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BJP finalises Bihar seat deal

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■
NEW DELHI/PATNA

In a very significant as well as an interesting note, the BJP on Monday sealed the Lok Sabha seat sharing with its partners in NDA, including Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) and amplifying the base of Chirag Paswan-led LJP faction while completely downsizing the LJP-led by Union Minister Pashupati Paras Paswan. Sources said Paras may quit the Modi Cabinet in a couple of days and either may contest Lok Sabha as an independent candidate or join the RJD-Congress led INDIA Bloc. As per the announcement by Bihar NDA partners, the BJP will contest 17 constituencies, the JD(U) 16 and Chirag Paswan's LJP (Ram Vilas) five, while Pashupati's LJP was left with nil. Two other NDA allies — Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) and Upendra Kushwaha-led Rashtriya Lok Morcha — will contest one seat each. Vinod Tawde, the BJP's in-charge for elections in Bihar, announced the seat sharing formula at the BJP headquarters, along with partners of the State. Tawde expressed confidence that the NDA will win all 40 seats in the State. It had bagged 39 seats in 2019. After Nitish returned to the NDA fold recently, the BJP was able to flex itself and contest on more seats than JD(U). In the 2019 Lok Sabha, both parties had



contested 17 seats each while the then undivided Lok Janshakti Party headed by Ram Vilas Paswan had fought six. The BJP and the LJP had won all of their seats while the JD(U) had bagged 16. "The BJP will contest 17 out of the total 40 seats and the JD(U) will contest 16. The Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) will contest five seats," Tawde said. Bihar LJP (Ram Vilas) chief Raju Tiwari said Chirag Paswan will contest

the Hajipur Lok Sabha seat, which has been given to the party under the seat-sharing pact for the 2024 polls. Paswan's estranged uncle Paras represents the constituency in the outgoing Lok Sabha and had been pitching his claim over it. Bihar BJP chief Samrat

Choudhary said talks are going on with Paras, who has already expressed displeasure with the national party after it sealed its alliance with Paswan a few days back. Tawde informed the BJP will contest Paschim Purvi Champaran, Aurangabad, Araria,

Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Maharajganj, Saran, Ujjiyarpur, Begusarai, Nawada, Patna Sahib, Patliputra, Arrah, Buxar and Sasaram. The JD(U) will field its candidates from Valmikinagar, Sitamarhi, Jhanjharpur, Supaul, Kishanganj, Katihar, Purnia, Madhepura, Gopalganj, Siwan, Bhagalpur, Banka, Munger, Nalanda, Jehanabad and Sheohar, he said. While the LJP (Ram Vilas) will field its candidates from Vaishali, Hajipur, Samastipur, Khagaria and Jamui Lok Sabha seats, former Bihar Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi-led HAM will join the fray from the Gaya Lok Sabha seat while the RLM from Karakat. All three main parties have been given the seats they won in 2019 barring a few changes to accommodate two smaller parties. The Sheohar seat has shifted from the BJP's quota to the JD(U), while Nawada was obtained from the LJP. The JD(U) ceded its claim on Karakat and Gaya, both of which it won in 2019, to accommodate the two new allies. Sources said Paras who was brought in Modi Cabinet after the demise of Ram Vilas Paswan who held the fort then, successfully broke the LJP by claiming to be the original one while Chirag was ignored.

Some parties dodge donors disclosure

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

After the electoral bonds data was released as part of the disclosure of 2018-19, some political parties have 'shied' away to acknowledge donors and said they were unaware of the 'content' in the packet delivered at their premises at some point of time while the maximum amount of recipients of funds the BJP, the Congress, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) have not shared any details about their donors. Some said they received the funding instruments through "drop box" or by post without any name. In a related development, the Supreme Court on Monday directed the State Bank of India (SBI) to disclose all details related to electoral bonds, including the date of purchase and redemption, the name of the purchaser and recipient, denomination, and alphanumeric numbers and serial bonds. The court also ordered chairman of SBI Dinesh Kumar Khara, to file an affidavit by 5 pm on Thursday, indicating that all details in its custody have been disclosed and that no details have been withheld. The data related to electoral bonds disclosed that the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) mentioned "not readily available" in the column for listing out the names of



donors while the Trinamool Congress (TMC) said the electoral bonds were sent to the party office and were "dropped in the drop box". The party said some bonds were sent through messengers from various persons who wished to support the party, many of whom prefer to remain anonymous. The NCP, then led by Sharad Pawar, expressed inability to furnish details of donors against each bond as the party had not maintained details or issued any receipts. The letter by the NCP to the Election Commission said several of its office-bearers were busy with the election campaign. "Wherever possible we have indicated the name of the person through whom bonds were received by the party," the NCP said. The BJP cited the amendments to the

Representation of People Act, 1951 and the relevant portions of the Reserve Bank of India Act and the Income Tax Act for not revealing its donors. "It is duly submitted that the electoral bonds were introduced with the aim of bringing only accounted funds in political funding while protecting the donors from any consequences, therefrom," the BJP said in its letter to the Election Commission. The Congress shot off a letter to the State Bank of India (SBI) seeking details of donors of electoral bonds, the amount, the bank account in which it was credited and the date. The SBI responded to the Congress that the details of the electoral bonds were available with the political parties and shared the statement of the bank account which was shared with the Commission. The DMK, which received most of its donations from a lottery firm, reached out to its donors to seek details of the electoral bonds as demanded by the Supreme Court in 2019. The DMK, which received almost 77 per cent of its funds from lottery king Santiago Martin's Future Gaming, said it had reached out to the donors of the party to get details of the donations they had made.

Modi, Rahul engage in verbal duel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI/HYDERABAD

As the campaigning pitch for the Lok Sabha elections gained momentum, political parties on Monday drew attention to the use of the Hindi word 'Shakti' at an Opposition party rally in Mumbai, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi stating that the upcoming polls will be a fight between those who want to destroy 'Shakti' and those who worship it. In a counterattack against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for his 'Shakti' jibe against him, Modi mentioned that the nation dedicated the success of 'Chandrayaan' to 'Shiv Shakti', and criticised Opposition parties for discussing the destruction of 'Shakti'. Rahul in his speech on Sunday said, "Our fight against Modi is not on a personal level. Modi is a 'mask' who works for a 'Shakti' (power). He is a shallow man who doesn't have a 56-inch chest". "On Sunday in Mumbai, there was an INDIA alliance rally after the announcement of the schedule for elections. They announced their manifesto at Mumbai's Shivaji Park, and said their fight was against 'Shakti'. For me, every mother and every daughter is a form of 'Shakti'. Mothers and sisters, I worship you as 'Shakti'. I am Bharat Maa's 'pujari', Modi asserted. "INDIA alliance in its manifesto announced to finish/destroy Shakti. I accept their challenge. I will sacrifice my life for the security of mothers and sisters," he further said. The Congress hits back saying the



elections will decide whether the country would be run by 'Asuri Shakti' (demonic power) or 'Daivik Shakti' (divine power). Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray too came in the line of cross fire and hit out at the BJP for criticising him over his opening remarks while addressing the same INDIA Bloc rally in presence of Rahul and other leaders of the Opposition. Thackeray had addressed the audience as his "deshbhakt and deshpremi brothers and sisters" instead of the traditional invocation of "Hindu brothers and sisters" at the Shivaji Park gathering in Mumbai. Thackeray said he used the "deshpremi" word because the INDIA Bloc wanted to save the country and democracy. Under attack for his "fight against

shakti" remark Rahul clarified that he was not talking about any religious power but the 'shakti' of unrighteousness, corruption and falsehood. He accused Modi of twisting his words and said he was speaking about the power of which Modi was wearing the mask. "The 'shakti' (power) that I mentioned, Modi is the mask of that power and we are fighting against it. It is such a power that today it has captured India's voice, India's institutions, the CBI, I-T, ED, Election Commission, the media, Indian industry and the entire constitutional structure of India in its clutches," Rahul said in a social media post. "The same 'shakti' (power) is given India's ports, India's airports, while India's youth is given the gift of 'Agniveer' that breaks their courage. While saluting the same power day and night, the country's media suppresses the truth.

EC removes top bureaucrats ahead of poll

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) on Monday issued orders for the removal of six Home Secretaries — including the top bureaucrats from Gujarat, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh including the transfer of West Bengal's Director-General of Police Rajiv Kumar, who is considered close to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. The reshuffle, not an uncommon move by the Election Commission before major polls, also includes the transfer of the Home Secretaries of Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, as well as the secretaries of the general administrative departments of the Chief Ministers of Mizoram and Himachal Pradesh. This aims towards upholding the principles of free, fair and transparent for the conduct of 2024 Lok Sabha elections. "The officials who have been removed in these seven States were found to be holding dual charges in the office of Chief Minister in respective States which may potentially compromise or be seen to be compromising the impartiality and neutrality required during the electoral process, especially in matters relating to law and order, deployment of forces," sources said. Sources said the decision to shift the West Bengal DGP was taken as the officer was removed earlier too from active election management-related duty during the 2016 Assembly election in the State and in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The EC has asked the State Chief Secretary to post Rajeev Kumar to



PTI / File photo

a "non-election" related assignment, and, as an interim arrangement, post an officer immediately junior to him as DGP. The State has been asked to send a panel of three officers who would be posted as the DGP. Criticising the removal of West Bengal DGP Rajeev Kumar, the Trinamool Congress on Monday claimed it was a glaring example of BJP's "control" over the Election Commission (EC). Addressing a Press conference in Kolkata, TMC general secretary Kunal Ghosh claimed that BJP was gripped by the fear of losing the Lok Sabha seats in the state. "The BJP is trying to misuse all institutions, including the EC. They are even meddling with the appointment of the election commissioners by changing the recruitment panel. The step taken today is a glaring example of the BJP's control over the EC," Ghosh said. "It doesn't matter if BJP changes even 100 such officers because the people of Bengal are with Mamata," he added. Elections for the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal will be

held over seven phases, beginning on April 19. Kumar was appointed as the DGP in December 2023 after the retirement of Manoj Malaviya. Previously, he has served as the chief of Kolkata Police and Bidhannagar Police. He also headed the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Special Task Force (STF), and served as the principal secretary of the department of information technology and electronics. In 2019, the CBI accused Kumar of allegedly suppressing and destroying evidence in the investigation of the Saradha scam while leading a SIT set up by the State Government to probe the matter. This step comes as part of the Commission's resolve and commitment to maintaining a level playing field and ensuring the integrity of the electoral process, which has been emphasised by CEC Rajiv Kumar time and again and recently during the Press Conference for announcement of Schedule for General Elections 2024.



Telangana Governor Tamilisai resigns

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Telangana Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan has tendered her resignation, the Raj Bhavan in Hyderabad said on Monday. Soundararajan, who is also the Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry, has submitted her resignation to President Droupadi Murmu. "The Governor of Telangana and Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry Dr Tamilisai Soundararajan has tendered her resignation with immediate effect. The resignation has been submitted to the President of India," an official communique said. The resignation comes in the wake of reports of her plans to contest the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha polls from Tamil Nadu. Soundararajan had contested the 2019 Parliament elections from Thoothukudi seat in southern TN on a BJP ticket and lost to DMK's Kanimozhi.

Robotic elephant to bless devotees in Kochi

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Next time when devotees through the Thrikkayil Mahadeva Temple at Kochi, they will be blessed by Mahadevan, an elephant resplendent in his golden Nettippattam and other paraphernalia like Aalavattam, Venchamaram and of course the coloured umbrella. As the devotees chant the panchashara sloka "Nama Shivaya" and "Shivashtakam", Mahadevan, standing three meters tall and weighing 800 kg would clap his ears and wag his tail. He will also bless the devo-

tees by placing his trunk on their heads. The pilgrims can rest assured that Mahadevan would not do anything to upset them. So what makes Mahadevan different from elephants in other temples? He is a mechanical elephant and a peace loving one. "There will not be any threat to the devotees or for that matter anybody because of him. He enjoys the offerings placed in front of him and blesses all those who come in search of divine blessings," Khushboo Gupta, Director of Advocacy Projects, PETA India, working

on animal rights and safety. This is a major relief to festival aficionados across Kerala where elephants paraded in front of temples misbehaving because of factors like psychological issues or musth. When the pachyderms come under the spell of musth, they run amok and attack whoever comes in front of them. The elephant Mahadevan does not belong to this category. Gupta told The Pioneer that this is the second elephant which is being offered to temples in the State. A major controversy is about parading elephants during temple



festivals (known in Malayalam as Pooram) that are held during February to May. "The scorching summer heat takes a heavy toll on the pachyderms and some of them become violent causing major disasters. They are forced to stand throughout the day as musicians play the percussion instruments. It is a matter of prestige for the temple authorities to parade as many elephants as possible," said Gupta. According to Ramesh, an elephant lover from Palakkad, the Arattupuzha Pooram in Thrissur showcases nearly 80

elephants every year while the Thrissur Pooram has a parade featuring 70 elephants. Animal lovers have been crying foul over the cruelty meted out to these innocent animals which are expected to live in dense forests eating wild grass and drinking water from the streams. Elephants, which are forced out of their "residential areas" in deep forest because of deforestation and encroachments by human beings, come to the periphery of the jungles in search of food and water. But the ingenious humans

blame the animals for trespassing into their settlements, a process by which the victims are blamed as aggressors. South Indian actress Priya Mani too joined the PETA in its endeavour to make the festivals a dignified event. Authorities of the Thrikkayil Mahadeva Temple are ready to rent out the services of Mahadevan to other temples so that devotees in those regions too could enjoy a peaceful festival. Now, the mechanical elephants would make critics of 'live' elephants keep their mouths shut.

Inter-State Coordination Committee meeting held at PHQ, Jharkhand

Top cops discuss law and order and crime control through mutual coordination

PNS : RANCHI

Director General of Police, Jharkhand, Ajay Kumar Singh along with Director Generals of Police and senior police officers of the border states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh in view of the Lok Sabha elections 2024 held a meeting of the Inter-State Coordination Committee was held through video conferencing.

At the beginning of the meeting, Additional Director General of Police Operations, Sanjay Anand Rao Lathkar, while welcoming all the present officials and senior officials of the Border States

through video conferencing, highlighted the importance of this meeting for the preparation of Lok Sabha elections 2024. In the meeting, the DGP, Jharkhand mainly discussed about active sharing of intelligence information, appointment of nodal officer, action being taken in the light of Left Wing Extremism scenario, mutual discussion on problems arising in the border areas. The outline of the action plan of the mechanism for cooperation, effective prevention of smuggling of drugs and illicit liquor, curbing the activities of Naxalites/criminal elements in the border areas and inter-state coordination meetings at all levels were discussed.



DGP Ajay Kumar Singh holds a meeting of Inter-State coordination committee in Ranchi on Monday. PNS

Inspector General of Police, Operations-cum-State Police Nodal Officer, Jharkhand stressed on timely exchange of intelligence for effective action against the activities of Naxalites operating in the border area, smuggling of illegal weapons, narcotics and illicit liquor. Also, emphasis was laid on establishing coordination and running active campaigns against Naxalite groups operating in the border states of Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and West Bengal.

In this meeting, there was discussion on making the check posts/blocks established in all the border states more effective and an effective

strategy was made so that concrete action could be taken against criminals and smuggling of illegal weapons, narcotics, illegal drugs and illicit liquor.

There should be frequent coordination meetings at all levels, the updated list of criminals, fugitives and history sitters active in the border areas will be shared.

In order to further strengthen the coordination meetings being held at the headquarters level as well as regional/regional level, also at the police station level of the border districts, emphasis was laid on taking immediate effective action by forming a mutual consensus.

In this meeting, RK Mallik,

ADG, Headquarters, Dr. Sanjay Anand Rao Lathkar, ADG, Operations, Akhilesh Jha, IG, Ranchi, Jharkhand, Amol Vinukant Homkar, IG, Operations, were present in this meeting from Jharkhand Police Auditorium. -Co-State Police Nodal Officer, Jharkhand, Prashant Kumar, IG, Special Branch, Aseem Vikrant Minj, IG, Anoop Virthare, DIG, Indrajit Mahatha, DIG Dhananjay Kumar, DGP, Odisha, Arun Kumar Sarangi, Director (Intelligence), SK Priyadarshi, ADG (Operations) S. Devdoot Singh and other senior police officers of Odisha and Chhattisgarh Police through video conferencing were present.

Marandi writes to CS for CBI probe in alleged JPSC paper leak

PNS : RANCHI

The opposition BJP on Monday demanded a probe into the allegation of question paper leak during the preliminary examination of the state's Public Service Commission.

The BJP has demanded a CBI probe and cancellation of the examination held on Sunday. BJP State president and former Chief Minister Babulal Marandi in connection has written a letter to Chief Secretary (Jharkhand) for a CBI probe in alleged paper leak of Jharkhand Public Service Commission (JPSC) PT examination and JSSC examination held in January this year. Out of two examinations, the government has denied paper leak in JSSC examination while in JSSC examination the state government has constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) probe in paper leak.

The BJP leader in his letter has mentioned that stu-



dents have informed him that the paper booklet number and OMR answer sheet number were found to be unequal and this has been published in all the major newspapers and visual media.

Marandi further stated that recently, a similar case had come to light, where a case of question paper leak had come to light in the General Graduate Qualified Combined Competitive Examination-2023 conducted by JSSC in 735 centers across the state for 2025 posts, after which JSSC dated 28.01.2024. All the shift examinations held on 10th and the examination to be held on 4th February were canceled due to unavoidable reasons, in this context too, I wrote a letter (letter no. 139/BLM/24) to the Chief Secretary, State Government on 01st February 2024, informing the CBI. Due to repeated cancellation of examinations and incidents of paper leaks, questions are raised on the impartiality of JSSC and JPSC, due to which all the participants have to suffer the consequences.

In the last 4 years, the dreams of poor and tribal

children of Jharkhand have been made a mockery. The people sitting at the top of power are engaged in serving their own interests and not for the public. State officials also have the same attitude. In the last 4 years, no such examination has been conducted in which there were no cheating, irregularities or irregularities. The officers and leaders sitting at the top leadership, who fill their pockets with the money of state money and corruption, have forgotten that their work is public service.

Marandi, targeting the state government, alleged that there is no such ineffective, poor and disorganized State Service Commission anywhere in the country. He alleged that an institution, which has been given the responsibility of conducting examinations for the last 4 years, is continuously failing in it. If it is happening then why are the officers taking salaries in the name of public

service? All officers involved in such criminal acts should be dismissed with immediate effect.

Marandi urged the CS to take cognizance of the above incident and recommend to CBI for investigation against the officers involved in the General Graduate Qualified Combined Competitive Examination-2023. JPSC Preliminary Examination conducted by JSSC and such misdeeds.

