of Chinese personnel are working in Pakistan on several projects being carried out under the aegis of the CPEC. BLA's Majeed Brigade, which was formed in 2011, is a particularly lethal guerrilla cell of the BLA. It was named after a

## 'Pak facing terrible threat of terrorism'

Washington (PTI): Pakistan is facing a terrible threat of terrorism as areas along its border with Afghanistan have witnessed a multi-fold increase in terrorist activities, a top Biden Administration official has said. During a Congressional hearing on Pakistani elections on Wednesday, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu told members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee that Afghanistan has witnessed conflict for 40 years and Pakistan has been caught up in it. "The end of the war in Afghanistan provides us all an opportunity, an opportunity to have a relationship with Pakistan on its own terms and we are committed to doing that," Lu said. "One of the major goals that we have with Pakistan now is to support the Pakistani people as they face this terrible threat of terrorism. Many of the members have discussed this, but this is a country where the people have suffered under the threat of terrorism in a way that I think no one on the planet has had to suffer," he said. The attacks, particularly in the provinces of Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan over the past three years have grown exponentially. Attacks continue to be launched from Afghan territory, Lu said. "And you saw a major attack on Saturday in which seven policemen were killed by the TTP, the Pakistani Taliban. We call on the Afghan Taliban to ensure that its territory is not used as a launching pad for terrorist groups," he said. A Lieutenant Colonel and a Captain along with five soldiers were killed when six terrorists launched multiple suicide attacks on a security check post in the restive tribal district of North Waziristan bordering Afghanistan on Saturday. All the six terrorists who attacked the check post in the Mir Ali area were shot dead, the Pakistani army had said. In response to the attack, Pakistan on Monday carried out airstrikes on the banned Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) affiliated militants in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. At least eight civilians, including three children, were killed in the airstrikes, the Afghan Taliban said and summoned the charge d'affaires of Pakistan's embassy in Kabul to lodge a strong protest. guard of former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was killed while attempting to assassinate the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) founder. It has been alleged that the group also maintains sanctuaries in areas along the Pak-Iran border. The brigade, which is the suicide squad of the BLA, mostly targets security forces and Chinese interests in Pakistan. It also claimed responsibility for the April 2022 suicide attack outside the Karachi University's Confucius Institute. The outfit had also claimed responsibility for three coordinated attacks launched using

Nations Department for Safety and Security said "several explosions followed by continuous firing" were reported during the attack on the complex. The statement confirmed there were no immediate reports of civilian casualties, elaborating that seven personnel from three UN agencies based in Gwadar and two UN agencies on missions were "safe and accounted for". Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, commending the security forces for thwarting the attack, appreciated the valour and professional skills of the personnel and officers of the police and security forces. He paid tribute to the soldiers who laid down their lives during the operation, the PM Office Media Wing said in a press release. Shehbaz further said those trying to target Gwadar and Balochistan wanted to interrupt the process for the country's economic prosperity and vowed to foil all internal and external conspiracies with the help of the people. Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti hailed security and law enforcement officials for their response against the attackers and said "the message is loud and clear" that "whosoever chooses to use violence will see no mercy from the state". Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terror activities in the past year, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan after the banned militant Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) outfit ended its ceasefire with the government in November 2022. Balochistan faces a double threat by the banned TTP as well as Baloch militants. The incidents of terrorism have increased in Pakistan since the Taliban took over the government in Kabul, dashing hopes in Islamabad that a friendly government in Afghanistan would help to tackle militancy. Wednesday's attack comes after a lull in violence and terror activities in the Balochistan province since the February 8 general elections.

## Pak claims concern by US over its elections due to 'misunderstanding'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan on Thursday said that the concerns a top US official raised over last month's general elections and its outcome were due to a "misunderstanding" of its internal situation and election laws. Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch at a weekly press briefing was responding to queries about the remarks by US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu at a congressional hearing that if the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) failed to investigate allegations of irregularities in the February 8 elections, it will "retard" America's relationship with Pakistan. According to state-run Radio Pakistan, Baloch said "some statements made there reflected a misunderstanding of Pakistan's domestic situation and electoral laws." Jailed former premier Imran Khan has accused the current government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the powerful military establishment and the top electoral body of being behind last month's allegedly manipulated polls, the authenticity of which his party has questioned. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party has refused to accept the outcome of the polls, alleging that the results were manipulated. Though more than 90 independent candidates backed by the PTI won the maximum number of seats in the National Assembly, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) led by former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto struck a post-poll deal and formed a coalition government in the country. At the same time, the FO spokesperson hoped that Pakistan could engage in meaningful discussion with the US "to address these misunderstandings." Baloch emphasised that Pakistan valued its close relations with the US and believed in constructive engagement with it.

# Cash-strapped Pak seeking 24th bailout, IMF confirms

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Announcing the staff-level agreement on the successful completion of the existing short-term facility, the IMF has confirmed that cash-strapped Pakistan is seeking a 24th medium-term bailout package for a permanent push towards longstanding structural reforms. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its end-of-mission statement on Wednesday said the cash-strapped country "expressed interest in a successor medium-term Fund-supported programme to permanently resolve Pakistan's fiscal and external sustainability weaknesses, strengthening its economic recovery, and laying the foundations for strong, sustainable, and inclusive growth", Dawn News reported. It said the global lender's team reached a staff-level agreement with the Pakistani authorities on the second and final review of Pakistan's stabilisation programme supported by the IMF's USD 3 billion standby arrangement approved in July last year. The statement said subject to the approval of its executive board, the staff-level agreement would enable Pakistan to access about USD 1.1 billion — 828 million special drawing rights (SDR) — by late April. While doing so, the Fund also laid bare the broader, though well-known, conditionalities of the next programme on which "discussions are expected to start in the coming months", the statement added. As in the past programmes, four central areas would remain under focus for reforms. The top objective of the next medium-term programme — Extended Fund Facility of about 36 to 39 months — would be strengthening public finances, including through gradual fiscal consolidation and broadening the tax base, especially in under-taxed sectors (read real estate, retail and wholesale trade and agriculture) and improving tax administration to

improve debt sustainability and create space for higher priority development and social assistance spending to protect the vulnerable. The second objective of the next programme would be restoring the energy sector's viability by accelerating cost-reducing reforms, including improving electricity transmission and distribution, moving captive power demand to the electricity grid, strengthening distribution company governance and management, and undertaking effective anti-theft efforts. The third key objective is returning inflation to the target, with a deeper and more transparent flexible foreign exchange market supporting external rebalancing and rebuilding foreign exchange reserves. The fourth and last critical aim would be promoting private-led activity through the actions mentioned above as well as the removal of distortionary protection, advancement of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) reforms to improve the sector's performance, and the scaling up investment in human capital to make economic growth more resilient and inclusive and enable Pakistan to reach its economic potential. The IMF staff-level agreement recognised the "strong programme implementation" by the State Bank of Pakistan and the caretaker government in recent months, as well as the new government's intentions for ongoing policy and reform efforts to move Pakistan from stabilisation to a strong and sustainable recovery. "Pakistan's economic and financial position has improved in the months since the first review, with growth and confidence continuing to recover on the back of prudent policy management and the resumption of inflows from multilateral and bilateral partners", the IMF mission chief to Pakistan, Nathan Porter, noted. However, growth is expected to be modest this year and inflation remains well above

target, Porter said. Porter emphasised that "ongoing policy and reform efforts were required to address Pakistan's deep-seated economic vulnerabilities amidst the ongoing challenges posed by elevated external and domestic financing needs and an unsettled external environment". The mission also welcomed the new government's commitment to continue the policy efforts that started under the current bailout package to entrench economic and financial stability for the remainder of this year. In particular, the authorities recommitted to delivering the fiscal 2024's general government primary balance target of Rs401 billion (0.4 per cent of GDP), with further efforts towards broadening the tax base and continuing with the timely implementation of power and gas tariff adjustments to keep average tariffs consistent with cost recovery while protecting the vulnerable through the existing progressive tariff structures, thus avoiding any net circular debt accumulation in the ongoing fiscal year. The State Bank also reaffirmed to the IMF that it would maintain a prudent monetary policy to lower inflation and ensure exchange rate flexibility and transparency in foreign exchange market operations. Pakistan's new finance minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, who assumed charge last week, had said that his priority was to start negotiations with the Washington-based IMF to bail out the country from its financial woes. Last year, the IMF Executive Board approved the USD 3 billion Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) for Pakistan, the term for which is set to expire next month. So far, two tranches have been issued while the last one is pending the review of the conditions set by the lender. Last year, the timely support by the IMF helped the country to avoid a potential default on its external liabilities.