Earlier, on Sunday a section of job aspirants created a ruckus in some examination centres in Chatra, Jamtara and Dhanbad districts on Sunday, alleging that the question paper of the Jharkhand PSC preliminary examination was leaked.

A purported video also went viral in which students were seen writing papers outside the examination hall in Jamtara district, however, the authenticity of the video is still to be proved.

Keep all Voter Awareness Forums in urban areas active: CEO



Chief Electoral Officer K Ravi Kumar during a meeting in Ranchi on Monday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

Chief Electoral Officer K. Ravi Kumar told all the district election officials of the state to run a special campaign from 20th to 30th March 2024, especially in the urban areas, through Voter Awareness Forum to make the voters aware about the exercise of their franchise and ethical voting. If voters do not exercise their right to vote due to any particular inconvenience, then motivate them to vote by getting such reasons resolved immediately. He said that under Section 135B of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, a provision of paid leave has been made for the employees of all government/non-government/business institutions to exercise their franchise. The Election Commission of India has made a provision to set up Voter Awareness Forum in every institution for voter awareness. If you organize a Voter Awareness Forum in any government/non-government/private or commercial institution, make it operational immediately.

If the percentage of voting in a particular place has been low in the previous elections, then hold a meeting with the nodal officials of the Voter Awareness Forum of the nearby voters and get feedback from them and on the basis of the feedback received, the voters of that area should be encouraged to

exercise their franchise. If any inconvenience is possible, ensure that it is resolved immediately. Today, through video conferencing from his office, he was reviewing the preparations for the Lok Sabha elections in various districts with all the district election officials of the state.

He said that all the preparations for voting through postal ballot should be completed well in advance, so that the voters exercising their franchise through postal ballot do not face any kind of problem in voting. For this, the concerned Assistant Returning Officer will ensure that all his concerned officers/employees are compulsorily trained in all the technical aspects of the entire process of voting through postal ballot of the Election Commission of India. Apart from this, issues like district wise vehicle management for elections, compliance with model code of conduct, preparation of counting centres, reach of voter awareness programs etc. were also thoroughly reviewed.

During this, Additional Chief Electoral Officer Sandeep Singh, Additional Chief Electoral Officer Neha Arora, OSD Geeta Choubey, Joint Chief Electoral Officer Subodh Kumar and officials of the Chief Electoral Officer's office were present.

Meanwhile, Kumar said that for the first time in the state, the assembly by-election in Gandey is being held

simultaneously with the Lok Sabha election. All political parties are expected to make this great festival of democracy successful by playing their important role in the clean, fair, fear-free and error-free conduct of these elections.

Highlighting the important provisions related to elections, he said that they should compulsorily inform each of their workers about the related provisions of the Election Commission of India so that due to lack of information, they do not unknowingly violate the related provisions of the Election Commission of India. Found. He was addressing a workshop organized for the representatives of recognized political parties in connection with the Lok Sabha General Election 2024 and 31-Gandey Assembly by-election in the conference room of his office today.

On this occasion, while providing copies of the "Handbook for Political Parties" issued by the Election Commission of India to the representatives of all political parties, he said that all the guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India related to political parties related to elections have been compiled in it. Has gone. He said that this manual should be studied seriously so that active cooperation of all political parties can be achieved in conducting clean and fair elections.

LAND SCAM AND ILLEGAL MINING

ED questions former CM Hemant Sorens Media Advisor

PNS : RANCHI

Abhishek Prasad alias Pintu, press advisor to former Chief Minister Hemant Soren on Monday morning reached the Enforcement Directorate (ED) office. The Central probe agency—ED has summoned Prasad for questioning in connection with land scam and illegal mining case. The ED had earlier raided the hideouts of Pintu and several other persons on January 3, 2024. For questioning in the same case, ED had asked Sahibganj DC to appear in the ED office on January 11, Vinod Singh on January 15 and former CM's press advisor Abhishek Prasad alias Pintu on January 16. However, Pintu has written a letter to ED with a plea that his wife is ill, hence he should be given time after January 22 for questioning. After which ED sent summons to

Pintu and called him for questioning on March 18.

ED had received many important data from the house of Abhishek Prasad alias Pintu. ED is also expected to get important evidence from the seized mobile phone. ED had sent a letter to the state police on August 8, 2022 regarding the business relations of architects Vinod Kumar Singh, Hemant Soren and Abhishek Prasad. In this letter, ED had sought information about Vinod Singh, the director of Grid Consultant Architect Company and under the influence of his political connections; he had made huge income and created property in the name of his family members.

The ED's probe began primarily on the basis of a First Information Report (FIR) registered by the Sahibganj police in 2022 against Hemant Soren's MLA repre-



sentative Pankaj Mishra, who has been referred to as the "kingpin" of illegal mining by the anti-money laundering agency.

Bishnu Yadav and Pavitra Yadav, who operated Maa Amba Stone Works, the firm allegedly involved in illegal stone mining in Sahibganj, were also named in the FIR, lodged under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Arms Act and the Jharkhand Minor Mineral Concession Rules (JMMC) Rules, 2004.

In August last year, the

Jharkhand High Court had asked the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to conduct a preliminary enquiry, which is generally a precursor to an FIR by the agency.

Then in November, the agency registered an FIR and booked Pankaj Mishra, Pavitra Kumar Yadav, Rajesh Yadav, Sanjay Kumar Yadav, Bacchu Yadav, Sanjay Yadav, and Suresh Mandal for their alleged role in "pilferage and illegal extraction" of stone at Sahibganj's Nimbu Pathar.

Meanwhile, sources said

that before Holi i.e. on March 18, March 19 and March 20, ED will interrogate three important people of the state. ED has summoned land scam suspect Preeti Kumar on March 20 at 11 am. Ranchi's Hatia DSP Pramod Mishra has been summoned on March 19. Abhishek Prasad alias Pintu has been called for questioning today on March 18. Whereas after Holi, on April 4, ED will interrogate Congress's Barkagaon MLA Amba Prasad in the case of land robbery, extortion and money laundering of money earned in cases registered under the Arms Act. In this case, Amba's father Yogendra Sao is to be interrogated on April 3 and Amba's brother Ankit Raj is to be interrogated on April 5. ED has also summoned Dhanbad's Govindpur CO and Hazaribagh's former CO Shashibhushan Singh on April 2.

'Basic facilities should be available for voters at polling stations'

Take immediate action against officials and personnel negligent in election work: CEO

PNS : RANCHI

Chief Electoral Officer, Jharkhand, K. Ravi Kumar said that in view of the Lok Sabha elections 2024, the District Election Officer should ensure minimum facilities at all the polling stations as per the guidelines given by the Election Commission of India. He said that the officials should also physically inspect the available facilities in all the polling centres under their area and should also take immediate action against the officials and employees who are negligent in the election work.

Kumar was addressing a meeting today through video conferencing with the election related officials of all the districts regarding the physical facilities available at the polling stations.

Jharkhand Education Project Council (JEPCC) Chairman Aditya Ranjan,



Chief Electoral Officer K Ravi Kumar during a workshop with Media persons in Ranchi on Monday. PNS

Joint Chief Electoral Officer Subodh Kumar, OSD Geeta Choubey, election related officials of all the districts and officials of the Chief Electoral Officer's office were present in the meeting.

Meanwhile, addressing a workshop organized for media representatives in his

CEO office today, Chief Electoral Officer K Ravi Kumar said that the role of media is important for clean, fair and peaceful voting. He said that they should play their role in making voters aware to exercise their franchise without any inducement and for ethical

voting.

In the workshop, Additional Chief Electoral Officer Neha Arora informed the media representatives in detail about the guidelines of the Election Commission of India on various points of election expenditure monitoring. While Additional Chief Electoral Officer Sandeep Singh spoke about the Model Code of Conduct, Assistant Chief Electoral Officer Dev Das Dutta spoke about various matters related to elections; Deputy Electoral Officer (Headquarters) Sanjay Kumar spoke about various topics related to media like fake news, paid news. About and System Analyst SN Jameel gave detailed information about the use of various IT applications of the Election Commission. After this, the doubts of all the media representatives were resolved in a question-and-answer session.

Jharkhand to witness rains, hailstorms for two days

PNS : RANCHI

The State is likely to witness rainfall coupled with gusty winds and hailstorm on March 19 and 20 said the Indian Meteorological Department office in Ranchi on Monday. The Met office said that a turf is going through Jharkhand to coastal Andhra Pradesh, which is bringing moisture from the Bay of Bengal.

There will be widespread impact of the turf on March 19 in the State. There will be heavy rains along with hail at many places in several districts. Winds can blow at a speed of 60 kilometers per hour, said head of Met office Ranchi Abhishek Anand here on Monday.

Anand said that the maximum temperature in the State may gradually drop by 2 to 5 degrees Celsius during the next 2 to 3 days. According to the Centre, light to moderate rain with thunder is expected at many places in the state on March 19.

There is a possibility of



light to moderate rain with thunder at some places over western, central and southern parts of the state.

He said that there is a possibility of rain at some places in the south and adjacent central parts of the state on March 21. It is likely to affect East Singhbhum, West Singhbhum, Seraikela-Kharsawan, Simdega, Khunti, Gumla, Ranchi, Ramgarh, Bokaro districts.

According to Anand, an alert has been issued for March 19 to 21. There is a possibility of thunder and lightning at some places.

Strong wind may also blow during the period.

Anand said that winds can blow at a speed of 40 to 50 kilometers per hour. It is likely to affect East Singhbhum, West Singhbhum, Seraikela-Kharsawan, Simdega, Khunti, Gumla, Ranchi, Ramgarh, Bokaro districts.

According to Anand, there is a possibility of thunderstorm and strong wind gust at isolated places in the western, central and southern parts of the state on March 20. The maximum wind speed is likely to be 30 to 40 kilometers per hour. There is a possibility of

thunder and lightning at isolated places in the south-eastern and adjacent central parts on March 21.

There is a possibility of hailstorm at isolated places in Gumla, Khunti, Ranchi, Simdega, Lohardaga and West Singhbhum districts of the state. There will also be strong gusts of wind here. Its speed is expected to be 50 to 60 kilometers per hour.

There is a possibility of heavy rain at isolated places in Gumla, Khunti, Ranchi, Simdega, Lohardaga and West Singhbhum districts of the state.

Voter buddies to aid disabled, elderly voters on polling days

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh Chief Electoral Officer Reena Babasaheb Kangale announced on Monday that voter buddies will be deployed at all polling centres to aid disabled and elderly voters.

She said this in a meeting with representatives of political parties in Raipur. She briefed them about the Model Code of Conduct, election expenditure guidelines, campaigning guidelines, and more.

A voter support centre will be set up at each polling station. All polling stations have ensured basic facilities



like ramps, drinking water, electric lighting, toilets and more, she said. Chhattisgarh will see balloting on April 19 and 26, and May 7, and the results

CEO briefed political parties about the Model Code of Conduct, election expenditure guidelines, campaigning guidelines, and more.

will be announced nationally on June 4.

15 school children hurt in bee attack

STAFF REPORTER ■
KORBA

Around 15 children suffered injuries when a swarm of bees attacked them at a government-run Atmanand English Medium School in Korba district of Chhattisgarh here on Monday.

The incident took place at around 9 am in Kartala town when the boys and girls were playing at the school playgrounds, Korba Superintendent of Police Siddharth Tiwari said.

After being alerted, the school management reached the spot.

They rushed the children to a nearby community health centre where their condition is said to be stable.

It is Didi versus Bhaui in Korba in Chhattisgarh



ABHIJAT SHUKLA ■
RAIPUR

A high-octane battle is expected between a Didi and a Bhaui in Chhattisgarh's Korba parliamentary constituency next month.

The BJP's Saroj Pandey has locked horns with Congress' outgoing MP Jyotsana Mahant. Naturally, a fierce and direct contest is being widely projected.

Saroj Pandey is a Rajya Sabha member from Chhattisgarh whose term ends in April.

Korba, one of the 11 Lok Sabha seats in Chhattisgarh, is a traditional bastion of the Mahant family.

Saroj Pandey is called Didi by BJP workers while as the seat has been twice represented by Charandas Mahant. His wife Jyotsana is widely known as Bhaui.

Former Union Minister and the present Leader of Opposition in the Chhattisgarh Assembly, Charandas Mahant, or his wife Jyotsana have represented the constituency for two out of the three times since the seat was carved out in 2009.

The BJP has been accused of parachuting Saroj Pandey who belongs to Durg region. At the same time, Jyotsana faces allegations of being inactive after being elected in 2019.

Jyotsana denies the charge.

Talking to The Pioneer, she cited the opening of a new medical college, an

office of the Employees State Insurance Corp (ESIC) in Korba district headquarter, and a Degree College at Umreli of the constituency as her achievements during the current tenure.

She also promised many more works and said the Mahant family was committed to the development of the Korba constituency.

Saroj Pandey also denies charges of being an outsider and vowed to augment health facilities and other civic amenities in the mineral-rich district.

The BJP performed well in the Assembly polls late last year. The Korba parliamentary seat comprises eight constituencies, six of which are represented by the BJP.

The parliamentary seat comprises Bharatpur-Sonhat, Manendragarh, Baikunthpur, Rampur, Korba, Katghora, Pali-Tanakhar and Marwahi seats.

Rampur is represented by Congress' Phool Singh Rathia while tribal seat Pali Tanakhar is represented by Tuleswar Markam of Gondwana Gantantra Party (GGP).

Charandas Mahant won in 2009 defeating former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's niece Karuna Shukla of the BJP. He lost to BJP's Banshilal Mahto in 2014 by a narrow margin.

In 2019, Jyotsana succeeded in snatching the seat from the BJP by defeating Jyoti Nand Dubey by a comfortable margin.

Maoist couple with Rs 7 lakh reward surrenders in Sukma



STAFF REPORTER ■
SUKMA

A Maoist couple carrying a collective bounty of Rs 7 lakhs on them on Monday surrendered to security forces in Sukma district of Chhattisgarh.

Sodi Sukka alias Kosa and his wife Sodi Sukki turned themselves in, Sukma Superintendent of Police Kiran Chavhan said.

Kosa, who carried a bounty of Rs 5 lakhs on his head, was the Agriculture Wing President/ Area Committee Member

(ACM) under the Kistaram Area Committee of the outlawed Maoist group.

His wife, who carried a reward of Rs 2 lakhs, was a Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan (KAMS) member. The two were involved in several Maoist incidents.

Three hospital guards held for extorting money

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIGARH

Chhattisgarh Police on Monday arrested three security guards of a government hospital for extorting money from relatives of a pregnant woman to enter the facility in Raigarh city.

Ravishankar Gautam, Omprakash Patel and Shivendra Shukla were from a private security firm, Bundela Securities Bilaspur, Raigarh Superintendent of Police Divyang Patel said.

They on Sunday demanded Rs 100 per person to issue entry passes to relatives of a woman who had come for delivery at the Sant Baba Guru Ghasidasji Memorial Government Hospital here.

The video of the incident went viral following which Raigarh Collector Kartikeya Goel directed the hospital administration to take immediate action.

Former BSP MLA joins BJP



STAFF REPORTER ■
JANJIR-CHAMPA

A two-time MLA in Chhattisgarh on Monday joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) here.

Former legislator Keshav Chandra and scores of supporters joined the party, district media In-charge Pankaj Agrawal

said.

He joined the saffron party in the presence of Cabinet Minister O.P. Choudhary and state unit president Kiran Singh Deo in Jajaiapur in Janjir-Champa district.

Chandra was elected as a Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) MLA from Jajaiapur Assembly seat in 2013 and 2018.

'Youth can script new narratives'

Two-day Ideathon Inaugurated in the Central university

STAFF REPORTER ■
BILASPUR

The Vice Chancellor of the Guru Ghasidas Central University (GGU), Prof Alok Kumar Chakrawal, on Monday said that youths are the carriers of fresh ideas through which they can script new narratives.

"The youth of this country is filled with endless possibilities, which will play a significant role in the development of Viksit Bharat by 2047," he said.

He was addressing the inaugural of a two-day Ideathon 2024, funded by the Department of Science and Technology through the Technology Enabling Centre (TEC).

The event was held at the Rajat Jayanti Auditorium in the university. Dr. Prem Sagar Mishra, Chairman and Managing Director of



South-East Coalfields Ltd, Bilaspur, was the chief guest.

Inspiring the youths, Mishra said that setting a goal was difficult without a purpose and at the same time love for the goal was

essential for any innovation and creation.

Prof. Chakravall said Ideathon will play a vital role in providing energy to new ideas.

Special guest S.S. Bajaj,

Director-General, Chhattisgarh Council of Science and Technology (CG COST), Raipur, said that the nation will be built through new discoveries and experiments.

C'garh campaigns for voter awareness

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

In view of the Lok Sabha elections, people across Chhattisgarh conducted various activities on Monday to inspire voters and increase the voter turnout.

The activities were organised under the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme.

Disabled schoolchildren in Bastar district conveyed the importance of voting through songs.

The students of Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University in Raipur educated people about the importance of voting to



strengthen democracy through street drama. Women in Dantewada district created rangolis and urged others to exercise their franchise.

Too lazy to hit the gym? Soon a pill to mimic exercise benefits

AGENCIES ■

US researchers have developed a medicine compound that will mimic the benefit of exercise, an advance that may help people with hectic schedules and unable to workout, or those who are lazy.

The compound, named SLU-PP-332, currently tested in rodent cells, was found to "recapitulate exercise's ability to enhance muscle cells' metabolism and growth, along with improved muscle performance", said researchers at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. A drug that can mimic these effects may also open up new treatment options for people with muscle atrophy and other medical conditions including heart failure and



neurodegenerative disease. "We cannot replace exercise; exercise is important on all levels," said Bahaa Elgendy, the

project's principal investigator and a Professor of Anesthesiology at the varsity.

"If I can exercise, I

should go ahead and get physical activity. But there are so many cases in which a substitute is needed," she added.

The potential pill can also counter the effects of other drugs, such as new weight-loss medications that cause the loss of both fat and muscle, Elgendy said.

Elgendy said that exercise typically activates specialised proteins, known as oestrogen-related receptors (ERRs), which come in three forms: ERR-alpha, ERR-beta, and ERR-gamma.

In the study of about 15,000 genes in cells from rat heart muscle, SLU-PP-332 was found to activate all three forms, including the most challenging target, ERR-alpha.

The new compounds also prompted a greater increase in the presence of RNA -- a measure of gene expression -- suggesting they more potently simulate the effects of exercise.

India, US review defence ties

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and US on Monday reviewed the entire gamut of their bilateral defence ties and ways to further strengthen them during telephone talks between Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin. Giving details here later, Defence Ministry officials said both Ministers briefly discussed a range of bilateral, regional security and defence cooperation issues. They reviewed the recent bilateral events such as the INDUS-X Summit held in New Delhi in February and the bilateral Tri-Service exercise 'Tiger Triumph' which has also commenced in India on Monday and ends on March 31. US Secretary of Defence appreciated the important role being played by the Indian Navy in conducting anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean Region. The two Ministers discussed ways and means to implement the India-US Defence Cooperation Roadmap which was concluded last year. Other defence industrial cooperation



issues such as repair of US naval ships in Indian shipyards were also briefly discussed. Both the Ministers had last met in New Delhi in November 2023 during the India-US Ministerial 2+2 Dialogue. As regards the Tiger Triumph drill, they said in consonance with the established partnership between India and the US, the bilateral tri-Service Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Exercise between both countries, Tiger Triumph-24, is scheduled on the Eastern Seaboard from March 18 to 31.

Indian Navy Ships with integral helicopters and landing crafts embarked, Indian Navy aircraft, Indian Army personnel and vehicles and Indian Air Force aircraft and helicopters along with the Rapid Action Medical Team (RAMT) would be participating in the exercise. The US would be represented by US Navy Ships with embarked troops of the US Marine Corps and US Army. The exercise is aimed at developing interoperability for conducting HADR operations and refine Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to enable rapid and smooth coordina-

tion between forces of both countries. The Harbour Phase is scheduled from March 18 to 25. Personnel from both navies would participate in Training Visits, Subject Matter Expert Exchanges, Sports Events and Social interactions. On completion of the Harbour Phase, the ships, with the troops embarked, would sail for the Sea Phase and undertake Maritime, Amphibious and HADR operations in accordance with injected situations. The Joint exercise would culminate with a closing ceremony on completion of the sea phase.

Indian Army raises elite unit to focus on futuristic communication technologies

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Army has raised an elite unit that will undertake research and evaluation of futuristic communication technologies like 6G, artificial intelligence, machine learning and quantum computing for military use in view of the changing nature of the field. The Signals Technology Evaluation and Adaptation Group or STEAG is mandated to nurture technologies spanning the complete spectrum of wired and wireless systems, officials said. The setting up of STEAG is part of the Army's efforts to develop technologies considering the future battlefield, they said. "It will be a premier organisation, the first of its kind equipped with the capability to harness niche technology, leverage cutting-edge solutions and identify suitable cases for defence applications by fostering collaboration with academia and industry," one of the officials said. The elite unit will focus on all upcoming critical technology domains including electronic exchanges, mobile communications, software defined



radios, electronic warfare systems, 5G and 6G networks, quantum technologies, AI, machine learning, etc., he said. The hi-tech unit will carry out technical scouting, evaluation, development, management of core ICT solutions, and provide user interface support by maintenance and upgradation of contemporary technologies available in the environment, the official added. Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande has been highlighting the need for acquiring new technologies by the force in view of the changing nature of warfare. "Aligning itself with the tenets of Atmanirbhar Bharat and

Start-Up India, STEAG will help bridge the divide between the armed forces on the one hand and industry and academia on the other," the official said on condition of anonymity. The new Centre of Excellence is expected to be a game changer in fostering self-reliance in high-end communication technologies, which have thus far been a monopoly of select countries with advanced economies and research ecosystems, he said. The Army believes communications are going to be an important component of military operations. "In the fast-

evolving technologies for the battlefield, the side with better communication technologies and the ability to connect the various constituents for information sharing will have an edge over its adversary," another official said. He said modern warfare necessitates the induction of new equipment to provide seamless communication support to units and formations during operations. "To imbibe such advancements in technology, the Indian Army has raised this groundbreaking technology-oriented unit STEAG which will bolster its capabilities in the digital domain," he added.

Kavitha conspired with AAP leaders in excise policy: ED

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

BRS leader K Kavitha and some others "conspired" with top AAP leaders, including Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia, to get favours in the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy by paying ₹100 crore to the political party that rules Delhi, the Enforcement Directorate alleged on Monday. Forty-six-year-old Kavitha, the MLC daughter of former Telangana chief minister K Chandrashekar Rao, was arrested by the federal agency last week from her Hyderabad home and she is in the ED custody till March 23. Probe found, the ED claimed in a statement, that Kavitha along with others "conspired with the top leaders of AAP including Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia for getting favours in the Delhi excise policy-formulation and implementation." "In exchange of these favours, she was involved in paying Rs 100 crore to the leaders of AAP," the agency said. By the acts of "corruption and conspiracy" in the formulation and implementation of Delhi excise policy 2021-22, a con-



tinuous stream of illegal funds in the form of kickback from the wholesalers was generated for the AAP, it said. It alleged "Kavitha and her associates were to recover the proceeds of crime paid in advance to AAP and to further generate profits/proceeds of crime from this entire conspiracy." The agency, while seeking the remand of Kavitha last week, told the special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court that she was "one of the kingpins, a key conspirator and beneficiary of the Delhi excise policy scam". Kavitha asserted earlier that she had done nothing wrong and alleged that the Centre was "using" the ED as the BJP could not gain a "backdoor entry" into Telangana. The

Aam Aadmi Party has accused the BJP was using ED and CBI as its "goons" to finish off political opponents. The agency said it has conducted searches at 245 locations across the country since the registration of a case in 2022 and has arrested 15 persons, including former Delhi deputy CM and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Manish Sisodia, AAP leader Sanjay Singh and some liquor businessmen. It has filed a total of six charge sheets in this case till now and had attached assets worth over Rs 128 crore. The ED and the CBI have alleged that the Delhi government's excise policy to grant licences to liquor traders allowed cartelisation and favoured certain dealers who had allegedly paid bribes for it, a charge strongly refuted by the AAP. The policy was subsequently scrapped and Delhi Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena recommended a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into the irregularities in its formulation and implementation. Later, the ED registered a case under the PMLA.

Food body set to establish standards for edible seeds

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In view of growing domestic and global demand for edible fruit/vegetable seeds such as sunflower seeds and chia seeds and pumpkin seeds in culinary and traditional foods, the Food and Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) under the Union Health Ministry is now all set to establish standards for them, aiming to bring clarity and consistency to their classification and use. The absence of standards for these 'nutritional powerhouse' was realised when the FSSAI was approached by several representatives seeking the correct categorisation of 'Watermelon Seeds' under Food Safety and Standards Regulation (FSSR). Though temporarily the apex food regulator as an interim measure categorized the products added in FoSCoS for the purpose of licensing of Edible Dried Fruits/ Vegetable Seeds. However at the same time, the order dated March 15, 2024 signed by Ajeet Singh, Joint Director (Regulatory Compliance Division) clarified that "at present, there is no specific standard for



Watermelon Seed' or any other Edible Dried Fruits/ Vegetable Seeds has been laid down under FSSR. "However, the matter has been examined by the FSSAI and as an interim measure to safeguard the interest of consumers, it has been decided that the said product names will be added in FoSCoS for the purpose of licensing of Edible Dried Fruits/ Vegetable Seeds, it added. The order further asked food businesses to apply under the general manufacturing kind of business for the said categories, till such time specific standard is notified by the Food Authority. A senior official from the Ministry pointed out that the long-standing history of

human consumption of seeds from fruits like sunflower seeds, as well as those from vegetables such as chia seeds and pumpkin seeds, in culinary and traditional foods underscores their significance in various cuisines worldwide. However, he admitted that, despite their widespread use, there has been a lack of universal standards for categorizing these edible seeds. "Now, the FSSAI is taking steps to address this gap by considering the establishment of standards for these seeds. This initiative aims to bring clarity and consistency to their classification and use, potentially benefiting consumers, producers, and food industry stakeholders alike.

Centre: No need to bring slaughterhouses under EIA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre has ruled out bringing slaughterhouses and meat processing units under the ambit of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, stating that existing guidelines and safeguards adequately regulate these facilities from an environmental perspective. "There is no requirement to bring slaughterhouses and meat processing units under the ambit of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, as guidelines and safeguards are already in place to regulate them from an environmental perspective," the Centre told the National Green Tribunal (NGT) recently. The Union Environment Ministry through the NGT was responding to the demand from animal rights activist Gauri Maulekhi who had approached the tribunal last year seeking to bring the slaughterhouses and meat processing units within the ambit of EIA, 2006. She had raised concerns regarding over consumption of water at slaughterhouses, con-

tamination of water bodies due to improper solid waste disposal and the risk of zoonotic diseases due to exposure to unhealthy carcasses among others. However, in its affidavit submitted recently in the NGT, the Ministry maintained that all regulations were in place to regulate such units. The affidavit is based on a report by an eight-member working group set up by the ministry in August last year. "Requisite guidelines/safeguards are already in place to regulate the slaughterhouses /processing units from an environmental perspective, and there is no requirement for bringing slaughterhouses and meat processing units under the ambit of EIA, 2006," the ministry said. It said the regulation framework and monitoring of agencies including district magistrates, pollution control boards, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development (APEDA) is adequate to address the environmental issues related to slaughterhouses and meat processing units.

Congress raises questions on fund

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress on Monday raised questions about the PM CARES Fund, saying that four years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still not clear why it was set up, who its donors are and why its administrative structure is so "lacking in transparency". Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh alleged that given the history of the Modi government, as shown by the "electoral bond scam", one can only speculate that the lack of transparency was deliberately engineered to give the prime minister an unsupervised pool of funds to spend as he wishes. In a social media post, Ramesh said, "Now that the corruption, extortion and intimidation of the Modi sarkar through the electoral bond scam is getting

revealed in all its shocking detail, let us not forget another route the Government opened for companies to curry favour: The self-glorifyingly named PM CARES." "The total amount of funds PM CARES received and the names of the donors have never been officially reported. Media reports suggest that it received donations to the tune of Rs 12,700 crore at least, with large donations from a few corporations," he claimed. Some prominent donors who publicly pledged to donate to the fund include the Reliance Group (Rs 500 crore), Adani Group (Rs 100 crore), PayTM (Rs 500 crore), JSW Group (Rs 100 crore) and others, the Congress leader said. "PM CARES is exempt from CAG and RTI oversight — allegedly, because it did not



receive budgetary support from the Government. However, it is well known that at least 38 PSUs, owned and operated by the government, have donated vast sums to the tune of Rs 2,105 crore to the PM CARES fund. An additional 150 crores came from PSU employee contributions," Ramesh said. Moreover, the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund) received several special exemptions from the government such as donations received 100 per cent tax

deduction under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act relating to charities. "Foreign donations were allowed under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act. Donations were made eligible to be treated as Corporate Social Responsibility expenditure under the Companies Act. This privilege is not extended even to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund in States," he said. "Suspiciously, quite a few China-based or Chinese-owned firms have donated to the PM CARES Fund. TikTok claimed to have donated Rs 30 crore, Xiaomi donated Rs 10 crore, Huawei up to Rs 7 crore and OnePlus reportedly donated Rs 1 crore," he claimed. At a time when China is encroaching on Indian territory in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, donations were sought

and accepted from these firms, he said. "Four years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still not clear why the PM CARES fund was set up, how much it received and from whom, how the funds were disbursed, and why its administrative structure is so lacking in transparency," Ramesh said. "Given the history of the Modi sarkar, as shown by the electoral bond scam, one can only speculate that the lack of transparency was deliberately engineered to give the Prime Minister an unsupervised pool of funds to spend as he wishes. For corporations, it was a new, tax-exempt, CSR-saving way of currying favour with the Prime Minister — possibly to seek government contracts and licenses in the future, or to avoid the intimidation of ED-IT raids," Ramesh alleged.

Study reveals disturbing dietary trends among north Indians

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A study conducted by researchers at The George Institute for Global Health India in collaboration with the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) has revealed disturbing dietary trends among the north Indian population, particularly regarding salt consumption, potassium intake, and protein consumption. Published in the journal 'Frontiers in Nutrition', the study found that salt intake among the participants surpassed recommended levels. High salt intake is associated with an increased risk of developing hypertension, car-

diovascular disease, and chronic kidney disease. Participants also exhibited inadequate potassium intake, which is essential for maintaining cardiovascular and kidney health. Low potassium intake further increases the risk of developing hypertension and related conditions. Protein consumption was below the recommended dietary allowance. This could have implications for overall nutritional status and health, particularly in individuals with chronic kidney disease, said the researchers. The study utilized 24-hour urinary excretion analysis to assess nutrient intake, which is considered more accurate than dietary recall methods.

The findings underscore the importance of accurate dietary assessments in understanding and addressing dietary imbalances. Professor Vivekanand Jha, the lead author of the study, emphasised the need for personalised dietary interventions and public health campaigns to address these dietary trends. The study suggested interventions such as setting up targets that aimed at reducing salt intake and increasing potassium-rich foods in the diet. Providing better information on food labels to help consumers make healthier choices at the same time encouraging the consumption of fruits and vegetables rich in potassium, said the study.

Bilkis Bano case: One more convict moves SC seeking review of verdict cancelling remission

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

One more convict in the Bilkis Bano case has moved the Supreme Court seeking a review of its January 8 verdict cancelling remission of his sentence, contending that it cannot be challenged based on the nature of the crime and "society's cry for justice". The review plea filed by Ramesh Rupabhai Chandana said the top court erred while passing the impugned order and overruling judgment dated May 13, 2022, passed by another bench of the apex court. The Gujarat government and

two of the 11 convicts have already filed a petition seeking a review of the January 8 verdict in which remission orders of all of them were cancelled and they asked to surrender. Listing reasons for seeking a review of the verdict, the plea said the top court bench erred in its finding "on the ground that the remission order passed by the competent authority cannot be challenged on factual grounds, inter alia, the nature of the crime, impact on society and society's cry for justice after the conviction and sentence has attained finality in the eyes of law." It said that overruling of the

judgment dated May 13, 2022, passed by a coordinate of this court, which allowed the Gujarat government to grant remission as per the 1992 policy, the impugned order of January 8 was in contravention of the doctrine of Comity of Courts. The doctrine of Comity of Courts refers to courts respecting the laws and decisions of other courts. The plea said that in the instant case, only the trial was transferred (to Maharashtra) under "extraordinary circumstances" by way of judicial intervention and it is a fact apparent on the face of record that in the trans-



fer petition concerned, the issue of remission was not the matter in issue. "Hence, it is not just and fair to presume that vide the said

transfer order, appropriate government as per section 432(7) CrPC also stood changed to being that of the transferee state," it said.

The plea further said the remission policies of Gujarat and Maharashtra respectively, when compared — both at the time of transfer and subsequent conviction respectively — can be said to be beneficial and prejudicial respectively. "That is to say, since Gujarat policy laying down 14 years as criteria for becoming eligible for grant of remission is beneficial for the petitioner and on the other hand, 28 years for the same as per Maharashtra policy is prejudicial for him," it said. Earlier, Radheyshyam Bhagwandas Shah and Rajubhai Babulal Soni, both lodged in Godhra sub-jail after

the January 8 apex court verdict, filed the review plea. On January 8, the top court quashed the remission it had granted to 11 convicts in the high-profile gang-rape case of Bilkis Bano and the killing of her seven family members while slamming the state for being "complicit" with the accused and abusing its discretion. It ordered all the convicts, who were released prematurely on Independence Day in 2022, back to jail within two weeks. Excoriating the Gujarat government, the apex court said it "usurped" the power of the Maharashtra government to

grant remission to the convicts. It held as nullity the May 13, 2022, judgement of another bench of the apex court, which had directed the Gujarat government to consider the remission applications of the 11 convicts in the case, saying it was obtained by "playing fraud on court". Bilkis Bano was 21 years old and five months pregnant when she was raped while fleeing the horror of the communal riots that broke out after the Godhra train burning incident in February 2002. Her three-year-old daughter was among the seven family members killed.

Assam ruling coalition to approach voters on developmental agenda

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

The ruling BJP-led coalition in Assam will approach voters on the basis of its developmental activities. BJP state president Bhabesh Kalita and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) chief Atul Bora said they have also developed a joint roadmap to take forward the electioneering process in the state.

“The alliance partners have already been working on to reach out to the people. Today, we discussed joint strategies to take it forward,” Bora said at a joint press after a meeting between the two parties.



Bora, a cabinet minister, said joint committees for coordination at different levels between the two parties are also being formed. “People are already aware of the ‘vikas yatra’ (journey of development) of our

government. Our candidates have good potential to win all seats,” Bora added. Kalita said, “We are confident of winning the maximum number of seats based on the development being done by our government. We will

approach the voters with the development agenda.” The BJP state president said a roadmap to take forward the campaign jointly was discussed during the meeting. “Leaders of all the allies will work together for all the candidates,” he added. The BJP has fielded candidates in 11 seats in the state, while AGP has put up its nominees in two seats. The third ally, the United People’s Party Liberal (UPPL), will be contesting from one seat. In the outgoing Lok Sabha, the BJP has nine members out of 14 from Assam, while AGP and UPPL have no representation.

Jagan to embark on 21 days bus yatra

PTI ■ AMARAVATI



YSRCP chief and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy will embark on a 21-day state-wide bus yatra soon to campaign for the forthcoming Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. The ruling government is expected to release the itinerary on Tuesday, which is expected to start on March 26 or 27 and will pass through all the Parliamentary constituencies, expect in those districts where the recent siddham (ready) meetings were held. The assembly and Lok Sabha polls in Andhra Pradesh are scheduled on May 13, and the results will be declared on June

4. “YSRCP chief Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy is all set to launch the bus yatra as part of the election campaign for the upcoming general and assembly elections,” said a CMO press release on Monday. During the bus tour, there will be interactive sessions in the morning and public meetings in the afternoon. “As part of the interaction, suggestions would be received

from people to further improve the performance of the government,” the release said. According to a YSRCP leader, Reddy would spend time with people and stay overnight in those places where he would be touring. Further, the party has also decided to conduct meetings in all regions and their names have also been prepared.



Seat sharing for Bihar in two to three days: Tejashwi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav on Monday said the seat-sharing for Bihar among the INDIA bloc allies was in the final stages and would be sealed in the next few days. The RJD leader, who came here from Mumbai after attending a rally organised by the opposition INDIA bloc at Shivaji Park on Sunday, said most issues had been sorted and there were issues only on one or two seats left. “Everything will be decided in two-three days. It is in the final stages. There are some issues over a seat or two, but everything will be sorted out,” Yadav told reporters here. The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Congress, Left and some other small parties are in talks for a seat-sharing deal for the Lok Sabha polls to take on the NDA. The former Bihar deputy chief minister also hit out at the BJP-JD(U) government in the state over the paper leaks issue. “What is the reason that as soon as the BJP formed the government in the state incidents like the paper leak started happening. Who is responsible for this?... Will action be taken against those responsible for playing with the future of the youth?” the RJD leader asked. Bihar Police have detained around 300 aspirants in Jharkhand’s Hazaribagh district in connection with the alleged question paper leak of the Teacher Recruitment Exam (TRE)-3 of the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC).