# Pakistan does not want 'armed conflict' with Af, Khawaja Asif

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has said that Islamabad does not want an "armed conflict" with Afghanistan, days after Pakistani air force jets carried out air strikes against terrorists in the border regions of Ghosht and Paktika inside the neighbouring country. "Force is the last resort. We do not want to have an armed conflict with Afghanistan," he said, warning that Pakistan could block the corridor it provided to Afghanistan for trade with India. "A message needed to be sent that this [cross-border terrorism] has grown too much," Asif said in an interview with Voice of America published on Wednesday, according to the Dawn newspaper. Pakistan wanted to convey to the Afghan interim government in Kabul that "we cannot continue like this," he said while commenting on the Pakistani airstrikes. On Monday, Pakistan carried out intelligence-based operations targeting Tehreek-e-Taliban's Hafiz Gul Bahadur

Group which is responsible for the March 16 attack in Mir Ali, North Waziristan and multiple other terrorist attacks in the country. Islamabad's action came following a deadly attack on Pakistani forces which resulted in the killing of seven soldiers including a Lieutenant Colonel and a Captain. Asif warned that Islamabad could block the corridor it provided to Afghanistan for trade with India. The defence minister asserted that Pakistan had the right to stop facilitating Kabul if it failed to curb anti-Pakistan terrorists operating on Afghan soil. "If Afghanistan treats us like an enemy, then why should we give them a trade corridor?" he asked. Pakistan has repeatedly called on the Afghan interim government to prevent its soil from being used against Pakistan by TTP and other militant organisations — a claim denied by Kabul. Recalling the February 2023 visit to Kabul by a high-level delegation led by him, Asif said he had told the Taliban ministers to not let banned militant Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan's

(TTP) past "favours" tie Kabul's hands. "If they [TTP] have done you a favour and you're grateful to them, then control them. Don't let them start a war with us while living in your country, and you become their ally," Voice of America quoted him as saying. "If they can harm us, then we'll be forced to [retaliate]," he said, expressing hope that Afghanistan would rein in the TTP. Asif alleged that Kabul was letting the TTP operate against Pakistan in a bid to prevent its members from joining the militant Islamic State group's local chapter, known as the IS-Khorasan chapter. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif asserted that his government will not tolerate any acts of cross-border terrorism and that his country would like to exist in peace with all its neighbours. Addressing the first meeting of the apex committee — a top official civil-military body tasked to tackle militancy — since the new government came to power earlier in the month, Shehbaz said that Pakistan would like to have peace with all neighbours.

# Dozens of Rohingya rescued after night on hull of capsized boat

Meulaboh (AP): An Indonesian search and rescue ship on Thursday located a capsized wooden boat that had been carrying dozens of Rohingya Muslim refugees, and began pulling survivors who had been standing on its hull to safety. An AP photographer aboard the rescue ship said 10 people had been taken aboard local fishing boats and another 59 were being saved by the Indonesian craft. Men, women and children, weak and soaked from the night's rain, wept as the rescue operation got underway and people were taken aboard a rubber dinghy to the rescue boat. It was unclear how many refugees were aboard the small craft when it capsized off of Indonesia's northernmost coast on Wednesday, with six survivors initially rescued by local fishermen estimating between 60 and 100 people. It was unclear whether all managed to cling to the capsized craft overnight or whether some had drowned. Indonesia's search and rescue

team only left Banda Aceh city in the evening Wednesday, many hours after the capsizing, and initially had difficulty locating the boat in the choppy waters off the coast. It finally found the boat and the survivors about midday on Thursday. Amiruddin, a tribal fishing community leader in Aceh Barat district, said those rescued indicated that the boat was sailing east when it started leaking and then strong currents pushed it toward the west of Aceh. The six said others were still trying to survive on the capsized craft. About 740,000 Rohingya were resettled in Bangladesh to escape the brutal counterinsurgency campaign by security forces in their homeland of Myanmar. Thousands have been trying to flee overcrowded camps in Bangladesh to neighbouring countries with Indonesia seeing a spike in refugee numbers since November which prompted it to call on the international community for help.

# Vietnam's vice president becomes interim prez

Hanoi (AP): Vietnam's Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan will serve as acting president after the previous president's resignation a year into the position, a Communist Party newspaper reported on Thursday. Analysts said a permanent candidate was unlikely to be selected soon, underscoring the growing concerns among foreign investors about political instability in the Southeast Asian nation that is a growing manufacturing hub and sits at the middle of the US-China competition for global influence. Xuan, 54, became vice president in 2021 and she will be serving as acting president for the second time, the Tuoi Tre daily reported. On Wednesday, President Vo Van Thuong resigned due to unspecified violations that hurt the perception and reputation of the party and the state, the Communist Party said. Thuong's predecessor Nguyen Xuan Phuc had resigned last year to take "political responsibility" for corruption scandals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the violations were not detailed, analysts said the party's language made it



clear he was implicated in the anti-corruption campaign. That the youngest president in Vietnam's modern history, once considered the protégé of Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong, 79, became its shortest-tenured is a "political earthquake," said Nguyen Khac Giang, an analyst at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. And it is likely to be followed by a "very complicated" succession within the party that'll likely last until the all-important National Congress in 2026 — the party's most important meeting when the successor to the Trong, Vietnam's most powerful politician, will be determined.

# SL Speaker survives no-trust vote

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lanka's Parliament Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena on Thursday survived an opposition-sponsored no-trust motion, the first of its kind in the island nation's history. Abeywardena won with 117 against (the motion) and 75 for in the vote held in the 225-member Assembly. The main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) moved the no-trust motion alleging him of government bias in addition to violation of the Constitution. The opposition charged that Abeywardena, a member of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), failed to accommodate the highest court-recommended amendments to the controversial online safety bill adopted at the end of January. Abeywardena was also accused of using his tie-breaking vote at the constitutional council to appoint the incumbent police chief. He was blamed for acting in consort with President Ranil Wickremesinghe to appoint Deshabandu Tennakoon to the police chief's job despite Tennakoon facing strictures by a court in a fundamental rights petition.

# Indonesia's defence minister, accused of abuses under dictatorship, declared election winner

AP ■ JAKARTA

Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto was announced the winner of the presidential election in the world's third-largest democracy on Wednesday over two former governors who vow to contest the result in court over alleged irregularities. Subianto, who was accused of abuses under the past dictatorship and chose the son of the popular outgoing president as his running mate, won 58.6 per cent of the votes. Former Jakarta Gov. Anies Baswedan received 24.9 per cent and former Central Java Gov. Ganjar Pranowo got 16.5 per cent, the General Election Commission said. It posted polling stations' tabulation forms on its website, allowing for independent verification. Subianto said he will respect those who made different

choices in the vote. "We call on all Indonesian people to look to the future together," he told a news conference. "We must unite and join hands because our challenges as a nation are very big." Subianto has received congratulatory messages from other Southeast Asian nations as well as the Chinese, Russian, French, Dutch and British governments, who all expressed their wishes to work with his new government. "We look forward to partnering closely with President-elect Subianto and his Administration when they take office in October," US State Secretary Antony J. Blinken said after his victory was confirmed. About 300 demonstrators held banners and signs criticising outgoing President Joko Widodo for supporting Subianto and alleging widespread fraud. They burned



photos of the president with trash near the election commission's compound. The second- and third-place finishers have refused to concede. On Thursday morning, Baswedan's lawyers filed a challenge to the results in the Constitutional Court. Pranowo also plans a court challenge. "We do not want to let these various deviations from

democracy pass without historical records and set a bad precedent for future election organisers", Baswedan said after final results were announced. They have alleged fraud, citing the vice presidential candidacy of Widodo's son. Widodo could not run again, and his son's candidacy has been seen as a sign of his tacit backing of Subianto. Widodo's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, is 37 but became Subianto's running mate after the Constitutional Court made an exception to the minimum age requirement of 40 for candidates. The court's chief justice, who is Widodo's brother-in-law, was then removed by an ethics panel for failing to recuse himself and for making last-minute changes to election candidacy requirements. The new president will be inaugurated on October 20 and will have to appoint a