Modi holds roadshow in Coimbatore

PTI ■ COIMBATORE (TAMIL NADU)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a roadshow here on Monday, amid non-stop chants of ‘Modi, Modi’ by BJP workers and he paid floral tributes to the portraits of 58 people killed here in the 1998 serial bomb blast. The roadshow, amid tight police security, comes days after the Madras High Court green-flagged the event, directing the police to allow it with reasonable conditions. The police had initially refused permission citing reasons, including the “communally sensitive” nature of the area, and the ongoing public exams in schools. As Modi began his roadshow in an open, flower-decked vehicle, people who gathered on both sides of the road showered flower petals on him, chanted slogans hailing him. While traditional music was played to welcome him, several of them danced and waved at him enthusiastically. This is the first time such a

road show, on a grand scale, has been organised by the BJP in Tamil Nadu, which witnessed a good turnout. “Meendum Modi, Vendum Modi,” (Once again Modi, we want Modi) was one of the slogans raised by BJP supporters. Many people who lined up on the roads held lotus flowers in their hands to welcome Modi and raised “Bharat Mata Ki Jai” slogans. Clad in a spotless white kurta, Modi sported a colourful BJP shawl and often raised both his hands to wave at people who took vantage positions in buildings to take a glimpse of him. All along the about 2.5 km route, from Saibaba Colony to RS Puram in downtown Coimbatore, Modi’s vehicle slowly made its way while people followed him on the service lanes. At the end of the road show, Modi paid floral tributes to the portraits of people who were killed in the bomb blast that rocked this textile city in 1998, hours before iconic BJP leader LK Advani was to address a poll meeting on

February 14 that year. Fifty eight people were killed and over a 100 injured. The portraits were placed in a small, makeshift memorial square. The BJP flags fluttered against the backdrop of colourful lights and festoons and the Prime Minister waved and cheered saffron party workers who were waiting for over an hour to take a look at him. Performances of folk dance and traditional music energised the cadres who sung songs and danced. This is the first time Modi has held a roadshow here and also this is the first political engagement of the PM following announcement of schedule for the Lok Sabha polls by the Election Commission. BJP Tamil Nadu president K Annamalai, Union Minister of State L Murugan, Coimbatore MLA and BJP Mahila Morcha national president, Vanathi Srinivasan were the three leaders who accompanied the Prime Minister in his vehicle.



Former RJD leader Lovely joins JD(U)

PTI ■ PATNA

Lovely Anand, former Lok Sabha MP from Bihar’s Vaishali, joined Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar’s Janata Dal (United) here on Monday. Anand, a former RJD leader, joined the party at a function here in the presence of JD(U)’s former national president Rajiv Ranjan Singh ‘Lalan’. Several senior leaders of the party were also present on the occasion. “For me, it is like a homecoming. Whatever responsibilities the party gives me, I will deliver my best”, Anand said soon after joining JD(U). Anand is the wife of former MP Anand Mohan, who was released from jail last year after serving 15 years of imprisonment in a murder case. It may be recalled that soon after the formation of the NDA government in Bihar, Anand’s son and RJD MLA Chetan had switched sides to the JD(U) camp during the trust vote of the Nitish Kumar government in the assembly.

LS polls: CPI nominates sitting MP from Tiruppur

PTI ■ CHENNAI

The Communist Party of India (CPI), which is contesting the Lok Sabha elections as part of the DMK-led alliance in Tamil Nadu, on Monday nominated Tiruppur sitting MP K Subbarayan again, to seek the people’s mandate from his home constituency. The party has also fielded Y Selvaraj to contest from the Nagapattinam Lok Sabha constituency, CPI national

secretary K Narayana announced at the end of the two-day meeting here. Both the constituencies were allotted to it by the ruling DMK during the seat-sharing talks. Speaking to reporters here, CPI state secretary R Mutharasan said the Election Commission’s announcement to hold polls on April 19 in Tamil Nadu hardly allowed any time for the political parties to take up a full-fledged campaign in all the 39

constituencies spread across the state. Meanwhile, Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) chief Vaiko, another ally of the DMK, announced that his son Durai Vaiko will contest from Tiruchirappalli seat allotted to it by the DMK. Durai, who was elevated to the post of chief secretary of MDMK, will make a debut from Tiruchirappalli constituency, which has returned MDMK, AIADMK and the Congress in the past.

BJP, allies will sweep Northeast in Lok Sabha elections: Sonowal

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Monday said the BJP-led NDA will sweep the Lok Sabha elections in the Northeast and win more than 23 seats out of 25 in the region. He said people of the region will again repose faith on the ruling alliance due to the development activities undertaken in the region over the last 10 years. “The mood is

in favour of BJP and its allies because under the leadership of Narendra Modi ji, there has been tremendous development in the last 10 years,” Sonowal told reporters at the state party headquarters here, his first visit since being named the BJP’s candidate from Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency. Claiming that the NDA will win more than 12 seats in Assam and over 23 in the Northeast, he added,

“Northeast people firmly believe that the region will prosper further if Modi ji comes to power for the third term.” Refusing to comment on his political rivals, the BJP leader said, “We consider all opponents with dignity, whoever that it may be.” In the outgoing Lok Sabha, BJP and its allies have 19 MPs from the region, Congress has four, AIUDF one and one is an Independent.



3 more held for attack on international students at Gujarat University hostel

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Police on Monday arrested three more persons in connection with the alleged attack some international students in the Gujarat University hostel premises here for offering namaz near the hostel block, the crime branch said. The city crime branch on Sunday nabbed two persons - Hitesh Mevada and Bharat Patel - and handed over them to the Gujarat University police station for further legal process, it said in a release. On Monday, the crime branch arrested three more persons, Kshiti Pandey (22), Jitendra Patel (31) and Sahil Dudhatiya (21), all residents of Ahmedabad, and handed them over to the local police for further probe, taking the total number of the arrested accused to five so far, the release said. Students hailing from different foreign countries were assaulted on Saturday night by a group of persons in the Gujarat University hostel for offering namaz near the facility’s block, according to the police. Two students — one from Sri Lanka and another from Tajikistan — were hospitalised after the incident which took place in the A-block hostel, police earlier said. Following the incident, an FIR

was registered against 20-25 unidentified persons under Indian Penal Code sections for rioting, unlawful assembly, voluntarily causing hurt, damage to property, criminal trespass, among others. Police Commissioner GS Malik rushed to the spot after the incident and said nine teams were formed to conduct a probe into it. Minister of State for Home Harsh Sanghavi also held a meeting with police officers on Sunday and directed them to take strict and judicial action in the matter. “Some 20-25 people entered the hostel premises (on Saturday night) and objected to the international students offering namaz there, asking them to do so in a mosque. They argued over the issue, assaulting them and hurling stones. They also vandalised their rooms,” Malik said earlier. There are around 300 international students enrolled at the Ahmedabad-based Gujarat University, including from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Sri Lanka and countries in the African continent, the official said. Nearly 75 of the international students stay in the A-block hostel of the university where the incident occurred, he said. Several purported videos of the incident have also surfaced showing people pelting stones and vandalising vehicles of the students.

Preparation for LS polls in Aizawl in full swing

PTI ■ AIZAWL

Preparations for election to Mizoram’s lone Lok Sabha seat are in full swing, an official said on Monday. Aizawl Deputy Commissioner Nazuk Kumar, who also serves as the returning officer, told reporters that training for various official teams assigned to manage the upcoming polls in 12 assembly constituencies within Aizawl district has been largely completed. The initial phase of training for polling parties is scheduled for March 26 and March 27, she said. Randomisation of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) has been finalised, and they are currently secured in strong rooms designated for each assembly constituency, she added. A total of 514 ballot units, 523 control units, and 541 VVPATs have been allocated for Aizawl district for the forthcoming



Lok Sabha polls, Kumar said. Voting is scheduled for April 19, with counting is on June 4. The deadline for filing nominations is March 27, while candidates have until March 30 to withdraw their candidatures. According to Kumar, a total of 290,058 electorate, including 153,000 women voters, are expected to exercise their franchise in the upcoming polls. Among them, there are 10,131 first-time voters, 1,439 senior citizens (aged 85 years and

above), and 778 Persons with Disabilities (PwD) voters. Aizawl district boasts 321 polling stations, with 48 (four in each assembly constituency) set to be manned by women and one by differently abled individuals. Home voting facilities will be provided for senior citizens (85 years and above) and PwD voters possessing disability certificates. Kumar emphasised efforts to encourage voter turnout and called for public cooperation to ensure free and fair elections.

75 companies of Central paramilitary forces deployed in Arunachal: CEO

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

The Election Commission has deployed 75 companies of Central Paramilitary Forces to conduct free and fair simultaneous Lok Sabha and assembly polls in Arunachal Pradesh, a senior election official said on Monday. In addition, the available police force in the state would also be pressed into service for election duties, Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Pawan Kumar Sain told reporters here. He said the CPMF companies (a company comprises around 100 personnel) have been deployed in all the districts of the state, and they have started the area dominance exercise in various critical and vulnerable polling stations. The northeastern state will go to simultaneous polls in the first phase on April 19. “Out of the total 2,226 polling stations in the state, 480 polling booths are under shadow areas, while 588 booths have been identified as critical and



443 as vulnerable,” the CEO said. Shadow zones or areas have poor or no mobile and internet connectivity. Sain said webcasting and enabling communication on real-time environment (ENCORE) would be available in 750 polling stations, while offline webcasting facility would feature in 342 polling stations. He said the state election machinery has so far seized Rs 3,88,34,496 in cash from various districts and recovered

378 unlicensed arms. “Out of 33,996 licensed arms in the state, people have deposited 2,400 arms in various police stations as of date,” the CEO said. “We will ensure free and fair polling without any violence, and will not tolerate any violation of the model code of conduct (MCC). We have already suspended an additional deputy commissioner and a senior government official for favouring candidates,” Sain said.

Bengaluru facing shortfall of 500 MLD water: CM

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Monday said Bengaluru is facing a shortage of about 500 million litres of water per day (MLD) against the requirement of 2,600 MLDs and officials have been directed to meet daily and draw up an action plan to tackle the water scarcity. According to the CM, 1,470 MLD water comes from Cauvery river and 650 MLD is sourced from borewells. “There are 14,000 borewells in Bengaluru, of which 6,900 have dried. Water bodies have been encroached or died. Bengaluru needs 2,600 MLD water.

SC to consider Tamil Nadu plea against Governor refusal to appoint Minister

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday agreed to consider a plea of the Tamil Nadu government against the refusal of Governor RN Ravi to appoint senior DMK leader K Ponmudi as a minister in the state cabinet. The governor has recently refused to re-induct the senior DMK leader and former Higher Education Minister into the state cabinet, saying it would be against constitutional morality. A bench comprising Chief

Justice D Y Chandrachud and justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra took note of the submissions of senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for the state government, there was some urgency in the matter which should be listed for hearing. The state government has sought a direction to the governor to act as per the aid and advice of the council of ministers led by Chief Minister M K Stalin. “This is the same errant governor, who was earlier dealt with by this court. The Supreme Court stayed the

conviction (of Ponmudi). The chief minister recommends his appointment. The governor writes a letter and says it is constitutionally immoral,” Singhvi said. “Please send an email. I will look into the email,” the CJI said. The governor, in a letter to Stalin, said the apex court only suspended the conviction of Ponmudi by way of an interim order. The governor refused to appoint the leader in the Stalin cabinet. The state government has

filed an interim plea in a petition relating to non-grant of assent to bills cleared by the legislative assembly. It has referred to a constitutional scheme to buttress the submission to say that the governor is bound by the aid and advice of the council of ministers. The plea said that once the conviction was stayed, there was no legal and constitutional bar on re-induction of Ponmudi in the state cabinet. The senior DMK leader was disqualified as an MLA under the Representation of

the People Act after the Madras High Court recently reversed his acquittal in the disproportionate assets case. The top court stayed the conviction and the sentence of the leader who was sentenced to over two year jail term. The state government then reinstated Ponmudi as a legislator after the Supreme Court suspended his conviction in a disproportionate assets case. The governor said the conviction and sentence have only been suspended and not set aside.

Pursuit of power

The Russian President is anxious to prove that he actually is his people’s choice for the top job

The enigmatic Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has a reputation for having a tight hold on power. Beneath the surface of power, meanwhile, is a convoluted web of manoeuvres designed to validate his administration via elections. Putin has consolidated his control and maintained the impression of popular support despite criticism for being an authoritarian and charges of electoral manipulation. A case in point is the latest crowding of polling stations by Russian nationals as a way of protest during the three-day voting which ended on Sunday. Manipulation of electoral laws and institutions is seemingly one of Putin's most favoured instruments. The Russian leadership has put policies into place over time that essentially silence critics and obstruct real political rivalry. Putin and his associates benefit from selective enforcement of electoral restrictions, skewed media coverage and stringent registration requirements. It is possible for the Kremlin to create the appearance of a competitive electoral process while guaranteeing



the intended result by manipulating the narrative and preventing Opposition voices from being heard. In addition, Putin has worked hard to project the image of a powerful, resolute leader who can defend Russia's interests against outside threats. Putin has successfully created a cult of personality by deftly manipulating State-run media and spreading (mis)information that presents him as essential to the safety and prosperity of the country. Putin has also used external wars and geopolitical crises to his advantage domestically. For instance, the Russian people broadly supported the annexation of Crimea in 2014, seeing it as a return of territory and pride in their country.

Many Russians view Putin as a bulwark against perceived foreign aggression, which has further enhanced his popularity. Putin can gain support and unity from the electorate by portraying himself as a global champion of Russian interests, which will validate his authority in public eyes. In addition, Putin has adeptly appropriated State institutions and utilised his command over the security apparatus to guarantee election results that are advantageous to his Government. Incidents of political persecution, like the detention of well-known activists and opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny, serve as a sobering reminder of what happens when you challenge Putin's authority. Putin aims to preserve control over important State power levers in order to secure his ongoing supremacy in Russian politics. Putin's complex campaign of manipulation, disinformation and pressure is part of his effort to gain legitimacy in the Russian elections. Putin aims to hold on to power and create an air of legitimacy by managing the election process, enhancing his public persona and taking advantage of international crises. Nonetheless, the enduring opposition and the diminishing confidence in Governmental establishments underscore the vulnerability of Putin's governance, implying that the pursuit of legitimacy is a continuous conflict in Russian politics.

PICTALK



A realistic mechanical elephant, gifted to Thirikkayil Mahadeva temple by PETA India, in Kochi

PTI

Surge in celiac disease calls for awareness

The gap between prevalence and diagnosis of celiac disease underscores the urgent need for heightened awareness and improved diagnostics

Traditionally thought to be uncommon in Asia, recent studies, including those conducted by AIIMS, have shed light on the prevalence of celiac disease in many Asian countries. In India alone, an estimated 6 to 8 million people are believed to be living with the condition, yet only a fraction have received a formal diagnosis. This alarming gap between prevalence and diagnosis underscores the urgency for increased awareness and enhanced diagnostic and treatment capabilities. Celiac disease, also known as celiac sprue or gluten-sensitive enteropathy, is a chronic autoimmune disorder that affects the small intestine. It is triggered by the ingestion of dietary gluten, a protein found in wheat and barley. When individuals with celiac disease consume gluten, their immune system responds by damaging the lining of the small intestine, leading to various gastrointestinal symptoms and potentially causing long-term health complications. Celiac disease affects approximately one per cent of the global population, although many



cases remain undiagnosed. The condition can manifest at any age, from infancy to late adulthood and can affect both genders. However, women are more prone to develop celiac disease. The first Asian Pacific Celiac Disease Symposium (APCDS 2024) commenced in New Delhi, focusing on the critical aspects of management, diagnosis and treatment of Celiac Disease. The symposium, organised by AIIMS in collaboration with the Asia Pacific Association of Gastroenterology (APAGE) and the International Society for the Study of Celiac Disease (ISSCD), marks a pivotal moment in the fight against this autoimmune disorder. APCDS 2024 serves as a platform for leading experts, healthcare professionals, and stakeholders to address the growing prevalence of celiac disease in the

Asia-Pacific region. Given the observed increase in cases across Asian countries. The establishment of timely diagnosis and management systems is crucial. Dr. Govind Makharia, Professor in the Department of Gastroenterology and Human Nutrition at AIIMS, highlighted the significance of the disease, "there is a need for concerted efforts to increase awareness and enhance diagnostic and treatment capabilities. Celiac disease knows no borders, and the symposium has emphasised the necessity for a united front in addressing this global health issue." Individuals with celiac disease may experience a range of symptoms, including: **Digestive Issues:** These can include diarrhoea, constipation, abdominal pain, bloating and nausea. **Malnutrition:** Damage to the small intestine can impair nutrient absorption, leading to deficiencies in vitamins, minerals, and other essential nutrients. This can result in fatigue, weight loss, anaemia and stunted growth. **Skin Problems:** Some individuals with celiac disease

may develop dermatitis herpetiformis, a skin rash characterised by itchy blisters. **Joint Pain:** Celiac disease has been associated with joint pain and inflammation. **Neurological Symptoms:** In some cases, celiac disease can cause headaches, numbness, and tingling sensations. The primary treatment for celiac disease is strict adherence to a gluten-free diet. Along with the scientific programme in APCDS 2024, a workshop for dietitians was also organised to create infrastructure for celiac disease. Since dietitians are central in the treatment of celiac disease, it is necessary to have dietitians with in-depth knowledge about celiac disease and gluten free diet. The aim was to sensitise them with different challenges faced by patients and how to overcome them. Also, a workshop for patients was conducted to educate them about the disease and treatment protocol. Group counselling sessions were conducted by a team of dietitians and patients queries were answered. (The author is consultant Celiac dietician, AIIMS; views are personal)



WAJIBA MEHTAB

Addressing the poll conundrum

To ensure free and fair elections, tackle the menace of muscle power, money power, misinformation and code of conduct violations diligently

The Chief Election Commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, has announced the 18th Lok Sabha election schedule, starting in April. He has identified four major problems that affect India's free and fair elections. These are the 4Ms: Muscle power, Money power, Misinformation, and violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). They are not new. During his campaign in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised to end the criminalisation of politics and regulate the use of black money.