Cabinet within two weeks. Subianto had claimed victory on election day last month after unofficial tallies showed he was winning nearly 60 per cent of the votes. Voter turnout was about 80 per cent, the election commission said. Subianto won in 36 of 38 provinces and received 96.2 million votes compared to 40.9 million for Baswedan, who won in two provinces. Baswedan, the former head of an Islamic university, won a massive majority in the conservative westernmost province of Aceh. Pranowo, the candidate of the governing Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, received 27 million votes and did not win any provinces. Todung Mulya Lubis, a prominent lawyer who represents Pranowo, asserted that election irregularities occurred before, during and after the polls. Widodo has dismissed the

fraud allegations, saying the election process was watched by many people including representatives of the candidates, the election supervisory agency and security personnel. "Layered supervision like this would eliminate possible fraud," Widodo told reporters last month. "Don't scream fraud. We have mechanisms to solve the fraud. If you have evidence, take it to the Election Supervisory Agency. If you have evidence, challenge it to the Constitutional Court." The campaign teams of Baswedan and Pranowo said they would provide evidence for their claims. But Lubis said his team has had difficulty getting witnesses to testify in court due to alleged intimidation by authorities. He acknowledged that election irregularities occurred before, during and after the polls. Widodo has dismissed the

cult. The ethics panel that removed Anwar Usman as the court's chief justice allowed him to remain on the court under certain conditions, including banning him from involvement when the court adjudicates election disputes this year. That means any such cases brought to the court would be decided by eight justices instead of all nine members. Subianto's campaign highlighted the Widodo administration's progress in reducing poverty and vowed to continue the modernisation agenda that has brought rapid growth and vaulted Indonesia into the ranks of middle-income countries. But Subianto has laid out few other concrete plans for his presidency, leaving observers uncertain about what his election will mean for the country's growth and its still-maturing democracy.



# PSBs saw fall in NPAs over last six months: Survey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

All public sector banks in India showed a reduction in non-performing asset levels over the last six months while only 67 per cent of private sector banks reported a decline during the period, said a FICCI-IBA Bankers' survey released on Thursday.

The survey revealed that 77 per cent of the respondent banks reported a decrease in the NPA levels in the last six months, with public sector banks reporting better asset quality as compared to their private sector counterparts.

The 18th round of the FICCI-IBA Bankers' survey was carried out for the period July to December 2023. A total of 23 banks, including public sector, private sector and foreign banks, participated in the survey. These banks together represent about 77 per cent of the banking industry, as classified by asset size.

Over half of the banks covered in the FICCI-IBA Bankers' unveiled on Thursday believe that gross non-performing assets would be in the range of 3-3.5 per cent over the next six months.

"All responding public sector banks (PSBs) have cited a reduction in NPA levels while amongst participating



private sector banks, 67 per cent of banks have cited a decrease. None of the respondent PSBs and foreign banks have stated an increase in NPA levels over the last six months while 22 per cent of private banks reported an increase," the survey highlighted.

Amongst the sectors that continue to show a high level of NPAs, most of the participating banks identified sectors such as Food Processing, Textiles, and Infrastructure. The survey also suggests that the outlook for non-food industry credit over the next six months is optimistic with 41 per cent of the participating banks expecting non-food industry credit growth to be above 12 per cent

while 18 per cent feel that non-food industry credit growth would be in the range of 10-12 per cent.

Moreover, 36 per cent of the respondents are of the view that non-food industry credit growth would be in the range of 8-10 per cent.

"Over half of the respondent banks in the current round believe that Gross NPAs would be in the range of 3-3.5 per cent over the next six months. 14 per cent of respondents are of the view that NPA levels would be in the range of 2.5-3 per cent," Ficci stated. As such, term deposits have picked up pace as reported by the respondent banks. Further, around 70 per cent of respondents have reported a decrease

in the share of CASA deposits in total deposits.

According to the survey, 65 per cent of respondent banks reported credit standards for large enterprises to have remained unchanged as against 54 per cent in the last round.

Respondents reporting easing of credit standards has decreased to 17 per cent in the current round as against 29 per cent in the previous round while those reporting tightening in credit standards were largely the same as in the previous round. For SMEs too, 64 per cent of the respondent banks reported no change in credit standards in the current round, and 27 per cent have reported easing of credit standards.

"India's economy held relatively well (7.6 per cent) in FY24 compared to other major economies driven by strong investment growth and a rebound in industrial activity.

"Credit growth also continued to rise, supported by factors such as economic expansion and a continued push for retail credit which has been supported by improving digitalisation. The banking sector's clean balance sheets support further loan growth going forward," Ficci stated.

The survey findings show that long-term credit demand has seen

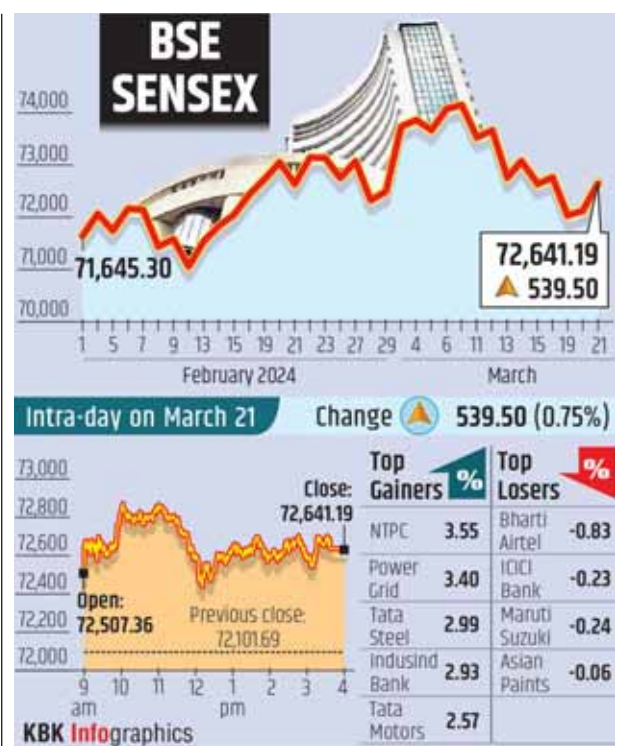
continued growth for sectors such as Infrastructure, Metals, Iron and Steel, Food Processing. Infrastructure is witnessing an increase in credit flow with 82 per cent of the respondents indicating an increase in long-term loans as against 67 per cent in the previous round.

Customers' search for higher rates and the ability to lock those interest rates for a longer time has led to a shift in favour of term deposits, found the survey.

Over 40 per cent of respondents have reported a decrease in requests for restructuring of advances in the current round of the survey as compared to 54 per cent in the previous round.

The proportion of respondent banks citing an increase in requests for restructuring of advances was 17 per cent, which is the same as in the previous round. Bank-wise analysis revealed that 50 per cent of participating PSBs have cited a decrease in requests for restructuring of advances while 30 per cent of such respondents have reported an increase in such requests.

As per respondents, some of the sectors that may continue to show NPAs over the next six months include textiles and garments, agriculture and gems and jewellery.



## Sensex, Nifty surge nearly 1 per cent

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty surged nearly 1 per cent on Thursday in tandem with a rally in global markets after the US Fed projected three rate cuts this year.

Rising for the second day, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 539.50 points or 0.75 per cent to settle at 72,641.19. During the day, it zoomed 780.77 points or 1.08 per cent to 72,882.46. The NSE Nifty climbed 172.85 points or 0.79 per cent to 22,011.95.

From the Sensex basket, NTPC, Power Grid, IndusInd Bank, Tata Steel, Tata Motors, JSW Steel, Tech Mahindra and Larsen & Toubro were the biggest gainers.

Bharti Airtel, Maruti, ICICI Bank and Asian Paints were the laggards.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, and Hong Kong settled significantly higher while Shanghai ended lower. European markets were

trading in positive territory. Wall Street ended with remarkable gains on Wednesday. The S&P 500 jumped to an all-time high. The Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite also hit record-high levels.