However, the question remains whether it is possible to prevent the improper use of the model code of conduct and control the use of money and muscle power. The Association for Democratic Reforms, an election watchdog, has found that several major Indian political parties, including the BJP, Congress, TMC, NCP, RJD, AAP, CPI(M) and YSRCP, have fielded candidates with criminal offences. The current Members of Parliament (MPs) own assets worth Rs 29,251 crores with an average wealth of Rs 38.33 crores. The report found that 44% of Union Ministers in India have a criminal record, and 25% of MPs have serious criminal cases against them. Of the total MPs, 53 are billionaires, and 475 are crorepatis. Increasing use of Money and Muscle power threatens Indian democracy. Politicians began using musclemen for their work, but since the 1980s, these criminals have started running for office. Political parties also find it easy as they fund their campaigns, and people vote for them out of fear. The nexus between crime and politics is a persistent issue that will not go away soon. This link impacts the country's democracy and governance. The connection between the two factors leads to high-cost elections and voter bribes. Those with financial resources use their money to buy their way into politics and become competitive. In the Supreme Court verdict, candidates running for election since March 2003 must provide information on their criminal charges, financial situation,



marital status, sources and amounts of income, wealth, and education in a self-sworn affidavit. However, some candidates need to give more consistent information about their education and assets. The Election Commission has changed the rules for political party funding during elections. The new regulations include decreasing the cash donation limit from Rs 20,000 to Rs 2,000 and introducing anonymous electoral bond contributions. However, companies can still donate to political parties without disclosing the source of funds up to a certain amount. The law does not limit the number of cash donations to enhance transparency. The Supreme Court prohibited the sale of election bonds this year. The government introduced the bond system in 2018. Individuals or companies can purchase these bonds at a value ranging from Rs 1,000 to Rs one crore, with no limit on the maximum amount. In the last five Assembly polls, electoral bonds worth Rs 6,128 crore were sold, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. Only a few parties benefitted, including the BJP and the Congress, and the BJP had a significant share. The court found that the

THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA HAS SUCCESSFULLY ORGANISED 17 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, 16 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND OVER 400 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. WITH 978 MILLION ELIGIBLE VOTERS, THE CREDIT FOR MAKING THIS HAPPEN GOES TO THE VOTERS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TEACHERS GET RECOGNITION

Sir — It's truly great to know that the Maharashtra government in a recent resolution issued by the state school education department has permitted the teachers to use the prefix 'Tr' in front of their names on the lines of doctors and advocates. The resolution, besides introducing a dress code for school teachers has permitted teachers to use the prefix 'Tr' before their names. This noble and highly appreciative gesture is worth emulating as educators across the nation have been requesting the various governments for a prefix that can give significant recognition to those in the noble profession which is also considered to be the mother of all professions. The 'Tr' prefix can uplift the spirits of school teachers who despite being the very foundation of education go unnoticed. Besides 'Dr' for doctors and 'Adv' for lawyers a few years ago Chartered Accountants were bestowed with a 'CA' and architects gracefully adopted 'Arch' for their titles. This gesture of Maharashtra is sure to be emulated by other state governments as teachers in the various states have been seeking this to acknowledge their indispensable role. Bestowing 'Tr' to teachers can garner more respect and admiration for the teaching community. The introduction of the 'Tr' prefix no doubt will redefine the teaching profession rewarding those in the profession with societal recognition and also giving a morale boost for teachers whose hard work and dedication create a better future for the society, nation and the whole world.

M Pradyu | Kannur

AI AND ELECTIONS

Sir — Artificial Intelligence (AI) is significantly influencing the 2024 Indian elections, particularly in the realm of campaigning. AI technologies are being utilised to create a variety of content, including memes, deepfakes and simulated audio, to support specific narratives and influence public opinion. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been at the forefront of adopting AI for campaign purposes, such as



Former President Ram Nath Kovind, who leads the high-level committee on 'One Nation, One Election' has submitted its report. It is for conducting simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies followed by elections to the local

One nation, one election

bodies within 100 days. There are many questions that remain to be answered before the law takes shape. It is accepted that cost can be reduced considerably. In the case of the death of an elected representative in the midst of his term will a by-election be held or the post will be kept vacant? Secondly, our anti-defection law is not that stringent. Defection in single or in groups should be totally banned. Thirdly splitting a party after elections or changing sides by defection should cause a member to lose his post. In the case of a fractured mandate will a reelection be held again in a state? All disputes need to be resolved before a decision is taken.

Sravana Ramachandran | Chennai

translating Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speeches into multiple languages to reach a wider audience. This use of AI extends to micro-targeting voters with personalised content, advertisements, and messages based on extensive datasets that analyse population, social media engagement, and online behaviour.

However, there are concerns about the ethical implications of AI in elections, especially regarding the spread of misinformation and the lack of regulation over AI-generated content by party IT cells and social media operatives. The Election Commission of India monitors official social media accounts and ad spending but does not regulate the actions of these groups. Experts suggest that while AI can revolutionise campaign strategies and voter outreach, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed to ensure fair and democratic elections.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

PARENTS SHAPE CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Sir — In the labyrinthine web of child development, parents serve as architects, shaping not only the physical environment but also the psychological and emotional landscapes within which their children grow. The words they speak and the actions

they take echo deeply within the hearts and minds of their children, leaving lasting impressions that mould their very beings. Positive expressions of love, encouragement and nurturing support foster emotional resilience and self-esteem. Conversely, neglect, criticism or verbal abuse can lead to deep emotional wounds like low self-confidence, depression and anxiety. The quality of parent-child communication plays a pivotal role in shaping children's mental health. Open, supportive dialogue nurtures trust and emotional intimacy, providing children with a safe space to express their thoughts and feelings. On the contrary, communication barriers or conflicts within the family dynamic can aggravate emotional distress and strain relationships. Recognising the deep-rooted impact of their words and actions, parents must prioritise emotional support, positive communication and empathy to nurture their children's holistic development. By fostering a supportive and loving environment, parents encourage their offspring to thrive and flourish in every aspect of their lives.

Tanisha Gupta | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

THE INDISPENSABLE
ROLE OF MENTORS

From guiding individuals to fostering skill development, mentors play a pivotal role



SAKSHI **SETHI**

In today's dynamic and fast-paced world, the need for mentors is more critical than ever. Hardly anyone can think of a time when they have been influenced in a significant way apart from mentoring. With rapid advancements in technology and changing job requirements, continuous skill development is essential for staying relevant in the workforce. As the professional landscape is becoming more sophisticated, prospective specialists need mentorship and guidance to stay focused and motivated.

Mentoring is a dynamic relationship between a more experienced individual i.e. the mentor and a less experienced individual i.e. the mentee, wherein the former provides guidance, support and expertise to help the latter develop personally, professionally or academically. In a short sense, it is fundamental to professional growth and success and is nowadays a common finding with highly successful people. It comes in a variety of different forms and areas of life and includes several aspects such as training, accompaniment, boost and direction from people who have both – done it before and are generally independent of the mentee's current.

Change is highly inevitable, whether it's in the form of industry disruptions, organizational restructuring or personal life transitions. In an era marked by high levels of stress, anxiety and burnout, mentors play a crucial role in supporting their mental health and well-being. They offer a listening ear, provide coping mechanisms and encourage self-care practices to promote resilience and balance.



Along with professional guidance, they also support personal development by helping mentees in a variety of tasks such as setting goals, prioritising tasks, managing time effectively and even maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Mentoring is not only required in organisations but is also essential in schools and organisations as it fosters skill development, career guidance, personal growth, leadership development, diversity and inclusion, enhanced performance and well-being. It contributes to the overall success and health of educational institutions. Some of them and even seniors serving as mentors can pass on their knowledge, expertise and leadership skills and provide feedback on their strengths and areas for improvement and helping them progress in their careers thereby ensuring continuity and succession within the organisation.

Research has shown that employees who have access to mentorship programmes are more likely to feel engaged and satisfied with their jobs as they help them feel valued and supported thereby, increasing their loyalty to the organization and reducing turnover. Not only this, but they also even play a crucial role in promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace by supporting underrepresented employees, advocating for their advancement and fostering a culture of inclusivity. Overall, mentors serve as trusted advisors, guides and role models who contribute to mentees' success and fulfillment in both their personal as well as professional lives.

A good mentor can a new job applicant up to speed quicker and help with answers to questions that may arise. Mentoring can be that hand that reaches down and pulls an individual out of the pit. It can change lives forever and create permanent relationships. It can even help a child get on the right track if they do not have someone else to help them. Mentors are indispensable for guiding and supporting individuals through complexity, fostering skill development, facilitating networking, nurturing leadership and fostering personal growth. Their guidance and support are and will be highly invaluable in helping mentees navigate the challenges and opportunities of the modern world.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Gender bias in politics is a crude reality



ARCHNA **DATTA**

The recent South Carolina primary victory of Donald Trump over Nikki Haley has reignited discussions surrounding gender biases in political elections



Donald Trump has won the South Carolina primary, defeating Nikki Haley, the last major Republican candidate in the race for Presidential nomination. On the eve of the poll, one of the South Carolinian Republican supporters in her home State, reportedly commented that 'yes, Ms Haley did some fine things as governor, but, Donald Trump is the man', which perhaps reflected the predominant public mood. Now, is this a case of a perceptible preferential bias among voters in favour of male candidates compared to female candidates?

'Many voters seem to use gender as one of the ways to evaluate candidates, predict a candidate's beliefs and competency — and use it as a shortcut for information about the candidates — and these subtle biases in some electoral contests, put a candidate at a disadvantage because of his or her gender', said Kira Sanbonmatsu, a political science professor, Ohio University, who authored a 2000 study on 'gender and voter's preferences'. A study in French parliamentary elections across different polling stations found that votes for women are lower in municipalities with more traditional gender-role attitudes (Barbanchon and Sauvagnat, 2019). However, a 2018 research contended that 'gender, through which men and women identify with masculinity and femininity with sets of roles, traits and ideals, strongly conditions the impact of sex on the voting pattern, but, it differs from case to case, depending on where one places oneself on a masculinity/femininity continuum'. Many men, who do not strongly identify with hyper-masculinity, are equally or more liberal than women on various



ON THE EVE OF THE POLL, ONE OF THE SOUTH CAROLINIAN REPUBLICAN SUPPORTERS IN HER HOME STATE REPORTEDLY COMMENTED THAT 'YES, MS HALEY DID SOME FINE THINGS AS GOVERNOR, BUT DONALD TRUMP IS THE MAN,' WHICH PERHAPS REFLECTED THE PREDOMINANT PUBLIC MOOD

issues, while, many highly feminine women with very traditional gender identities, are more conservative on some issues, and thus, gender cannot be automatically treated as a 'first-order' or 'meta' identity, the study added. There is also a competing view that 'gender is not a strong pull on the vote or on political attitudes, and that there are few male-female gaps in attitudes in voting' (Amanda Bittner, University of Newfoundland & Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, Queens University, 2017). A study in Spain, after it adopted a law in 2007, that obliged political parties to include at least 40 per cent of women on every list for every election, didn't find any evidence that it had either worsened women's relative electoral performance or voters' lower electoral support for exogenous reasons (Bagues and Campa, 2020). Nevertheless, in the 2018 midterms in the USA, sex and gender did play a prominent role, leading to large partisan gaps between men and women in casting their ballots. A study in India revealed that a 'woman voter' is more likely to vote for a male candidate, than a man to vote for a woman, as it is more about perception of society, than the candidates' suitability. Sadly, women's under-representation in electoral politics is a reality! World Economic Forum's Gender Equality Report, underlined that so far only 25% of a hypothetical 100% gender gap has been closed in women's political

participation. Many political scientists explained the gap from the angle of supply and demand constraints, as there is 'a shortage of potential candidates', and also 'lower appeal of women politicians in electoral battles'. Several socio-economic and cultural barriers keep women away from politics, and create 'a higher opportunity cost of running for elections' (Fox et al., 2001). Women also tend to be less in number in professions that become a conduit for a political career (Welch, 1977, Clark, 1994). Studies also mentioned the 'ambition deficit', as many women, despite having the requisite professional and economic credentials, often fight shy of entering competitive politics (Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007 & Fox and Lawless, 2004). Family and relational considerations dissuade many of them, as recent research in Sweden found that female politicians in mayoral positions experienced a significant increase in the likelihood of divorcing their partner (Folke and Rickne, 2020). On the other hand, 'women are routinely demotivated by being told that they do not belong here, signifying a structured system of oppressive gender hierarchy in politics'. Sexism among party leaders is also rampant, more so, if they are aware of voters' bias against women, as a votes-maximising strategy. While, India witnessed an increasing turnout of women voters, in the 2019 election, but, the number of women candidates

remained less than 9 per cent. Those who did get party tickets, mostly, have family political connections or are 'dynastic' politicians. The gender quota at PRIs 'hasn't created much larger candidacy responses at the state level'. However, a study (Bhalotra et al. 2018), analysing electoral data over three decades (1980-2007) found that a woman's electoral victory leads to an 18.5 percentage point higher probability of having a woman as a major party candidate in the next election.

Now, as of November 2021, gender quotas have been adopted in 132 countries, either in the form of voluntary party or compulsory legislative quotas. A study (1995-2012) disclosed that such measures enhanced women's representation from 11 percent to 21 percent. Some critics argued that it is 'anti-democratic', and 'manipulate voters' choices', while, a section of women's rights activists claimed, they are 'disrespectful in the assumption that women cannot get seats on their own', and are often negatively labelled as 'quota women'. Nevertheless, it brought women in many least-developed countries like Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania to the political front, and increased their substantive representation on issues that are traditionally seen as gendered. India has already passed the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023, its implementation cannot be put off to an uncertain date!

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

From awareness to action: India's fight against thalassemia

Collaboration between the public and private sectors is crucial to create widespread national awareness about thalassemia

Thalassemia, characterised by an inherited blood irregularity resulting in insufficient haemoglobin production, impacts the functionality of red blood cells. Once unrecognised and daunting in India, thalassemia now faces resilience and has been acknowledged as a benchmark disability under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act of 2016. With advancements in medical research, increased awareness campaigns, and collaborative efforts between government bodies, healthcare professionals, and philanthropic organisations, India stands at the forefront of combating thalassemia.

Government Initiatives

The Government of India has actively addressed this issue



KIRIT P **SOLANKI**

through various initiatives. One key programme is the Thalassemia Bal Sewa Yojana (TBSY), launched in 2017 and recently extended into its third phase in May 2023. This Public-Private Partnership (PPP) initiative provides financial assistance to thalassemia patients eligible for bone marrow transplant treatment. Recognising the critical need for safe blood management, the National Blood

Transfusion Council (NBTC) has established guidelines ensuring free blood access for thalassemia patients across all states and territories. Furthermore, the government prioritises preventing Transfusion-Transmitted Infections (TTIs) by promoting voluntary blood donation and implementing world-class blood screening methods like Nucleic Acid Testing (NAT). India, known as the thalassemia capital of the world, harbours over 1.5 lakh people living with thalassemia major (i.e., blood transfusion-dependent) and diagnoses approximately 10,000 new cases annually, despite its preventable nature. Living with thalassemia, a genetic blood disorder, is a constant struggle,

especially when ensuring a sufficient and readily available blood supply is a continuous challenge. However, the Government of India has been working to address this issue and continues to do so. In 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare inaugurated a Thalassemia Screening and Counseling Center at the Indian Red Cross Society's National Headquarters (IRCS NHQ) Blood Bank to educate the public on the prevention of this disease. Additionally, there are currently 10 transplant centres in India. In 2023, Vinod K. Paul from NITI Aayog announced that the model used to screen people in tribal belts for sickle-cell disease would be applied to thalassemia screening as well, urging the Union Government

for a national mission to tackle thalassemia. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)'s decision to provide blood transfusion therapy to thalassemia patients free of charge is a welcome move that will significantly ease the patients' lives. On the research front, the ICMR National Institute of Immunohematology (NIIH) and the National Institute of Research in Tribal Health (NIRTH) are researching haemoglobin disorders such as thalassemia, engaging in field investigations, and enhancing diagnostic techniques. Furthermore, Dr Bharati Pravin Pawar, Union Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, launched the third phase of the Thalassemia Bal

Sewa Yojana (TBSY) to commemorate World Thalassemia Day. The minister emphasised the importance of increasing awareness, screening, and treatment facilities for blood disorders like thalassemia and sickle-cell anaemia. The launch also included the unveiling of the Thalassemia Bal Sewa Yojana Portal and the release of Standard Treatment Guidelines for Sickle Cell Disease. Thalassemia can be prevented through early detection and intervention. Recognising this potential, the government has prioritised raising awareness and implementing screening programmes to reduce the national burden of the disease.

Lack of Public Awareness

A significant barrier to bridg-

ing the blood supply gap in India is the lack of public awareness about voluntary blood donation. Additionally, a lack of clear understanding about the donation process and accessible locations creates further barriers to participation. This, coupled with the continued practice of replacement donation in many hospitals and blood banks, despite government regulations, hinders the creation of a sufficient and diverse blood bank inventory, especially for emergencies.

Way Forward

Effective thalassemia management requires stricter enforcement of standardised blood screening guidelines. Collaboration between patient advocacy groups and healthcare providers can

address concerns about blood safety, transmission risks, and social stigma through accurate information dissemination. Implementing advanced screening methods is crucial, but robust implementation is also key.

Upgrading healthcare infrastructure, training healthcare workers, and investing in new technologies are essential for significant progress. Collaboration between patient advocacy groups like the Thalassemia Patients Advocacy Group (TPAG) and healthcare providers can address concerns about blood safety, transmission risks, and social stigma.

(The writer is a member of Parliament, views are personal)

Israel launches another raid on Gaza’s main hospital

AP ■ RAFAH (GAZA STRIP)

Israeli forces launched another raid on the Gaza Strip’s largest hospital early Monday, saying Hamas militants had regrouped there and had fired on them from inside the compound, where Palestinian officials say tens of thousands of people have been sheltering. In a separate development, the European Union’s top diplomat, Josep Borrell, accused Israel of continuing to hinder efforts to deliver aid to Gaza, saying the territory faces an “entirely man-made” famine as “starvation is used as a weapon of war.” The army last raided Shifa Hospital in November after claiming that Hamas maintained an elaborate command centre within and beneath the facility. The military revealed a tunnel leading to some underground rooms, as well as weapons it said were found inside the hospital. But the evidence fell short of the earlier claims, and critics accused the army of recklessly endangering the lives of civilians. People sheltering in the hospital said Israeli forces backed by tanks and artillery had surrounded the medical complex and that snipers were shooting at people inside. They said the army raided a number of buildings and detained dozens of

people. “We’re trapped inside,” said Abdel-Hady Sayed, who has been sheltering in the medical facility for over three months. “They fire at anything moving. ... Doctors and ambulances can’t move.” Gaza’s Health Ministry said the Israeli army was directing gun and missile fire at a building used for specialised surgeries. It said a fire broke out at the hospital’s gate. The ministry said around 30,000 people are sheltering at the hospital, including patients, medical staff and people who have fled their homes seeking safety. Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief Israeli military spokesperson, said the army launched a “high-precision operation” in parts of the medical complex. He said senior Hamas militants had regrouped there and were directing attacks from the compound. The army released a grainy aerial video of what it said were militants firing on its forces from inside the hospital, as well as video of a rocket-propelled grenade striking an armoured vehicle. It said its forces had detained around 80 people. Hagari said the patients and medical staff could remain in the medical complex and that a safe passage was available for



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left, delivers his speech after a meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Jerusalem, Sunday. AP/PTI

civilians who wanted to leave.