"Domestic market is taking cues from the global market infusing optimism as the Federal Reserve signalled to remain on track for three interest rate cuts this year despite inflation staying above long-term target," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.08 per cent to USD 85.88 a barrel. Foreign institutional investors offloaded equities worth Rs 2,599.19 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. The 30-share BSE benchmark rebounded 89.64 points or 0.12 per cent to settle at 72,101.69 on Wednesday. The NSE Nifty climbed 21.65 points or 0.10 per cent to 21,839.10.



## Robust regulatory frameworks must to check digitalisation risks, says RBI Deputy Governor

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Robust regulatory frameworks are needed to protect customers from misuse and fraud resulting from rapid digitalisation in financial services and proliferation of fintech platforms, RBI deputy governor Swaminathan J said while speaking at an event in Paris.

Addressing the Global Money Week 2024 earlier this week, the deputy governor said the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitalisation in financial services, prompting a swift transition to online mode by service providers and customers, according to an RBI statement.

Accompanying this surge in digitalisation was also the proliferation of fintech platforms, he said.

Often operating outside the regulatory envelope and unconstrained by legacy systems that typically encumber traditional banks, fintech companies exhibit remarkable agility and adaptability in offering customised financial products, Swaminathan added.

"These developments are indeed welcome. However, while they offer immense benefits such as accessibility and hyper-personalization, they also heighten the risk of misuse and fraud. They can expose consumers to risk of cyberattacks, data breaches, and often times, some financial harm," he said.

The senior RBI official emphasised that consumers may struggle to resolve disputes or obtain compensation due to lack of transparency on the part of

such players. "These new risks must be addressed through robust regulatory frameworks, enhanced cybersecurity measures, and increased consumer awareness initiatives," he said.

The deputy governor also shared some of the approaches adopted in India through regulation, supervision and enhanced consumer awareness.

He elaborated on Indian regulations and supervision, including the requirement of multi-factor authentication for most of payments through electronic modes and fund transfers, guidelines on digital lending, and national cyber crime reporting portal.

"Despite all these measures, instances of unauthorised transactions due to compromised credentials from phishing attacks or customer negligence are not uncommon," Swaminathan said.

The RBI therefore, makes concerted efforts to foster a culture of financial prudence and resilience through customer awareness and education campaigns, he said in his speech on topic 'Safe banking practices - protecting the young'.

"As we focus on safeguarding the young, let us not forget the vulnerability of our senior citizens to financial frauds and cybercrime. It is incumbent upon us to extend our efforts to ensure their financial security and well-being as well," the RBI official said.

He stressed that it is imperative to remain vigilant and proactive in addressing the emerging risks and challenges.

## M&M, Adani Total join hands to set up EV charging infra

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mahindra & Mahindra on Thursday said it has tied up with a unit of Adani Total Gas to establish electric vehicle charging infrastructure across the country.

The auto major and Adani Total Energies E-Mobility Ltd (ATEL) have inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in this regard. The MoU sets a roadmap for the creation of an expansive EV charging infrastructure across the country, it added. Moreover, the partnership will also entail rolling out e-mobility solutions to provide seamless access to the charging network for the customers covering discovery, availability, navigation, and transactions, the Mumbai-based automaker said.

With this association, electric vehicle XUV400 customers will now have access to more than 1,100 chargers, it added.



"This alliance is a cornerstone in enhancing the EV charging infrastructure, ensuring our customers enjoy seamless access to charging network and digital integration for an unparalleled EV experience," M&M President - Automotive Division Veejay Nakra said. In line with the commitment to enhance customer experience with partner network, the company is actively onboarding multiple partners to broaden the EV ecosystem, driving the adoption of electric vehicles, he added.

Adani Total Gas Executive Director & CEO Suresh P Manglani said the collaboration with M&M for the charging infrastructure will bolster the confidence of customers to embrace EV technology as part of the energy transition.

"Together, such steps will help reduce carbon emissions, and help India meet its climate action goals," he added.

## Kia India to hike vehicle prices by three per cent

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Kia India on Thursday said it will increase prices of its range of vehicles by up to 3 per cent from April 1, 2024.

The decision is attributed to the escalation in commodity prices and supply chain-related inputs, the automaker, which sells models like Seltos, Sonet and Carens, said in a statement.

It marks the first price adjustment by the company this year, Kia India said. Commenting on the development, Kia India National Head Sales and Marketing Hardeep Singh Brar said the company consistently strives to deliver premium and technologically advanced products to customers.

"However, due to the continuous increase in commodity prices, adverse exchange rate and rising input cost, we are compelled to implement a partial price hike," he added.

The company is absorbing a significant portion of the increase, allowing customers to continue driving their favourite Kia cars without a major dent in their pockets, Brar stated. Kia has sold almost 1.16 million units in India and overseas markets combined to date.

## RBI issues omnibus framework for recognising SROs for regulated entities

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank on Thursday issued an omnibus framework for recognising Self-Regulatory Organisations (SROs) for its regulated entities, under which SROs would be required to establish minimum benchmarks for their members. The RBI said SROs enhance the effectiveness of regulations by drawing upon the technical expertise of practitioners and also aid in framing/fine-tuning regulatory policies by providing inputs on technical and practical aspects.

With the growth of regulated entities (REs) in terms of number as well as scale of operations, increase in adoption of innovative technologies and enhanced customer outreach, the RBI had felt the need to develop better industry standards for self-regulation.

The framework said, SROs will be expected to operate with credibility, objectivity and responsibility under the oversight of the regulator, with the objective to improve regulatory compliance.

In general, SROs are expected to adhere to a set of overarching objectives for betterment of the

sector they represent, foster advancement and address critical industry concerns within the broader financial system, it said. "The primary responsibility of the SRO towards its members would be to promote best business practices. The SRO shall establish minimum benchmarks and conventions for professional market conduct amongst its members," the RBI's framework said.

The term 'members' used in the framework refers to the REs which accept the membership of the SRO.

The central bank also said a SRO is expected to be an ally of the

Reserve Bank in ensuring better compliance with the regulatory guidelines, protection of stakeholder interests, foster innovation and detection of early warning signals. The SROs would be a not-for-profit company registered under Section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013. The membership of SRO shall be voluntary. Existing SROs already recognised by the Reserve Bank would continue to be governed by the terms and conditions under which they were recognised, unless this framework is specifically extended to such SROs.

## One crore customers of rivals using our mobile banking app: ICICI Bank

PTI ■ MUMBAI

ICICI Bank on Thursday said one crore customers of rival banks are using its interoperable mobile banking application, Imobile Pay. The second largest private sector lender has allowed customers of other banks to use the app since December 2020,



and services like making payments to any UPI ID or merchants, paying bills, recharging online and money transfers are possible.

In a statement, the bank said there has been a 26 per cent growth in the overall transactions value between April 2023 and February 2024 as com-

pared to the same period a year ago, on the mobile app, while the average ticket size increased by 16 per cent. It can be noted that other lenders also followed suit by making their offerings interoperable. Industry watchers feel offering the experience of using services can be of help in tapping more business through wares like loan products which are also available and also a shift in banking relationships. ICICI Bank's head for digital channels and partnerships Sidhartha Mishra said 400 services are available on the banking platform.



## Rupee rises six paise to close at 83.13 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee appreciated 6 paise to close at 83.13 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, supported by a firm trend in domestic equities and a weak greenback amid rising appetite for riskier assets.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.07 against the greenback. The unit hit an intra-day high of 83.04 and a low of 83.16.

The local unit finally settled at 83.13 (provisional) against the dollar, higher by 6 paise from its previous close of 83.19. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.15 per cent higher at 103.54.

### BUSINESS BRIEF

#### SRM TO START SPORTS TRIAL

SRM Institute of Science and Technology - among India's biggest and pre-eminent destinations for higher education across disciplines - will be admitting athletes who have excelled at State, National, and International events for the academic year 2024-2025. The trials for the various sports and games, track and field, and indoor sports will be held from April 4 onwards. SRMIST provides wholesome education to India's talented young women and men and as part of this endeavour, encourages students who excel in sports.