HOSPITALS OUT OF SERVICE

Israel accuses Hamas of using hospitals and other civilian facilities to shield its fighters, and the Israeli military has raided several hospitals since the start of the war, which was triggered by Hamas’ October 7 attack into southern Israel. Most of Gaza’s medical facilities have been forced to shut down for lack of fuel and med-

ical supplies, even as scores of people are killed and wounded each day in Israeli strikes. The Gaza Health Ministry said Monday that at least 31,726 Palestinians have been killed in the war, including 81 in the past 24 hours. The ministry doesn’t differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people in the surprise attack out of Gaza that

triggered the war, and took another 250 people hostage. Hamas is still believed to be holding about 100 captives, as well as the remains of 30 others, after most of the rest were freed during a cease-fire last year in exchange for the release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. The United States, Qatar and Egypt have spent weeks trying to broker another cease-fire and hostage release, but the gulf between the two sides remains wide, with Hamas demanding guarantees for an end to the war and Israel vowing to continue the offensive until it destroys the militant group. Israel’s offensive has driven most of Gaza’s 2.3 million people from their homes and the UN says a quarter of the population is starving.

HARSH CONDEMNATION FROM EU DIPLOMAT

Northern Gaza, including Gaza City, was the first target of the invasion and suffered widespread destruction. The military said late last year that it had dismantled most of Hamas’ military infrastructure in the north and withdrew thousands of forces, but sporadic fighting has continued. The north is the epicentre of Gaza’s humanitarian catastrophe, with many residents reduced to eating

animal feed. At least 20 people, mostly children, have died from malnutrition and dehydration in the north, the Health Ministry said earlier this month. Airdrops by the US and other nations continue, while deliveries on a new sea route have begun, but aid groups say it’s essential that Israel open up more ground routes and ease restrictions to meet the mounting humanitarian needs. “We are in a state of famine, affecting thousands of people,” EU foreign policy chief Borrell said at an international aid conference in Brussels. “Starvation is used as a weapon of war.” He went on to call for greater efficiency at the two functioning border crossings and for Israel to open additional ones. “Israel has to do it. It is not a question of logistics. It is not because the United Nations has not provided enough support,” he said. “The support is there, waiting. Trucks are stopped. People are dying, while the land crossings are artificially closed.” Israeli authorities say they place no limits on the entry of aid and accuse UN bodies of failing to distribute it in a timely manner, saying aid piles up on the Gaza side of the crossings. Aid groups say distribution is impossible in much of Gaza because of ongoing hostilities, the difficulty of coordinating

with the military and the breakdown of law and order. The international aid group Oxfam said Sunday that a “dysfunctional and undersized inspection system” snarls the entry of aid, with trucks stranded in long lines for 20 days on average. The group says it has an entire warehouse filled with goods that were rejected, including oxygen, incubators and water and sanitation gear. “Israeli authorities are not only failing to facilitate the international aid effort but are actively hindering it,” said Oxfam Mideast director Sally Abi Khalil. **‘FAMINE IMMINENT’ IN NORTHERN GAZA** The UN food agency says “famine is imminent” in northern Gaza, where an estimated 70% of the population faces catastrophic hunger. The World Food Program on Monday released the latest findings of its Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, an international process for estimating the scale of hunger crises. It says virtually everyone in Gaza is struggling to get enough food, and around 210,000 people in northern Gaza are in Phase 5, the highest, which refers to catastrophic hunger.

N Korea resumes missile test

Raising tensions with rivals after military drills end

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korea fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles toward its eastern waters on Monday morning, its neighbours said, days after the end of the South Korean-US military drills that the North views as an invasion rehearsal. The launches were North Korea’s first known missile testing activities in about a month. Outside experts earlier predicted North Korea would extend its run of missile tests and intensify its warlike rhetoric ahead of the US presidential election in November to boost its leverage in future diplomacy. Japan’s Defence Ministry said North Korea fired three missiles, two together at 7:44 am and the other about 37 minutes later. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told a parliamentary session that the North Korean missiles landed in the waters between the Korean Peninsula and Japan, all outside of Japan’s exclusive economic zone, and that no damage or injuries have been reported. Kishida denounced North Korea’s repeated ballistic missile tests as acts “that threaten the peace and safety of Japan, the region and the international society”. He said Japan strongly protested against North Korea over its testing activities, saying they violated UN Security Council resolutions that ban the North from engaging in any ballistic activities. South Korea’s military said it also detected “several” suspected short-range ballistic launches by North Korea on Monday morning. The Joint Chiefs of Staff called the launches “clear provocation” that threaten peace on the Korean Peninsula. It said South Korea will maintain readiness to repel any provocation by North Korea, based on its solid military alliance with the United States. According to Japan and South Korean assessments, the North Korean missiles fired from its capital region travelled a distance of 300-350 kilometres (about 185-220 miles) at the maximum



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, bottom second right, South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, bottom second left, Britain’s Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden, bottom left, and other leaders pose for a photo at the third Summit for Democracy in Seoul, South Korea. AP/PTI

speed of 50 kilometres (about 30 miles) per hour. The US State Department condemned the launches, saying they pose a threat to the North’s neighbours and undermine regional security. A State Department statement said the US commitment to the defence of South Korea and Japan remain “ironclad”. The US stations a total of 80,000 troops in South Korea and Japan, the backbone of its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. During the South Korea-US military drills that ended on Thursday, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un guided a series of military training exercises involving tanks, artillery guns and paratroopers and called for greater war fighting capabilities. The 11-day South Korean-US drills involved a computer-simulated command post training and 48 kinds of field exercises, twice the number conducted last year. The North didn’t perform any missile tests during its rivals’ training, however. Its missile tests are considered much bigger provocations as North Korea has been pushing hard to mount nuclear warheads on its missiles targeting the US mainland and its allies. Many experts say North Korea already has nuclear-armed missiles capable of reaching all of South Korea

and Japan, but it has yet to have functioning long-range missiles that can strike the US mainland. Before Monday’s launches, North Korea last carried out missile tests in mid-February by firing cruise missiles into the sea. Animosity on the Korean Peninsula remain high in the wake of North Korea’s barrage of missile tests since 2022. Many of the tests involved nuclear-capable missiles designed to attack South Korea and the mainland US. The US and South Korean forces have responded by expanding their training exercises and trilateral drills involving Japan. Experts say North Korea likely believes a bigger weapons arsenal would increase its leverage in future diplomacy with the United States. They say North Korea would want to win extensive sanctions relief while maintaining its nuclear weapons. Worries about North Korean military moves have deepened since Kim vowed in a speech in January to rewrite the constitution to eliminate the country’s long-standing goal of seeking peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula and to cement South Korea as its “invariable principal enemy”. He said the new charter must specify North Korea would annex and subjugate the South if another war broke out.

Netanyahu snaps back at growing US criticism

AP ■ RAFAH

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu railed Sunday against growing criticism from top ally the United States against his leadership amid the devastating war with Hamas, describing calls for a new election as “wholly inappropriate.” In recent days, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, the highest-ranking Jewish official in the country and a strong Israel supporter, called on Israel to hold a new election, saying Netanyahu had “lost his way.” President Joe Biden expressed support for Schumer’s “good speech,” and earlier accused Netanyahu of hurting Israel because of the huge civilian death toll in Gaza. Netanyahu told Fox News that Israel never would have called for a new US election after the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001, and denounced Schumer’s comments as inappropriate. “We’re not a banana republic,” he said. “The people of Israel will choose when they will have elections, and who they’ll elect, and

it’s not something that will be foisted on us.” When asked by CNN whether he would commit to a new election after the war ends, Netanyahu said: “I think that’s something for the Israeli public to decide.” The US, which has provided key military and diplomatic support to Israel, also has expressed concerns about a planned Israeli assault on the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where about 1.4 million displaced Palestinians are sheltering. The spokesman for the National Security Council, John Kirby, told Fox the US still hasn’t seen an Israeli plan for Rafah. The US supports a new round of talks aimed at securing a cease-fire in exchange for the return of Israeli hostages taken in Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack. The Israeli delegation to those talks was expected to leave for Qatar after Sunday evening meetings of the Security Cabinet and War Cabinet, which will give directions for negotiations.

Despite the talks, Netanyahu made it clear he would not back down from the fighting that has killed more than 31,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza health officials. More than five months have passed since Hamas attacked southern Israel, killed 1,200 people and took another 250 hostage. Earlier Sunday, Netanyahu said calls for an election now — which polls show he would lose badly — would force Israel to stop fighting and paralyze the country for six months. Netanyahu also reiterated his determination to attack Hamas in Rafah and said that his government approved military plans for such an operation. “We will operate in Rafah. This will take several weeks, and it will happen,” he said. The operation is supposed to include the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of civilians, but it is not clear how Israel will do that. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi reiterated his warning that an Israeli ground offensive

in Rafah would have “grave repercussions on the whole region.” Egypt says pushing Palestinians into the Sinai Peninsula would jeopardize its peace treaty with Israel, a cornerstone of regional stability. “We are also very concerned about the risks a full-scale offensive in Rafah would have on the vulnerable civilian population. This needs to be avoided at all costs,” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said after meeting with el-Sissi. And German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, after meeting with Netanyahu on Sunday, warned that “the more desperate the situation of people in Gaza becomes, the more this begs the question: No matter how important the goal, can it justify such terribly high costs, or are there other ways to achieve your goal?” Germany is one of Israel’s closest allies in Europe and, given memories of the Holocaust, often treads carefully when criticizing Israel. Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, in

Washington for St. Patrick’s Day, said during a White House reception that the Irish people were “deeply troubled” by what’s unfolding in Gaza. He said there was much to learn from Ireland’s peace process and the critical US involvement in it. Varadkar said he’s often asked why the Irish are so empathetic to the Palestinians. “We see our history in their eyes. A story of displacement, dispossession, and national identity questioned and denied forced emigration, discrimination and now hunger,” he said. Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul-general in New York and an outspoken critic of Netanyahu, said that the prime minister’s comments fit with his efforts to find someone else to blame if Israel doesn’t achieve its goal of destroying Hamas. “He’s looking on purpose for a conflict with the US so that he can blame Biden,” Pinkas said. Both sides have something to gain politically from the dispute.

Economy turning corner: UK PM Sunak attempts optimistic reset

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Monday attempted an optimistic reset amid reports of growing unrest within his own Conservative Party ranks as he unveiled a new package of reforms for small businesses and insisted the UK “economy is turning a corner”. The British Indian leader referenced his family-run pharmacy in the southern England port city of Southampton, where he was born and helped out as a schoolboy, as an example of his first-hand small business experience. In an indirect message for the rebels, he stressed that it was important to stick with the plan for the economy that was working after a tough couple of years. “There is now a real sense that the economy is turning a corner with all the economic

indicators pointing in the right direction,” Sunak said during a Business Connect event in Warwickshire, in the Midlands region of England. “This year, 2024, will be the year Britain bounces back... inflation has more than halved and is falling fast, growth is higher than anyone expected, debt is on track to fall; we are not there yet but we are absolutely moving in the right direction. So, let’s stick to the plan and build a better, brighter future together,” he said. Under the new package of measures, the UK government will fully fund apprenticeships in small businesses from April 1 by paying the full cost of training for anyone up to the age of 21 — reducing costs for businesses and delivering more opportunities for young people to kick start careers. The move is underpinned by an additional GBP 60

million of new government funding for next year to support apprenticeships and also cut red tape. “Growing up in my mum’s pharmacy, I know first-hand how important small businesses are. Not just for the economy, but as a driver for innovation and aspiration, and as the key to building a society where hard work is always recognised and rewarded,” said Sunak. In what was his first major speech on the economy since the Spring Budget earlier this month, Sunak insisted that the new measures will unlock a “tidal wave of opportunity” and make a real difference to businesses and entrepreneurs across the country. “Whether it’s breaking down barriers and red tape for small businesses, helping businesses hire more young people into

apprenticeships and skilled jobs or empowering women to start up their own businesses — this government is sticking to the plan and leaving no stone unturned to make the UK the best place to do business,” he added. The new measures aim to help small and medium enterprises (SMEs) hire more apprentices by reducing costs and enabling more employers to get the skilled workers they need. Taken together, the measures are targeted at enabling up to 20,000 more apprenticeships, primarily for young people. “Whether it’s through cutting red tape, unlocking investment costs, today’s announcements show that this government is committed to doing all it can to turbo-charge SMEs so that they can go further and faster than ever before,” said UK Business and Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch.

First flight carrying US citizens from Haiti lands in Miami

Miami (AP): A charter flight carrying dozens of US citizens fleeing spiralling gang violence in Haiti has landed in Miami, US State Department officials said. More than 30 US citizens were on the government-chartered flight that landed on Sunday, officials said in a statement. It arrived at the Miami International Airport after the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince earlier this month urged US citizens to leave “as soon as possible” as chaos grips Haiti. Passenger Avlot Quesada, who lives in Boston, travelled from the centre of the country to board the charter flight after going to Haiti last month for what was supposed to be a weeklong trip to visit his mother. “It’s just terrible ... The suffering, you can only imagine,” Quesada told the Miami Herald of the nearby Caribbean nation. “Haiti is my homeland and it’s very stressful to see the homeland going through this act of violence, destruction ... and they are our neighbours.” Haiti’s main airport in Port-au-Prince remains closed following gang attacks that have raged through Haiti in recent weeks, pushing many people to the brink of famine. Government and aid agencies this weekend reported looting of aid supplies as the situation worsened. The State Department announced on Saturday that it would offer limited charter flights for American citizens from the less chaotic northern city of Cap-Haitien. Officials said they could not provide ground transportation to Cap-Haitien and that US citizens should consider the charter flights “only if you think you can reach Cap-Haitien airport safely.”

Indian student dies in US, probe rules out foul play

New York (PTI): In yet another tragic incident, an Indian student died in Boston and initial investigation has ruled out any foul play, officials said on Monday. Deeply saddened to learn about the unfortunate demise of Mr. Abhijeeth Paruchuru, an Indian student in Boston, the Consulate General of India in New York said in a post on X. Paruchuru’s parents are based in Connecticut and are in direct touch with detectives. Initial investigations rule out foul play, the consulate said. The consulate said it “rendered assistance in documentation and transportation of his mortal remains to India” and it remains in touch with local authorities as well as the Indian-American community in the matter. According to sources, 20-year-old Paruchuru’s last rites have already been performed in his

hometown Tenali in Andhra Pradesh. US-based nonprofit organisation TEAM Aid had helped to bring his mortal remains to India. Since the beginning of 2024, there have been at least half a dozen deaths of Indian and Indian-origin students in the US. The alarming rise in the number of attacks has caused concern among the community. In March, Amarnath Ghosh, a 34-year-old trained classical dancer from India and a student of Washington University, was shot dead in St Louis, Missouri. Kuchipudi and Bharatnatyam dancer Ghosh migrated to the US from West Bengal last year “to follow his dancing dreams”. He was shot several times near the border of St Louis’ Academy and Central West End neighbourhoods. He died on the spot.



Ireland’s Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, right, presents President Joe Biden with a bowl of Shamrocks during a St. Patrick’s Day reception in the East Room of the White House, Sunday. AP/PTI

Putin extends rule in preordained Russian election

AP ■ MOSCOW

President Vladimir Putin sealed his control over Russia for six more years on Monday with a highly orchestrated landslide in an election that followed the harshest crackdown on the opposition and free speech since Soviet times. While the result was never in doubt, Russians attempted to defy the inevitable outcome, heeding a call to protest Putin's repression at home and his war in Ukraine by showing up at polling stations at noon on Sunday. But from the earliest returns, it was clear Putin would extend his nearly quarter-century rule with a fifth term.

With nearly all the precincts counted Monday, election officials said Putin had secured a record number of votes — an unsurprising development underlining the Russian leader's total control of the country's political system. Putin has led Russia as president or prime minister since December 1999, a tenure marked by international military aggression and an increasing intolerance for dissent. At the end of his fifth term, Putin would be the longest-serving Russian leader since Catherine

the Great, who ruled during the 18th century.

As early results came in, Putin hailed them as an indication of “trust” and “hope” in him — while critics saw them as another reflection of the preordained nature of the election. “Of course, we have lots of tasks ahead. But I want to make it clear for everyone: When we were consolidated, no one has ever managed to frighten us, to suppress our will and our self-conscience. They failed in the past and they will fail in the future,” he said at a meeting with his campaign staff after polls closed.

Any public criticism of Putin or his war in Ukraine has been stifled. Independent media have been crippled. His fiercest political foe, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison last month, and other critics are either in jail or in exile. Beyond the fact that voters had virtually no choice, independent monitoring of the election was extremely limited.

Russia's Central Election Commission said Monday that with nearly 100% of precincts counted, Putin got 87% of the vote. Central Election Commission chief Ella Pamfilova said that nearly 76 million voters cast their ballots



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks during a visit to his campaign headquarters after a presidential election in Moscow, Russia, on Sunday

for Putin, his highest vote tally ever. Western leaders denounced the election as a sham, while President Volodymyr Zelenskyy particularly criticized voting in Ukrainian areas that Russia has illegally annexed, saying “everything Russia does on the occupied territory of Ukraine is a crime.”

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis also said the exercise didn't deserve the name “election.”

Germany sharply criticized the vote with Chancellor Olaf Scholz's spokeswoman, Christina Hoffmann, saying

that “in our opinion, it was not a democratic election.”

“There is no freedom of expression in Russia,” she told reporters in Berlin. “Russia, as the chancellor has already said, is now a dictatorship and is ruled by Vladimir Putin in an authoritarian manner.”

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis also said the exercise didn't deserve the name “election.”

“It's a procedure that is supposed to resemble elections,” he

said. “Some might call it reappointment, lacking any legitimacy.”

Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un quickly congratulated Putin, along with some Central and South American leaders and presidents of nations that have historic and close current ties to Russia, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

In the tightly controlled envi-

ronment, Navalny's associates urged those unhappy with Putin or the war to go to the polls at noon on Sunday — and lines outside a number of polling stations both inside Russia and at its embassies around the world appeared to swell at that time.

Among those heeding the call was Yulia Navalnaya, Navalny's widow, who spent more than five hours in the line at the Russian Embassy in Berlin. She told reporters that she wrote her late husband's name on her ballot.

Asked whether she had a message for Putin, Navalnaya replied: “Please stop asking for messages from me or from somebody for Mr. Putin. There could be no negotiations and nothing with Mr. Putin, because he's a killer, he's a gangster.”