#### PFC CONSULTING TRANSFERS SOLAPUR TRANSMISSION SPV TO TORRENT POWER

PFC Consulting Limited, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Power Finance Corporation Limited, a Maharatna CPSE, has transferred a transmission project-specific Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) 'Solapur Transmission Limited' to 'Torrent Power Limited', the successful bidder, on March 20. The SPV was transferred in the presence of Manoj Rana, CEO, PFCL, Sudhir Prasad, Executive Director, Torrent Power Limited and other senior officials of PFC Consulting and Torrent Power Limited. The selection of successful bidder was carried out through Tariff Based Competitive Bidding process for selection of Transmission Service Provider for establishment of transmission system in line with guidelines notified by Ministry of Power, Government of India.

## You Tube mandates labelling of synthetic, AI generated content

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Google-owned online video platform YouTube has asked its creators to label synthetic and AI-generated content, in an effort towards supporting responsible AI innovation. Viewers increasingly want more transparency about whether the content they're seeing is altered or synthetic, YouTube said in a blog post.

"We're introducing a new tool in Creator Studio requiring creators to disclose to viewers when realistic content - content a viewer could easily mistake for a real person, place, scene, or event - is made with altered or synthetic media, including generative AI. We're not requiring



creators to disclose content that is clearly unrealistic, animated, includes special effects, or has used generative AI for production assistance," the blog post said.

The new feature is meant to strengthen transparency with viewers and build trust between creators and their audience, it added. A label will appear in the expanded description, but for videos that touch on more sensitive topics like health,

news, elections, or finance, YouTube will also show a more prominent label on the video itself. YouTube said the labels will roll out across all YouTube surfaces and formats in the weeks ahead, starting with the mobile app, followed by visibility across its desktop and TV formats.

The video platform said it will grant some time to its creators to adjust to the new process, but will consider enforcement measures in the future for creators who consistently choose not to disclose this information. "In some cases, YouTube may add a label even when a creator hasn't disclosed it, especially if the altered or synthetic content has the potential to confuse or mislead people," YouTube said.

## Nissan Motor India names Vatsa as MD

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Nissan Motor India on Thursday said it has appointed Saurabh Vatsa as Managing Director effective April 1, 2024.

Vatsa was appointed as the company's Deputy Managing Director on January 15 this year.

Vatsa will report to Frank Torres, President of Nissan India Operations and Region Divisional Vice President of Business Transformation (AMIFEO), the automaker said in a statement.

He succeeds Rakesh Srivastava who retires on March 31, 2024. "As we transition into a new phase of the transformation plan for India, we are assured of having an experienced and



insightful leader in Saurabh Vatsa. He will build on the foundation laid by Rakesh and spearhead our next phase of growth," Torres stated. Nissan has committed to invest Rs 5,300 crore in India as part of the Renault-Nissan Alliance and introduce more products for the Indian consumer as part of the transformation plan in 2023.

These changes underpin the business transformation plan and product pipeline the brand has prepared for India.

## Zydus launches Olaparib

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Ahmedabad-based Zydus has launched Olaparib, a PARP inhibitor, under the brand name IBYRA in India, aiming to make advanced cancer treatment accessible to all. This drug targets specific genetic mutations prevalent in certain types of cancers, offering a more tailored and effective treatment approach. According to Globocan 2022 data, India sees nearly 2.75 lakh newly diagnosed cancer patients, with a significant portion suffering from breast, ovarian, prostate, and pancreatic cancers. Patients diagnosed as HRD positive or with BRCA mutations stand to benefit from IBYRA, a next-generation targeted therapy specifically designed for them.



# SHARATH TO BE INDIA FLAG BEARER

## Mary Kom appointed chef de mission for Paris Games

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Veteran table tennis player and reigning CWG champion Sharath Kamal will be India's flag bearer at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games while legendary boxer MC Mary Kom was on Thursday appointed the chef de mission of the country's contingent.

The 41-year-old table tennis player symbolises "the unity and spirit of our contingent as they compete on the Olympic stage", the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) said in a statement while making the announcement.

"It has been an unbelievable three weeks. From not even sure of Olympic berth to playing the way I did in Singapore last week, jumping 54 spots in the rankings to being named India's flag bearer," Kamal told PTI.

"It is the biggest honour and fairytale stuff considering it is going to be my fifth and last Olympics. Also, not many TT players have got that honour, globally. I just got a call from IOA and I could not believe it." Kamal was India's flag bearer at the closing ceremony of 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, where he won three gold medals. Recently, the Indian men's and women's team had qualified for the team events of Olympics for the first time by the virtue of their rankings. Six-time World Champion Mary Kom, bronze medalist at the 2012 London Olympics, will be assisted by luger Shiva Keshavan, who has been



appointed the deputy chef de mission. "Mary Kom's unparalleled dedication to sports and inspiring journey makes her a natural choice to guide and mentor our athletes at the Olympics," IOA said. "Keshavan, a former Olympian in luge, brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to support the team's management and coordination efforts."

Olympic bronze medalist in rifle shooting Gagan Narang will oversee India's operations at the shooting range, which is very far from the main venues. India will be sending its largest-ever shooting contingent to Paris with 19 quotas already in pocket. "His (Narang's) meticulous approach and understanding of athletes' needs will ensure a conducive environment for our shooters," the statement added. "These appointments represent a blend of experience, expertise, and leadership that will contribute significantly to the

success of our athletes on the global stage, the statement added. Commenting on the appointments, IOA president PT Usha, said, "We are delighted to have such a distinguished and capable team of officials leading our contingent for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Their expertise, dedication and passion for sports will undoubtedly inspire our athletes to achieve their best and make the nation proud."



## Jhanjharia, Bagri advance to second round

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Kanishk Jhanjharia and Anurag Bagri will clash in the second round after recording one-sided wins in their respective first-round contests here at the CCI Billiards Classic event on Thursday. At Sir Wilson Jones hall, Cricket Club of India's (CCI) Jhanjharia cruised past Amit Sapru 400-213 in the contest lasting over 90 minutes,

constructing a break of 69 in the process. Bagri remained steady on the path to win as he defeated Anil Sagar 308-227. In another match, Akshay Gogri was made to work hard by Rahul Narang for a close 304-278 victory while Sunil Jain also had to toil, winning by a margin of 277-200 over Anwar Choudhary. Carl Serrao staged a fightback to defeat Nikhil Ghadge 287-221 and Thakkar also scripted

a similar story in his win over Shekhar Surve by 240-189. **Results (round 1):** Vatsal Ponda beat Bakirao Pacharne 329-240; Yash Rungta beat Sanket Bapat 263-208; Akshay Gogri beat Rahul Narang 304-278; Sunil Jain beat Anwar Choudhary 277-200; Carl Serrao beat Nikhil Ghadge 287-221; Rishabh Thakkar beat Shekar Surve 240-189; Anurag Bagri beat Anil Sagar 308-227; Kanishk Jhanjharia beat Amit Sapru 400-213.

## Verstappen says he plans to fulfil his Red Bull contract



AP ■ MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA)

Formula 1 champion Max Verstappen wants to stay with Red Bull until the end of his contract in 2028 amid rumours of a switch to Mercedes, even as he admits to actively avoiding knowing any more than he does about the ongoing turmoil at the team.

Verstappen said on Thursday he was flattered by comments at the last race in Saudi Arabia by Mercedes boss Toto Wolff, who said he'd "love" to have the Dutch star as a driver. Verstappen said he wants to stay with his Red Bull "family."

"That's why I signed the deal in the first place," Verstappen said. "As I've said before, I'm happy within the team and, of course, it's very important that we try to keep the key players in the team (together) for a longer period of time because that's, of course, where the performance is as well — and at the end of the day, it's a performance business."

"It's also my intention to be here until the end (of it) because, of course, it would be a great story for me personally to see it out, because it basically means that I've been part of one family, and one team."

Rumours that Verstappen could seek a move to Mercedes were wide of the mark, he said.

"We all want the same, and we want to just perform on track, so that's what we want to focus on as a team," he said.

"The problem is also that (speculation is happening) not only within the team but from the outside and that is something that I cannot control. The only thing you can control is, of course, (getting everyone moving) on the same direction within the team, and I feel that is what we are doing." He also defended the way Red Bull is handling the saga surrounding team principal Christian Horner, stating it was all done "in the right way," though necessarily distanced himself from the process.

"I also don't want to be too involved with these kinds of things," Verstappen said. "At the end of the day, I'm the driver who's here to look at the performance side of things, that's what I'm hired for."

"But from what I know, everything is handled in the right way and I'm not going into any further details on that side. I don't know more than that, and I also don't want to know because that's not my job or my

task within the team."

The team's parent company last month dismissed a complaint of alleged misconduct by Horner toward a team employee. Verstappen's father Jos has been sharply critical of Horner, claiming the team could "explode" if he remains in charge.

The employee whose complaint sparked the investigation has since been suspended. The employee has exercised the right to appeal Red Bull's clearance of Horner and filed a formal complaint with the F1 governing body, the FIA.

Earlier Thursday, Verstappen's Red Bull teammate Sergio Pérez downplayed speculation that three-time champion Verstappen could be considering a switch to Mercedes.

"The team is in a very strong position because with the results we're currently having, the harmony that there is in the team, I think to achieve that it takes a couple of years probably," Pérez said before the first practice sessions in Melbourne.

Verstappen won the first two F1 races in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Pérez finished second in both.

"Right now, the dynamic, everyone in the team is working really well together, the whole engineering group, it's really united," Pérez said. "And, you can see that on-track, and how efficient we've been in the last year. So, I don't see any reason to change it."

He added it would "obviously be a blow for the team if Max were to leave."

Pérez denied any knowledge of an exit clause in Verstappen's Red Bull contract, which has been the subject of intense speculation.

"I don't have that clause," Pérez said. "I don't know what clause Max has in his contract, it's better if you ask him. Max, as far as I know, has a contract with the team and is fully committed with the team."

"And the rest, it's not for me to comment, nothing to do with me." The Australian Grand Prix is set for Sunday. There are two practices scheduled for Friday and another on Saturday before afternoon qualifying.

## Lewis praises F1 Academy director Susie

AP ■ MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA)

Seven-time Formula 1 world champion Lewis Hamilton has criticized FIA while supporting Susie Wolff's "bravery" for filing a criminal complaint against the sport's governing body in the French courts.

Wolff, who is married to Mercedes F1 team boss Toto Wolff, and director of the all-female junior racing series F1 Academy, on Wednesday said she had begun legal action "in relation to statements made against me" by the FIA.

The Wolffs were the subject of an FIA investigation last December which sought to determine if the couple shared confidential information. It followed allegations of a conflict of interest published in BusinessF1 magazine. But FIA



closed the investigation after just 48 hours, following near-identical statements from the remaining nine teams denying they'd lodged the complaint required to commence it, with Susie Wolff beginning legal action on March 4. Hamilton, though, firmly

backed Wolff during a media session Thursday at Albert Park ahead of Sunday's Australian F1 Grand Prix, in which he lamented the lack of accountability in the sport.

"I'm incredibly proud of Susie Wolff," Hamilton said. "I think she's so brave, and she stands

for such great values. She's such a leader. And in a world where often people are silenced, for her to be standing up sends such a great message."

"I love that she's taken it out of this (F1) world to fight it from the outside because there is a real lack of accountability here within this sport, within the FIA. Things that are happening behind closed doors, there is no transparency, there is clearly no accountability."

On the grid, Hamilton said he was confident that his Mercedes team can improve pace from his W15 car to challenge for podiums and races later this year. He last climbed the podium's top step at the 2021 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. The British driver is a two-time winner of the Australian Grand Prix, with his last win in 2015.

## Haaland plays down injury concerns and reveals message from Guardiola ahead of joining Norway squad

AP ■ OSLO

Erling Haaland played down concerns he sustained an injury in training with Norway this week — and revealed a message he was sent by Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola before going away on international duty.

Haaland has linked up with his national team ahead of friendly matches against the Czech Republic on Friday and Slovakia on Tuesday.

Footage from a Norway training session on Tuesday showed Haaland in apparent pain, even if the Norwegian team doctor said afterward there was no problem with the striker's fitness.

Speaking at a news conference in Oslo on Thursday, Haaland said he was "feeling fine."

"I didn't walk off the training — I don't

know who wrote that," he said in English. "I trained the full training and I'm feeling good and ready to play the game."

Guardiola will be hoping Haaland comes through Norway's games unscathed, with City facing a run of big matches after the international break in its bid to win the English Premier League-FA Cup-Champions League treble for the second straight season. Indeed, City plays Arsenal, one of its rivals for the Premier League title, in their first game back on March 31.

Haaland, the top scorer in the Premier League last season and this season so far, has already missed nearly two months of this season because of a foot injury.

"The only thing Pep said," Haaland said cheerfully in quotes carried by

Norwegian newspaper VG, "was, If you're not well when you come back, I'll come after you."

Haaland referenced the challenge of playing so many games for club and country each season, with the March international break coming at an awkward time for club managers ahead of the final weeks of the domestic seasons.

"It's nice to play for the country," Haaland said in VG. "But facing Arsenal next weekend versus (playing) the Czech Republic at home is different. I'm not going to lie. There's a big difference. "But what do you do? There are as many games as possible on the calendar. That seems to be the goal."

Norway hasn't qualified for the European Championship being played in Germany across June and July.

AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS (US)

## Murray beats weary Matteo

Andy Murray won another lengthy match with Matteo Berrettini, who appeared weary and leaned on his racket to keep his balance during Murray's 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 victory at the Miami Open.

Playing his first match on the ATP Tour this season, Berrettini was serving with Murray leading 5-2 in the second set when he seemed to become dizzy, resting his racket on the court to hold himself up. He was visited by a medical attendant, who checked his blood pressure before play continued.

Berrettini left the court after dropping that set but was able to finish the match, which last 2 hours, 49 minutes. It was a rematch of Murray's 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 6-7 (7), 7-6 (10-6) victory that lasted more than 4 1/2 hours in the first round of the 2023 Australian Open.

"It was obviously a great win for me," Murray said. "Started off a little bit slow but then I did think I played pretty well across then end of the first set through to the end of the match. Created a lot of opportunities and he was struggling for a little bit end of the second and beginning of



the third, and I capitalized on that and got off to a quick start in the third and served it out well at the end." Plagued by injuries, Berrettini hadn't played a match on tour since being forced to retire during his match in the

second round of last year's U.S. Open. The 2021 Wimbledon runner-up returned last week and reached the final of a Challenger tour tournament in Phoenix.

The 36-year-old Murray has

won the title twice in Miami and joined Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal as the only active players with 30 wins at the event. The three-time Grand Slam champion advanced to face No. 29 seed Tomas Etcheverry in the

second round. Naomi Osaka, a two-time U.S. Open champion, beat Elisabetta Cocciaretto 6-3, 6-4 in her return to Miami. The runner-up to Iga Swiatek in her last appearance in 2022 advanced to face No. 15 seed Elna Svitolina in the second round.

Elsewhere on the first full day of the tournament, Sloane Stephens celebrated her 31st birthday by beating Angelique Kerber 6-2, 6-3 in a matchup of past U.S. Open women's champions. Also, Donna Vekic outlasted Karolina Pliskova 6-4, 2-6, 6-2; and Americans Danielle Collins and Shelby Rogers advanced with three-set victories.

Men's winners included Denis Shapovalov, who beat Luciano Darderi 6-3, 6-7 (3), 6-4; and Martin Damm Jr., who outlasted China's Zhang Zhizhen 7-6 (2), 7-6 (3).

The 32 seeded players were given first-round byes. Aryna Sabalenka, the No. 2 seed, is expected to play her opening match against Paula Badosa on Friday.

## Tough day for Indian trio at Queen Sirikit Cup

PTI ■ CHRISTCHURCH (NEW ZEALAND)

The Indian trio of Zara Anand, Vidhatri Urs and Heena Kang endured a tough day as it dropped three places to be ninth in the team competition at the 44th Queen Sirikit Cup golf tournament here on Thursday.

First round co-leader in the individual event, Zara (73-77) fell to 11th while Vidhatri (79-77) dropped from T-20 to T-26.

Heena Kang (85-76), on the other hand, climbed to 30th as against T-32 a day earlier as she shot the best score among the Indians on the second day.