A voter in Moscow, who identified himself only as Vadim, said he hoped for change, but added that “unfortunately, it's unlikely.” Like others, he didn't give his full name because of security concerns.

Meanwhile, supporters of Navalny streamed to his grave in Moscow, some bringing balloons with his name written on them.

Putin brushed off the effective-

ness of the apparent protest and rejected Western criticism of the vote as he tried to turn the tables on the West, charging that the four criminal cases against US Republican candidate Donald Trump were a use of the judiciary for political aims and describing denigrating democracy in the US as a “catastrophe.”

“The whole world is laughing at it,” he said. Putin referenced Navalny by name for the first time in years at the news conference, declaring that he was ready to release him in a swap for unidentified inmates in Western custody just days before the opposition leader's death.

Some people told the AP that they were happy to vote for Putin — unsurprising in a country where state TV airs a drumbeat of praise for the Russian leader and voicing any other opinion is risky.

Dmitry Sergienko, who cast his ballot in Moscow, said, “I am happy with everything and want everything to continue as it is now.”

Voting took place over three days at polling stations across the vast country, in illegally annexed regions of Ukraine and online.

Several people were arrested,

including in Moscow and St Petersburg, after they tried to start fires or set off explosives at polling stations while a few others were detained for throwing green antiseptic or ink into ballot boxes. Many more were rounded up by police for attempting to protest.

The OVD-Info group that monitors political arrests said that about 90 people were arrested in 22 cities across Russia on Sunday. Stanislav Andreychuk, co-chair of the Golos independent election watchdog, said Russians were searched when entering polling stations, there were attempts to check filled-out ballots before they were cast, and one report said police demanded a ballot box be opened to remove a ballot. That left little room for people to express themselves. Still, huge lines formed around noon outside diplomatic missions in London, Berlin, Paris and other cities with large Russian communities, many of whom left home after Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

“If we have some option to protest I think it's important to utilise any opportunity,” said 23-year-old Tatiana, who was voting in the Estonian capital of Tallinn and said she came to take part in the protest.

Pakistan conducts airstrikes inside Af; 8 people killed

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD/KABUL

Pakistan on Monday said it carried out airstrikes on the banned Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) affiliated militants in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, amidst a war of words between the two neighbours for a spate of recent terror attacks in restive Pakistani cities.

At least eight civilians, including three children, were killed in the airstrikes carried out by Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban said while summoning the charge d'affaires of Pakistan's embassy in Kabul to lodge a strong protest.

In a press release, Pakistan's Foreign Office (FO) said that rebels belonging to TTP's Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group were hit after the outfit claimed responsibility for the attack on Saturday at an army outpost that resulted in the killing of seven soldiers, including two officers. “This morning Pakistan carried out intelligence-based anti-terrorist operations in the border regions inside Afghanistan. The prime target of today's operation was the terrorists belonging to Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, which along with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), is responsible for multiple terrorist attacks inside Pakistan, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and law enforcement officials,” it stated.

The FO said that over the past two years, Pakistan repeatedly conveyed its serious concerns to the Interim Afghan Government over the presence of terror outfits, including TTP, inside Afghanistan, who posed a grave threat to Pakistan's security as they consistently used Afghan territory to launch terror attacks inside Pakistani territory.

It said terrorist groups like TTP were a collective threat to regional peace and security and Pakistan was aware of the challenge Afghan authorities faced in combating the threat



posed by TTP. Pakistan also announced its decision to continue to work towards finding joint solutions in countering terrorism and to prevent any terrorist organisation from sabotaging bilateral relations with Afghanistan.

The FO said that Pakistan accords prime importance to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan and always prioritises dialogue and cooperation to confront the terrorist threat.

“We have repeatedly urged the Afghan authorities to take concrete and effective action to ensure that the Afghan soil is not used as a staging ground for terrorism against Pakistan. We have also called on them to deny safe havens to TTP and to hand over its leadership to Pakistan,” FO said.

It said that Pakistan has great respect for the people of Afghanistan but certain elements among those in power in Afghanistan are actively patronising TTP and using them as a proxy against Pakistan.

It said that such an approach against a brotherly country, which stood with the people of Afghanistan through thick and thin, manifests shortsightedness and ignores the support extended by Pakistan to the people of Afghanistan over the last several decades.

“We urge these elements in power to rethink the policy of siding with Khwarij terrorists shedding the blood of innocent Pakistanis and to make a clear choice to stand with the people

of Pakistan,” it said.

There were also reports of the exchange of fire on the border between the troops of the two sides after the Afghan side fired mortars following the airstrikes, injuring four civilians. In response to the Pakistani air strikes on the Barmal district of Paktika and the Spera district of Khost, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the charge d'affaires of Pakistan's embassy, Obaid Rahman Nizamani and submitted a protest letter to him. “Besides condemning the airstrikes, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informs Pakistan that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has experienced a long struggle for freedom against the superpowers of the world and cannot tolerate any kind of invasion of its territory,” the ministry said in a statement. Earlier, Zabiullah Mujahid, the spokesperson of the Afghan rulers, said in a statement that Pakistani aircraft had carried out the airstrikes, the Dawn newspaper reported from Kabul.

At “around 3 am, Pakistani aircraft bombed civilian homes” in Khost and Paktika provinces near the border with Pakistan, said Mujahid, claiming that all eight people killed were women and children.

Mujahid said that Pakistani planes had bombed the Laman area in Paktika's Barmal district. Alleging that “houses of common people were targeted”, he said three women and three children were killed in Paktika

and a house collapsed while two women were killed in Khost, where a house was destroyed as well.

“The Islamic Emirate strongly condemns the attacks and describes these as non-serious actions and violation of Afghanistani territory,” Mujahid said.

The spokesperson asked Pakistan to stop blaming Afghanistan for its problems and failure to control violent incidents. “Such acts can lead to dire consequences which will not be in control of Pakistan,” he warned.

The strikes come a day after President Asif Ali Zardari vowed retaliation following the killing of seven soldiers, including two officers, in a terrorist attack on a security forces' post in North Waziristan.

Offering the funeral prayers of the two officers, Zardari on Sunday said that the blood of the martyrs would not go in vain and the country would avenge the deaths. The president said Pakistan would not hesitate to strike back if attacked by anyone at borders or inside its territory.

The Hafiz Gul Bahadur group had claimed responsibility for the deadly attack. Security officials say that fighters of the Gul Bahadur group operate from the Afghan side of the border, mostly from Khost. The Paktika province is located near Pakistan's South Waziristan District while Khost is situated near North Waziristan.

Pakistan's Special Representative to Afghanistan Ambassador Asif Durrani on Saturday said that an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 militants from the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have taken shelter in neighbouring Afghanistan. The TTP, which has ideological linkages with the Afghan Taliban and is also known as the Pakistan Taliban, was set up as an umbrella group of several militant outfits in 2007.

Maryam visits Kot Lakhpat Jail

Lahore (PTI): Nawaz Sharif is a “kingmaker” today while his oppressors are “nowhere,” an emotional Maryam Nawaz, the first woman chief minister of Pakistan's Punjab province, has said, as she visited the Kot Lakhpat jail here and recalled hardships she and her father endured in prison.

Maryam, 50, on Sunday visited the Kot Lakhpat Jail, where she and Nawaz Sharif served prison terms in corruption cases, and broke Ramzan fast with the women prisoners. She sat with the women prisoners and presented samosas, pakoras, fruits and biryani to them.

She also got to see the prison cell where her father three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif languished in a Panama Papers corruption case before leaving the country for London in 2019 on medical grounds.

“Emotional moment to see the cell of MNS (Mian Nawaz Sharif), where a three-time prime minister was kept. I was in the same jail but I was never allowed to visit him. Got to see it today. He is a kingmaker today while his oppressors are nowhere,” she said on X. After spending four years in self-exile Sharif, 74, returned in October last year reportedly after striking a deal with a powerful military establishment.

He was set to become premier for a record the fourth time in last month's general elections but his party failed to get enough seats in the National Assembly to form a government on its own. Independent candidates backed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won the maximum number of seats.

However, his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif, who is considered a favourite of the military establishment, managed to form a coalition federal government with the help of five other parties. Recalling her time in this jail, she said: “I was imprisoned in the death cell and faced a difficult time. My father was also imprisoned in the same jail but I was denied permission for meeting him. I used to meet my father once a week only.”

Imran's party seeks probe into undeclared foreign bank ac/s

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

An estranged founding member of Imran Khan's beleaguered Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf on Monday urged Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi to conduct an inquiry into the party's alleged “secret” foreign bank accounts.

Akbar S Babar sent a letter to Naqvi and recalled the years-long prohibited funding case against the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), in which the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) ruled that the party received prohibited funding from abroad.

A copy of the letter was also sent to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the Dawn newspaper reported. Babar also wrote that no action was taken even after the verdict on the PTI foreign funding case which was announced 20 months back.

He quoted details from the ECP order, including “private bank accounts of PTI employees illegally used to collect donations” and “grossly inaccurate and wrong” filing of

signed certificates by 71-year-old former cricketer-turned-politician Khan. The former prime minister has been in jail after being convicted in some of the more than 100 cases against him. “There is a need to pursue with full vigour all instances of violations of law documented in the ECP of Aug 2, 2022,” Babar asserted.

The letter mentioned seven foreign bank accounts “identified” during the proceedings of the case and “admitted by PTI” — three Bank of America accounts, one in Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, one in Australia and New Zealand Banking Group and two in Lloyds Bank.

It further said three sources of funding were revealed — from PTI Finland, PTI Norway and Insaf New Zealand.

Terming “illegal funding of political parties” as a matter of national security, Babar urged the interior minister to “seek details of all PTI international bank accounts maintained abroad through the Mutual Legal Assistance arrange-

ments” and to take action against the perpetrators.

In a long-awaited verdict on PTI's prohibited funding, the ECP in August 2022 ruled that the party of Khan did indeed receive illegal funding. A three-member ECP bench headed by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sikander Sultan Raja announced the verdict in a case filed by Akbar S Babar which was pending since November 14, 2014.

In its written order, the ECP said Khan's PTI received millions of dollars in illegal funds from foreign countries, including the United States, the United Arab Emirates, the UK, and Australia.

“The office is also directed to initiate any other action under the law, in light of this order of the Commission,” said the 68-page judgement. The electoral watchdog also declared that 13 ‘unknown’ accounts have been found linked to the party and the submissions by PTI chief Imran Khan were ‘inaccurate and wrong’.

‘Russia ready to scrap contracts of Nepalese nationals who joined Russian Army’

Kathmandu (PTI): Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha has said that Russia has given its “in-principle consent” to cancel the contracts of Nepalese nationals who joined the Russian Army and are engaged in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, a media report said on Monday.

Shrestha, also the country's foreign minister, said in a meeting of the House of Representatives that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has said that it has “agreed in principle to assist those who have joined the army to cancel their contracts”, the Republica newspaper reported. However, its modality is yet to be decided, he added. The 65-year-old CPN

(Maoist Centre) leader said the Nepali Embassy in Moscow is constantly following up on this. “Photos of those held captive in Ukraine have been released. Efforts are being made to bring them back to Nepal,” Shrestha said.

Last week, Shrestha had asked Russia to share a list of Nepalese citizens serving the Russian Army but stressed that complications remained in bringing them back from the war zone. The comments by Shrestha came while speaking to media persons after the Russian Ambassador to the Himalayan nation Aleksei Novikov called on him, the Kathmandu Post newspaper reported.

“Since the war between Russia

and Ukraine has not stopped, bringing Nepalis back from the Russian Army is still difficult,” he said.

Hundreds of Nepali citizens are reportedly fighting for the Russians against Ukraine. A small number of Nepali citizens are serving in the Ukrainian Army as well, but both the conflicting nations have not shared the details with the government of Nepal. According to a network of the victims' families, 20 Nepali nationals are confirmed dead fighting for the Russians, and more than 260 have gone missing or are out of contact. However, the Nepal government has said that so far 11 Nepalese nationals serving in the Russian Army were killed in the war with Ukraine.

Former ISI chief's brother arrested

Lahore (PTI): Former ISI chief Lt Gen Faiz Hamid's brother has been arrested on charges of corruption in Pakistan's Punjab province, anti-graft authorities said on Monday, as the new government appears to take revenge against those who targeted the Sharif family under Imran Khan's regime.

“Revenue officer Najaf Hamid, brother of former ISI head Faiz Hamid, was arrested on Monday in Chakwal (about 350 kilometres from Lahore) on the charges of corruption and misuse of authority,” an Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) spokesperson said. He said the suspect would be presented before a magistrate for his physical remand. Chakwal is the hometown of Hamid. Najaf's arrest has come against the backdrop of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's (PML-N) crackdown against those responsible for the ouster of Nawaz Sharif from power in 2017.

Chinese FM meets New Zealand counterpart to start diplomatic tour

AP ■ WELLINGTON

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his New Zealand counterpart Monday, as China's most senior diplomat began a tour of the country and Australia. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Winston Peters greeted Wang in Wellington, New Zealand's capital.

“There have been some significant developments since we last met, not least a global pandemic that impacted both our countries,” Peters said in his opening comments of their formal meeting at New Zealand's parliament house. “Today is a valuable opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities that are now before us.”

Wang is the highest-ranking

Chinese politician to visit the country since his own previous visit in 2017.

New Zealand has had strong economic ties with China in recent years, and was the first developed country to sign a bilateral free trade deal with Beijing in 2008.

While in Wellington, Wang will also have brief meetings with Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Trade Minister Todd McClay.

“China looks forward to working with the two countries to deliver on the common understandings between the leaders, enhance strategic communication, deepen mutual trust, advance exchanges and co-operation, promote the steady and sustained growth of the China-New Zealand and China-Australia comprehensive

strategic partnerships and contribute to world peace, stability and prosperity,” foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said.

Wang will arrive in Canberra, Australia on Wednesday to meet with counterpart Penny Wong, with dialogue between the pair expected to center on the case of detained Australian Yang Hengjun. It will be the first time the two foreign ministers have met face to face since Yang was found guilty of espionage following a closed trial and sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve in February.

The trade tariffs cost the local economy an estimated 20 billion Australian dollars (\$13 billion), but have since been wound back on most goods except wine, rock lobsters and some abattoirs.

S Korea says North has supplied 7,000 containers of munitions to Russia

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korea has shipped around 7,000 containers filled with munitions and other military equipment to Russia since last year to help support its war in Ukraine, South Korea's defense minister said Monday. Shin Won-sik shared the assessment at a news conference hours after the South Korean and Japanese militaries said the North fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles into its eastern waters, adding to a streak of weapons displays amid growing tensions with rivals.

Since the start of 2022, North Korea has used Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a distraction to ramp up its weapons tests and has also aligned with Moscow over the conflict, as

leader Kim Jong Un tries to break out of diplomatic isolation and join a united front against the United States.

US and South Korean officials have accused North Korea of supplying Russia with artillery shells, missiles and other equipment in recent months to help fuel its war on Ukraine, saying that such arms transfers accelerated after a rare summit between Kim and Russian President Vladimir Putin in September.

North Korea in exchange possibly received badly needed food and economic aid and military assistance aimed at upgrading Kim's forces, according to South Korean officials and private experts. Both Moscow and Pyongyang have denied the existence of an arms deal between the coun-

tries. During a news conference in Seoul, Shin said the South Korean military believes the North, after initially relying on ships, has been increasingly using its rail networks to send arms supplies to Russia through their land border.

In exchange for sending possibly several million artillery shells and other supplies, North Korea has received more than 9,000 Russian containers likely filled with aid, Shin said. He raised suspicions that Russia could be providing North Korea with fuel, possibly in defiance of U.N. Security Council sanctions that tightly cap the country's imports of oil and petroleum products. While fuel shortages likely forced North Korea to scale back winter training activities for its soldiers in recent years, South

Korea's military assesses that the North expanded such drills this January and February, Shin said. North Korea's latest missile launches came days after the end of the latest South Korean-U.S. combined military drills that the North portrays as an invasion rehearsal. Shin said the North may dial up its testing activity before the April 10 parliamentary elections in South Korea, which is shaping up as a confidence vote for conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has taken a harder line than his liberal predecessor over North Korea's nuclear ambitions and threats.

Animosities between the war-divided Koreans has recently worsened, with both countries taking steps to breach a 2018 bilateral military agreement on reducing border tensions.

Insurance sector gets FDI worth ₹54,000 crore in last nine years

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The insurance sector has received close to Rs 54,000 crore as foreign direct investment (FDI) in the last 9 years on the back of further liberalisation of overseas capital flow norms by the government, Financial Services Secretary Vivek Joshi has said. The government increased the permissible FDI limit from 26 per cent in 2014 to 49 per cent in 2015 and then to 74 per cent in 2021, he told PTI in an interview. However, he said, the permissible FDI limit for insurance intermediaries was increased to 100 per cent in 2019. As a result, Rs 53,900 crore of FDI was received in insurance companies between December 2014 and January 2024, he said. During the period, Joshi said, the number of insurance players increased from 53 to 70 as of January 2024. Insurance penetration increased from 3.9 per cent in 2013-14 to 4 per cent in 2022-23 while insurance density rose from USD 52 in 2013-14 to USD 92 in 2022-23, he said. Insurance penetration and density are two metrics, among others, often used to assess the level of development of the insurance sector in a country. While insurance penetration is measured as the percentage of insurance premium to GDP, insurance density is calculated as the ratio of premium to population (per capita premium). Asset Under Management nearly tripled to



Rs 60.04 lakh crore as compared to Rs 21.07 lakh crore in 2013-14, while the total insurance premium more than doubled to Rs 10.4 lakh crore from Rs 3.94 lakh crore at the end of March 2014. The insurance sector was opened for private players in August 2000 with the invitation for application for registrations. Foreign companies were allowed ownership of up to 26 per cent. Since then, many foreign companies have invested in the insurance sector. The latest Zurich Insurance-Kotak General Insurance deal could be one of the major FDI flows in the insurance sector. Last month, Zurich Insurance had said, it proposes to acquire a 70 per cent stake in

Kotak Mahindra General Insurance, for Rs 5,560 crore, in a single tranche. In November 2023, Kotak Mahindra Bank had announced the sale of a 51 per cent stake in its general insurance arm to Zurich Insurance for Rs 4,051 crore through a combination of fresh capital infusion and share purchase, followed by a 19 per cent stake sale within a period of three years. The proposed 70 per cent acquisition would be subject to fulfilment of customary conditions precedent, including the receipt of regulatory approvals from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai).