Heading into the third round in the 12-nation championship, Australia's Sarah Hammett with a 5-under 67 moved into top spot and a total of 141 total. She is five in front of second-placed Kim Shi-hyun. While Korea's Lee Hyo-song, Kiwi Eunseo Choi and Chinese Taipei's Hsieh Ping-hua are in a three-way tie



for third place. Among teams, Australia leads by three over Korea with Japan one further behind. Chinese Taipei are fourth and hosts New Zealand share fifth spot with Thailand on 297 followed by Indonesia (301), Singapore (304), Hong Kong and India (both 305), the Philippines 322 and Malaysia 326. Zara failed to pick any birdies but hung in tenaciously on the challenging Clearwater Golf

Club with just one birdie in the first 13 holes. She then dropped four bogeys in the last five holes and finished with 77. Vidhatri had an action-packed round with three bogeys, six bogeys and a double bogey. She managed just three pars on the front nine and another five on the return journey in her round of 77. Heena had one birdie on the fifth, but after that she had three bogeys and a double for 76.



# FOUR MEN, FOUR NARRATIVES AND A CUP ON HORIZON

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The never-ending speculation surrounding Mahendra Singh Dhoni's retirement, Virat Kohli's 16-year-itch, the second chance that life has offered Rishabh Pant and Rohit Sharma's bleeding heart will make for intriguing sub-plots in the annual carnival called the Indian Premier League starting on Friday.

Known to do the unexpected, Dhoni stepped down as captain on the eve of the IPL opener against Royal Challengers Bengaluru, handing over the reins to Rituraj Gaikwad, a man he mentored for the leadership role.

But the 42-year-old will once again smile wryly when asked if it's his last year.

His heir apparent Pant, literally back from the brink after a life-threatening accident, will be desperate to show the world that he can still hit those one-handed sixes with elan.

In between, he could also be slipping in those quotable

quotes behind the stumps that are considered broadcast gold. Rohit will be the last person to show his scars hidden behind the typical 'Mumbaiya' nonchalance as he gets down to enjoying his evening dates at the Wankhede albeit without the captain's title. The partisan crowd would nonetheless look forward to those pulled sixes.

As for King Kohli, he would be in pursuit of that elusive jewel in his crown. By his own admission, he has been longing for a big title and his own passionate approach to the game would be a key factor in deciding whether the RCB men manage to emulate the women this year.

A bigger prize is also at stake for at least 10 to 12 other players, who will be vying for eight slots in the New York-bound flight that will take off at the end of May for the T20 World Cup in the USA and the Caribbean.

There will be unbelievable comebacks by some, a few new stars will emerge, there will also be those usual rags to riches stories and all of it could



unfold in a matter of four minutes, the time it takes to deliver one over. Just like overnight stars, the merciless social media will find villains too.

The likes of Pat Cummins (SRH) and Mitchell Starc (KKR), who raked in big money during the auction, will

shoulder a massive burden of expectations through the season. For every six that they concede at the death or each yorker that turns into a full toss, the two will be reminded of salaries which are north of USD two million.

**CSK AND MI THE ETERNAL FAVOURITES:**

Away from the money talk and purely on cricketing prowess, CSK would be the favourites for a sixth IPL title with a squad that has all bases covered.

Rachin Ravindra was a breakout World Cup star and now he has the chance of becoming a T20 superstar.

Deepak Chahar, the much-maligned seamer who is often accused of making CSK his first priority, would like his wrists to do the talking for him and with new captain Rituraj Gaikwad, Moeen Ali, and Ravindra Jadeja in the mix, anything can happen.

And how can one forget Dhoni, the smiling assassin. All it takes is one six in T20 cricket and Dhoni's love affair with the maximum is eternal. For Mumbai Indians, it has been a story of all or nothing. Five titles till 2020 and three years of lull forced them to change a captain, who can still whip up crazy sentiments.

It will be a tightrope walk for Hardik Pandya the leader. For other captains, they need to win the on-field games but Pandya needs to win the dressing room too. There will be seniors with bruised egos, knowing that a shot at leadership has bypassed them. They could well be difficult to handle.

If he wins that dressing room, half of his battle will be won as MI do have a solid batting line-

up even if the bowling looks weak.

For RCB, the greatest inspiration could be the women's team that gave the men a crash course on how to play calmly at the business end where Kohli and Co. Have faltered.

Kohli wouldn't mind 200 runs less but he would badly want that trophy. Dhoni has laid his hands on it five times, so has Rohit Sharma.

But what would rattle Kohli is the fact that even KKR has won it twice under his bete noire Gautam Gambhir.

However, Kohli alone cannot win it. The Dinesh Karthiks, the Faf du Plessis, the Glenn Maxwells and likes of Akash Deep need to believe that 'E saala Cup Naam de' (This time Cup is Ours).

Gambhir, who is now back in the KKR camp, would be as ambitious if not more.

No one has forgotten the ugly war of words that broke out between him and Kohli. In his familiar KKR dugout, Gambhir the coach could make a difference.

A middle-order comprising Shreyas Iyer, Nitish Rana, Rinku Singh and Andre Russell can send shivers down any bowling attack's spine. And then comes Starc, who needs to justify his nearly Rs 25 crore deal.

The team that Gambhir quit, Lucknow Super Giants has a new coach in Justin Langer and it would like to do better than Play-offs this time but with a bowling attack that doesn't exactly inspire confidence.

Ditto for Delhi Capitals although Pant's comeback could well be the most emotionally charged story of this IPL. Gujarat Titans, the team of the last two seasons, might not make it this time with no Pandya or Mohammed Shami, who is out injured, in its line-up.

Rajasthan Royals with Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sanju Samson, Dhruv Jurel and Jos Buttler will be serious contenders.

Sunrisers Hyderabad, despite having Pat Cummins as captain, and Shikhar Dhawan's Punjab Kings are not expected to go the distance.

## Dhoni hands over CSK captaincy to Gaikwad

**PTI ■ CHENNAI**

The legendary Mahendra Singh Dhoni on Thursday "handed" over the Chennai Super Kings captaincy to opener Rituraj Gaikwad on the eve of the IPL opener here, a stunning decision that is bound to send speculation swirling on his playing future with the franchise.

In a post on X, the Indian Premier League made the announcement a day before CSK take on Royal Challengers Bengaluru. The five-time champions issued a brief statement soon after.

"MS Dhoni has handed over Chennai Super Kings' captaincy to Rituraj Gaikwad ahead of the start of TATA IPL 2024. Rituraj has been an integral part of Chennai Super Kings since 2019 and has played 52 matches in IPL during this period. The team looks forward to the upcoming season," said CSK.

There is speculation that Dhoni will retire at the end of the season and therefore the franchise felt the need for a smooth transition in the stalwart's presence as a player.

Gaikwad, who has played six ODIs and 19 T20s for India, made his CSK debut in 2020 and has gone on to represent the team in 52 games.

"Whatever Dhoni does, it is in the best interest of the team. I got to know of the decision just before the captains' meeting. You have to respect his decision, it is his call," CSK CEO Kasi Viswanathan told PTI.

The stylish opener had a memorable run last year, aggregating 590 runs in 16 games at an impressive strike rate of 147.50. His breakout year was 2021 when he



amassed 635 runs in 16 games. The 27-year-old from Maharashtra is not new to captaincy, having led the Indian team to the gold medal in the Asian Games last year.

CSK and Dhoni share an unbreakable bond and the World Cup-winning captain is expected to keep a significant role in the franchise going forward albeit not as a player.

CSK had attempted the leadership transition even in the 2022 edition but it did not work out with Ravindra Jadeja handing back the captaincy duties to Dhoni after eight games.

"It didn't work out at that time, this is different," said Viswanathan.

Dhoni officially announced his retirement from international cricket on August 15, 2020 but has kept playing the IPL.

The 42-year-old, who played with a dodgy knee last season, underwent a surgery after leading CSK to their fifth title.

Dhoni has played as many as 250 IPL matches, scoring more than 5000 runs at a strike rate

of 135.92.

Due to his knee issues, Dhoni pushed himself down to number 8 in the batting order last season but after regaining full fitness, he is expected to bat higher up this edition.

Former India pacer Irfan Pathan met Dhoni recently and claimed that the latter appears to be in good shape following the knee surgery.

"Last year, Dhoni said he was giving a gift to his fans with his cricket. I met with him a few days ago, he was playing pickleball for two hours non-stop. His knee was as fit as it ever was. It's an exciting time for fans; he now has his vintage old look. Will we get the vintage old Dhoni too?" Pathan asked on Star Sports.

"His role has changed in the past two years. He comes in lower-order, plays lesser deliveries but hits the big shots, the strike rate is high. It's a small innings but a memorable one.

"I think there won't be much of a change in that this year. He will continue to play that role," said Pathan.

## More than happy to help Gill in any way I can: Williamson

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

With the IPL season set to roll on Friday, one captain who has 100 Tests under his belt is willing and ready to mentor a newbie captain who will be taking over a leadership role for the first time.

The unassuming Kane Williamson says he will be happy to help his Gujarat Titans captain Shubman Gill in any way he can as he considers the Indian a "great thinker", a huge compliment coming from someone who is a bonafide legend in international cricket.

"He (Gill) is a great player and like I said a great cricketing brain, and I would certainly encourage him to walk that path and take his decisions. No doubt what he will look to do the same," Williamson told PTI in an interview.

The 24-year-old Gill was handed Gujarat Titans' reins after incumbent Hardik Pandya made an abrupt exit from the franchise for his former team and spiritual base Mumbai Indians.

The dashing right-hander only recently recovered from a poor run of form when he came good in the home Test series against England, hitting two hundreds in the series.

He is set to explore the uncharted territory of captaincy in the IPL and Williamson promises to lend a helping hand whenever Gill needs.

"I will be more than happy to help Shubman in any way I can and Shubman knows that," said Williamson.

The Titans have had couple of great IPL seasons in 2022 and 2023. They won the title in 2022 and lost to Chennai Super Kings in a last-ball thriller the next year.

Williamson said that the youngster, who is widely regarded the next Indian batting superstar, has the calibre to navigate his way through choppy waters.

"As for the team and myself, I would generally like to share some ideas. It is a long season ahead. It will be quite a journey and we will all be learning through it," said the veteran, who captained New Zealand to 22 wins in 40 Tests.

With no Mohammed Shami available due to recuperation from heel surgery, it won't exactly be a walk in the park for Gill but Williamson said such challenges are a routine for any captain.

"Obviously, there has been a few changes in the camp, that's a



challenge for every team as every year you have some adjustments to make, really exciting opportunity for Shubman and we need to focus what's there in front of us," he said.

The support staff comprising head coach Ashish Nehra, Cricket Director Vikram Solanki and Mentor Gary Kirsten are also there to help Gill ease into his role.

As far as his own batting position is concerned, Williamson hinted that it would be his usual No. 3 slot.

"I think it will be a top order option. There are so many quality players, whether that's local Indian players, who have been exceptional or the overseas ones. So, it will come down to balance

and I think a top order option," he said.

**WELCOMES TWO BOUNCERS PER OVER:** Williamson quite liked the idea of bowlers being allowed two bouncers per over from this IPL as he feels it will ensure a more balanced contest.

"I think it is a good addition and it will bring slightly different dynamic to the game. It is a nice extra option for the fast bowlers," said Williamson.

However, at smaller grounds, rule might just aid the batters.

"There could be smaller grounds around country and some very good surfaces which offer some high scores. Also addition of Impact Players, weighed more

towards the runs side of the things. So, it is a nice addition and will play a role for sure."

**I COUNT MY BLESSINGS EVERY DAY AFTER INJURY:** In the middle of last year, Williamson had a horrifying knee injury which required Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) reconstruction and since his comeback, he is just happy to play the game he has always loved.

So, is there anything left to achieve for a man who has played 100 Tests, notched up 32 tons in the traditional format, won a World Test Championship title, and has been a part of the greatest ODI World Cup final?

He paused and smiled.

"It is an interesting question. It is about having to remind yourself that you love this game as well. There's always more of those tournaments and more of those things.

"So just kind of trying to stand alone and appreciate where you are after having an injury, coming back. Just being grateful to be back playing and doing your bit for team, whatever team that is," he said.

But he has the grace and humility to accept reality as well.

## Smriti, Richa only Indians picked in Hundred draft

**PTI ■ LONDON**

Women's Premier League-winning captain Smriti Mandhana and wicketkeeper batter Richa Ghosh were the only Indian players who found takers during the Hundred Draft here.

Mandhana, who led the Royal Challengers Bengaluru to a WPL title last Sunday, was drafted in by Southern Brave Women's while her teammate Richa found a new home at Birmingham Phoenix Women's.

The left-handed Mandhana had a good run in the WPL, scoring 300 runs from 10 matches with two fifties, while Richa, who often did the role of a finisher, made 257 runs from 10 matches with two half-centuries and a strike-rate of 142.

Mandhana has already been a part of the Brave dressing room, and notably, she



worked alongside Luke Williams here before he joined RCB as the coach during the WPL 2024.

The Phoenix is Richa's second team in the Hundred as she had earlier donned the jersey of the London Spirit.

However, some other players like Harmanpreet Kaur, Deepti Sharma, Jemimah Rodrigues and Shreyanka Patil, who were among the 17

Indian players registered for the draft, could not find bidders during the draft.

Shreyanka, who played for RCB, was the highest wicket-taker during this season's WPL with 13 wickets from eight matches.

But they still have a chance to enter the Hundred as the teams can rope in one more overseas player each through the Vitality Wild Cards.

## CSK need to dismiss dangerous Kohli in powerplay, says Hayden

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Virat Kohli can be the most dangerous if he gets to bat long and Chennai Super Kings will need to get him out early on a tricky Chepauk pitch during the IPL opener against Royal Challengers Bengaluru, said former Australia opener Matthew Hayden.

Kohli will be returning to action at the IPL after a paternity break which saw him miss the five-Test series against England at home.

The much-awaited T20 extravaganza will kick off with a clash between CSK and RCB at the Chepauk Stadium in Chennai on Friday.

"His record is a 30 average at Chepauk stadium with a strike rate of 111. Someone like Virat, even the greatness of Virat has been reduced in terms of his overall performance at that venue," Hayden told Star Sports.

"It is a tricky venue to bat on, especially as an opening batsman. It gets a weird tennis ball type bounce, it's quite slow and difficult to play shots early, but the longer you bat, the game opens up and that's where Virat can be at his most dangerous.



"It's really tricky, so they're going to need Virat Kohli out early inside the powerplay. They've done so thrice over

the last 5 innings, and they'll need to do so for the 4th time."

Hayden said Kohli can take the game away if he stays longer.

"If he is prepared to bat the 20 overs, he can put together a match-winning performance. 200 is very accessible at Chinnaswamy but not necessarily at Chepauk Stadium," he said.

"A 150, 130 at times has been plenty of runs when you get guys as good as (Ravindra) Jadeja there who bowls stump to stump with the odd ball to turn and the odd ball that stays low."

Kohli, who last played against Afghanistan in the T20 series in January, has been in red-hot form, having scored 765 runs in the ODI World Cup last November to become the second-highest run scorer in the history of the tournament.

"Virat's form is brilliant. I don't remember the last time he's played so well for so long. Yeah, he is a big player, but the last 2 years, he's been amazing. In the World Cup, he became the player of the tournament and the hunger and desire to score runs make him a big player," said former India batter Mohammed Kaif.

## Mithun, Nikhil, junior selector Krishan in race to become BCCI selector

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Former India spinner Nikhil Chopra, Delhi veteran Mithun Manhas and current junior selector Krishan Mohan are in the race to become a BCCI selector for the senior national team. The BCCI had invited the applications for the single position in the five-man selection panel back in January.

Currently, West Zone is represented by two men Salil Ankola and chairman Ajit Agarkar. Ankola is likely to make way for a selector from North Zone, which is not represented in the panel following the resignation of Chetan Sharma.

Former Punjab cricketer Mohan, who is part of the junior selection panel since September 2021, is among the aspirants who have applied for the job.

Former India wicketkeeper Ajay Ratna has also thrown his hat into the ring. The application deadline was January 25 but with the IPL starting Friday, the board still has enough time to fill the vacancy. The Cricket Advisory Committee headed by Ashok Malhotra is expected to interview the shortlisted candidates in the near future.

"There are a few strong candidates who are in the race and they include Mithun, Chopra and Mohan," said a BCCI source.

Mithun played as many 157 first class games for Delhi and was a regular in the IPL from 2010 to 2014. Recently, R Ashwin spoke glowingly about Mithun's special abilities with the bat ahead of his 100th Test in Dharamsala.