IT to see three to five per cent growth in FY25

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Indian IT sector's revenue growth is expected to come at a tepid 3-5 per cent in FY25, a domestic rating agency said on Monday. The sector's hiring will "remain muted" in the near-term until the growth momentum picks up, Icra Ratings said. However, the companies' profitability is expected to be resilient amid concerns on topline growth, it said, adding the operating profit margins for the USD 250 billion Indian IT sector will come at a healthy 21-22 per cent in FY25. The agency said in the first nine months of the ongoing 2023-24, the industry has posted a revenue growth of just 2 per cent, as against 3-5 per cent it had estimated for the sector in the past. The topline growth for the first nine months of FY23 had stood at a healthy 9.2 per cent. Persistent macroeconomic headwinds in key markets of the US and Europe, which has led to lower discretionary IT spends by corporate has led to expectations of tepid revenue growth even in FY25, its sector head Deepak Jotwani said. He, however, added that critical spending and cost optimisation deals continue to gain traction, supporting the



growth prospects for the Indian IT services companies to "some extent". The agency expects pick-up in the growth momentum once the macroeconomic headwinds subside on strong order books and deal pipeline of most companies and tech spends becoming far more integral to overall capital allocation for corporate after the pandemic. While it expects hiring activity to remain muted, the agency said the attrition levels will stabilise over the near term, inching closer to the long-term average of 12-13 per cent, as overall slowdown in growth momentum and strong hiring in the previous fiscal has corrected the demand-supply mismatch witnessed earlier. The agency maintained its stable outlook on the sector for the new fiscal.



Markets close higher in volatile trade

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty closed higher in a highly volatile trade on Monday as investors turned cautious ahead of the US Federal Reserve interest rate decision. After gyrating between gains and losses, the 30-share BSE Sensex settled higher by 104.99 points or 0.14 per cent at 72,748.42. As many as 14 Sensex shares closed in the green while 16 in the red. The index moved between a high of 72,985.89 and a low of 72,314.16. The broader Nifty of the NSE rose by 32.35 points or 0.15 per cent, to close at 22,055.70 as 21 of its components advanced and 29 declined. The gains were primarily led by metal, auto and commodity shares while IT and Tech shares capped the upside. Reliance Industries which rebounded more than 1.5 per cent from the day's low was the major contributor to Sensex and Nifty gains. RIL settled higher by 1.45 per cent. Tata Steel rose the most by 5 per cent among Sensex shares. Mahindra & Mahindra, JSW Steel, Tata Motors, Axis Bank, Sun Pharma, Reliance Industries and Maruti were the other biggest gainers. IT shares on the other hand declined amid concerns over interest rates in the US market. Infosys fell the most by 1.99 per cent among Sensex shares. Tata Consultancy Services, Titan, Wipro, Hindustan Unilever and Nestle also declined. "The Indian market followed the positive Asian peers with a mixed bias. Domestic issues, like mutual fund stress tests, hardly brought any negative views, but premium valuation remains as a concern. Midcap & small caps are attempting to scroll up, however consolidation persists," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Policy actions, this week, from global central banks, the US FED, BOJ, and BOE will dictate the market direction. Indication, by the FED, that rate cut may probably be in the latter half of CY24, should bring a mixed sentiment in the short term, he added. The US Federal Open Market Committee meeting will commence on March 19 and the policy rate decision will be announced on Wednesday. In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.04 per cent while the smallcap index dipped 0.07 per cent. Among the indices, metal zoomed 2.88 per cent, auto jumped 1.08 per cent, commodities climbed 0.91 per cent, healthcare (0.88 per cent), realty (0.58 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.47 per cent). However, IT, consumer durables, tech, services and financial services were the laggards. "European markets started Monday with modest gains ahead of policy decisions this week by Japan's central bank and the Federal Reserve," said Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities. After the initial downtick, Nifty oscillated sharply in a range and finally settled at 22,050 levels, Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research at Religare Broking Ltd said. The recent price action in Nifty shows indecisiveness among the participants and frequent breakout failures on the stock-specific front further adding to their worries, he added. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong settled higher. European markets were quoting in the green. The US markets ended lower on Friday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 848.56 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.87 per cent to USD 86.08 a barrel.

New EV policy to help launch eco friendly premium SUVs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

VinFast Auto on Monday said India's new electric vehicle policy that provides import duty concessions for companies setting up manufacturing units in the country with a minimum investment of USD 500 million will allow it to introduce a wide variety of eco-friendly premium-quality SUVs at inclusive prices. The Indian government's new electric vehicle (EV) scheme aims to drive large investments in manufacturing, create competencies and upskilling, set up a robust supply chain and offer consumers world-class, zero-tailpipe emission vehicles, VinFast India CEO Pham Sanh Chau said in a statement. "This forward-looking policy helps us introduce a wide variety of smart, green, premium-quality SUVs, at inclusive prices, along with outstanding aftersales policies," he added. Chau further said, "With a long-term growth commitment in India, we have pledged an expenditure of USD

500 million, which includes the electric vehicle manufacturing facility in Tamil Nadu." In February this year, VinFast -- a major competitor to American EV had stated that it would invest Rs 4,000 crore over the next five years in the initial phase, which will generate 3,500 jobs in the Tuticorin region. The plant will have a capacity to produce 1.50 lakh vehicles once it becomes operational. Ola Electric Founder and CEO Bhavish Aggarwal in a post on X, also lauded the new EV policy, saying it is a win for the Make in India initiative. "Great to see the Indian government's progressive decision to lower import duties on EVs for companies investing in India. This is a win for the #MakeInIndia initiative & strengthens our manufacturing ecosystem, propelling India towards a greener future. India will become the global EV hub of manufacturing and technology!" he wrote. Commenting on the policy, Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) President Vinod Aggarwal



said a holistic view has been taken by the government of India in the best interests of the country. "The Indian automobile industry and

members of Siam will adapt to this new policy and remain committed to bring new, innovative, and aspirational products and work

towards developing a robust EV ecosystem in the country," he added. Last week, the government approved an EV policy, under which import duty concessions will be given to companies setting up manufacturing units in the country with a minimum investment of USD 500 million, a move aimed at attracting major global players like US-based Tesla. The companies that would set up manufacturing facilities for EV passenger cars will be allowed to import a limited number of cars at lower customs/import duty of 15 per cent on vehicles costing USD 35,000 and above for five years from the date of issuance of the approval letter by the government. At present, cars imported as completely built units attract customs duty ranging from 70-100 per cent, depending on the engine size and cost, and insurance and freight value less or above USD 40,000. The policy seeks to promote India as a manufacturing destination for EVs and attract investment from reputed global EV manufacturers.



Air India Express to operate 360 daily flights in summer

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Air India Express will operate more than 360 daily flights during the summer schedule, with international services set to rise by over 20 per cent. The airline is in the process of completing the merger with AIX Connect (earlier known as AirAsia India) and the schedule includes flights of both carriers. In a release on Monday, Tata Group-owned Air India Express said it will offer over 360 daily departures during the summer schedule. Compared to last year's summer schedule, there will be an increase of over 25 per cent in domestic flights and more than 20 per cent rise in overseas services. "This translates to an additional 55 domestic flights and 19 international flights, bringing the total to 259 domestic and 109 international departures," the release said. Generally, the summer schedule is from the last Sunday of March till the last Saturday of October. In 2024, the summer schedule will be from March 31 till October 26. Among others, the airline will be increasing its frequencies to destinations such as Abu Dhabi, Dammam, Jeddah, and Sharjah.

Currently, Air India Express operates over 360 daily flights with a fleet of 67 aircraft -- 39 Boeing 737s and 28 Airbus A320s.

Office leasing likely to rise 12 per cent this year

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Demand for office space is likely to rise 10-12 per cent this year across major cities with foreign companies looking to set up Global Capabilities Centres (GCCs) in India, according to realty firm RMZ Group Chairman Raj Menda. Bengaluru-based RMZ Corporation is one of the leading commercial real estate developers in the country. In an interview with PTI, Menda, Chairman of Supervisory Board at RMZ Corporation, said the absorption of office will grow by about 10-12 per cent this year across six major cities. He rued that the demand is still concentrated in these top six cities. Gross leasing of office space stood at 58.2 million square feet in 2023 calendar year across six major cities namely Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi-NCR, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Pune, according to a FICCI-Colliers report. Menda, who is also Chairman of FICCI Committee on Urban Development and Real Estate, noted that the demand for



bigger spaces, starting from 5 lakh square feet to 10 lakh square feet, from foreign firms has tapered down and enquiries are more for 50,000 square feet to 2 lakh square feet office spaces. "In pre-COVID, the bigger companies which were coming in used to commit and pre-lease large office spaces. So we would, at RMZ, get commitments of 5 lakh square feet to 10 lakh square feet, that has tapered down," Menda said. Now, he said these companies are looking for 1-2 lakh square feet space space. "But the good part of the story is... A lot of GCCs are coming in now to start their businesses here," he added.

India still provides low cost alternatives for these GCCs, Menda said, while emphasising on the availability of skilled talent and cheaper real estate in the country. "So they are setting up offices and their requirements typically range between 50,000 to 1,00,000 square feet as they are starting business for the first time in India. But once they set up office here, then they tend to grow very rapidly," he observed. Menda also mentioned that the demand for Grade-A office space is primarily emanating from six major cities -- Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune and Delhi-NCR -- because of the availability of skilled talent.

"What is currently happening, is happening only in the six cities. We are not getting any inquiries beyond these six main cities and still Bengaluru leads the way..." he said. The RMZ Group Chairman also remained bullish about the growth of the flexible workspace segment in India. He said the new company entering the Indian market wants to test the market first. Therefore, initially they would prefer working from a managed office space. "They prefer to work in a co-working space for a year or two, get the correct comfort and then decide how much to grow," Menda said. Regarding the RMZ Group business, he said the company has an ambitious expansion plan. Menda said the group became debt-free after divesting a significant part of its commercial real estate portfolio in 2020. In December 2020, RMZ Corporation completed the sale of its large commercial portfolio to Brookfield for USD 2 billion. The company had sold 12.8 million sq ft so far.

Venkatasubramanian P&G India new CEO



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Leading FMCG maker P&G India on Monday announced the appointment of Kumar Venkatasubramanian as CEO, with effect from May 1, 2024. The current CEO, L V Vaidyanathan will leave the company to pursue personal interests after 28 years of service, a statement from P&G India said. Kumar is currently leading the P&G business in Australia and New Zealand as CEO. Before the Australia role, Kumar was leading sales team in P&G India until 2020, it added. Kumar, an alumnus of IIM Calcutta started his journey with P&G in 2000 in sales team

in India, straight from the campus. P&G owns popular brands such as Ariel, Gillette, Head & Shoulders, Oral-B, Pampers, Pantene, Tide, Vicks and Whisper. P&G President, Asia Pacific, Middle East, and Africa Stanislav Vecera said: "The India business and people will immensely benefit from his (Kumar's) leadership and vision, and collectively I am certain they will take the India business to new heights while maintaining a balanced growth outlook." On his new role, Kumar said: "We will focus on a portfolio of daily use products where performance drives brand choice and raise the bar on all aspects of our superiority strategy - product, package, brand communication, retail execution, and value." P&G India operates here with four entities -- Procter & Gamble Hygiene & Health Care, Procter & Gamble Health, Gillette India and Procter & Gamble Home Products (non-listed).

AI supercomputer at KIET institute

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

North India can now boast to have a cutting-edge technology World's first 5petaFLOPS AI Supercomputer: NVIDIA DGX A100 at the "Centre of Supercomputing" run by the KIET Group of Institutions in Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad under the State Government's supported initiative 'Start in UP' start-up policy. Sunil Kumar Sharma, State Cabinet Minister, Electronics and Information Technology, hoped that such technologies will help students to create new products and ideas that can multiply economic growth and promote innovation and entrepreneurship. Atul Garg, MLA Ghaziabad, said, "Through NVIDIA DGX A100 supercomputer, we want to provide new opportunities to our children to progress in the field of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning," while Dr. Rekha Kashyap, HoD CSE AI & CSE AIML talked about the technology. "The NVIDIA DGX A100 is the world's first 5 petaFLOPS AI system, designed to unify training, inference, and analytics into a single, easy-to-deploy AI infrastructure. With unparalleled computational efficiency and versatility, the DGX A100 will accelerate research in areas such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, data analytics, climate science, genomics, and more," she said. Dr. Manoj Goel, Joint Director and Dr. Adesh Pandey, Dean ITS were of the view that the "the DGX A100's integration will significantly enhance educational programs, providing students with hands-on experience using state-of-the-art AI technology."

Citroen to supply 4,000 units of EV e C3 to BluSmart Mobility

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

French carmaker Citroen on Monday said it will supply 4,000 units of its electric vehicle e-C3 to BluSmart Mobility, over a period of 12 months. Citroen and BluSmart Mobility, a vertically integrated eMobility ride-hailing and EV charging service provider, have signed a memorandum of understanding for the same. As part of the initial phase, 125 Citroen e-C3 were flagged off from BluSmart's EV

charging superhub in Bengaluru, the company said in a statement. "This collaborative effort between Citroen and BluSmart Mobility signifies a shared vision for a sustainable future in the realm of electric mobility, reaffirming our commitment to shaping a cleaner and greener transportation ecosystem," Citroen India Brand Director, Shishir Mishra said. He further said, "BluSmart's foray in the shared electric mobility space is a well applaud-

ed initiative that offers convenient and safe urban mobility without any tailpipe emission strengthening our collective mission to decarbonise cities by making EVs mainstream." The e-C3 features such as an operational range of 320 kms as per Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI), fast charging capabilities, and intuitive technology, make it an attractive proposition for passengers and fleet operators, Mishra added.

Servotech to set up 20 EV charging stations in Nashik

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Servotech Power Systems on Monday said it has secured an order to set up 20 electric vehicles (EV) charging stations across Nashik Municipal Corporation area. The objective of this contract is to meet the increasing need for convenient and accessible charging facilities for electric vehicles, thus facilitating the state's shift towards sustainable transportation solutions, a company statement said.



According to the statement, Servotech Power Systems, a prominent player in the EV charging and solar industry, has secured a substantial contract from the Nashik Municipal

Corporation (NMC). This contract involves Servotech supplying, commissioning, and constructing 20 electric vehicle (EV) charging stations throughout the Nashik Municipal Corporation area. "This contract represents a major milestone for Servotech Power Systems, we are deeply committed to advancing India's electric vehicle revolution and fostering sustainable transportation solutions," Sarika Bhatia, Director of Servotech Power Systems said in the statement.

LAKSHYA, SINDHU SPEARHEAD INDIA CHALLENGE IN SWISS OPEN

PTI ■ BASEL (SWITZERLAND)

Star Indian shuttler Lakshya Sen is expected to continue his purple patch, while two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu will strive to regain top form at the Swiss Open Super 300 tournament, beginning here on Tuesday.

After first-round losses at the Malaysia Super 1000 and India Super 750 earlier in the year, Sen has gained momentum. The 22-year-old enters the USD 210,000 tournament on the back of semifinal appearances at the French Open and All England Championships. The seventh-seeded Indian will open his campaign against Malaysian Leong Jun Hao and is likely to cross paths with 2021 world champion Lee Zii Jia. Former world No. 1 Kidambi Srikanth will face Asian Games bronze medallist Wang Tzu-wei of Chinese Taipei in the first round while young Priyanshu Rajawat will take on Hong Kong's fourth seed Lee Cheuk Yiu.



After making headway in the French Open earlier this month, Sindhu, who is on a comeback trail after recovering from a left knee injury, made an early exit from the All England Championship. She was guilty of

committing several unforced errors and the former world champion would look to improve on that aspect. The fourth-seeded Indian will once again meet Germany's Yvonne Li, who retired against Sindhu in the All

England Championship opener last week. She will face a tough customer in Busanan Ongbamrunphan in the quarterfinals and if she manages to tame the Thai shuttler, Sindhu is likely to face in-form reigning All England champion and nemesis Carolina Marin of Spain.

The other Indian in the fray in the women's singles, Aakrashi Kashyap has a tough draw. She will open her campaign against Canada's Michelle Li and if she emerges victorious, she will face the winner of the clash between Japan's Nozomi Okuhara and seventh seed Ratchanok Intanon of Thailand. The sixth-seeded pair of Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto, who have been in good touch, will cross swords with the Indonesian combination of Meilysa Trias Puspitasari and Rachel Allessya Rose. Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who have been seeded eighth, will have to fight it out against the American duo of Annie Xu and Kerry Xu.

Akhil, Anish win gold

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Paris Olympics quota winners Akhil Sheoran and Anish Bhanwala won a gold medal each as Indian shooters ended their Polish Grand Prix campaign with six medals. Sheoran won gold in the men's 50m rifle 3-positions Match 2 with a record score of 468.4. Patrik Jany of the Czech Republic was 2.2 points behind at second spot at the Grand Prix Wroclawia & Dolnego Slaska.

Both the scores were higher than the existing world record of 466.1, held by Jany's countryman Jiri Privratsky. Bhanwala won gold in the men's 25m rapid-fire pistol at the Jozef Zapedzki Grand Prix held simultaneously. Some members of India's 50m rifle and 25m rapid-fire pistol squad are currently on an exposure tour to Europe to compete in various established international events in the build-up to the Paris Olympics. Navy shooter Niraj Kumar was



also impressive, finishing with two bronze in both the men's rifle 3P matches, becoming the only Indian to finish with two medals.

Niraj also shot impressive scores of 595 and 594 in the two qualification matches. In the first match, he finished third behind Jany and Rio Olympic silver medallist Serhiy Kulish of Ukraine. Swapnil Kusale also shot a solid 595 in Match 2 to top the

qualification standings, being more accurate than Niraj, but finished fourth overall. The two Grands Prix also saw another Paris quota winner Shriyanka Sadangi win bronze in the women's 3P and Ashi Chouksey pick up a silver in the second women's 3P. The Indian shooting contingent will now move to Germany for the ISAS Dortmund which begins on Tuesday.



IOA dissolves adhoc committee for wrestling WFI TO TAKE CHARGE

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Olympic Association on Monday dissolved the ad-hoc committee for wrestling, saying "there is no further need" for it to continue after revocation of the suspension on the national federation, which now gets complete administrative control of the sport.

The IOA said that the decision was also guided by the successful conduct of the selection trials for next month's Olympic qualifying tournament for which the panel collaborated with the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI). The ad-hoc committee was formed in December last year after the sports ministry suspended the WFI, which got a shot in the arm when the suspension imposed on it by the global governing body — United World Wrestling — was lifted in February.

"The decision to dissolve the Adhoc Committee comes in light of the lifting of the ban on the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) by the United World Wrestling (UWW) and the successful completion of Selection Trials by the Adhoc Committee appointed by the IOA as per the directives of the Hon'ble High Court of Delhi," said the IOA order issued on March 10.

WFI chief Sanjay Singh thanked the Indian Olympic Association for giving his elected panel control of the national federation. "We thank IOA for giving us full-fledged control of the WFI. We will give all facilities to the wrestlers. We will soon organise a national camp and if the wrestlers want to train abroad we will facilitate that as well. The focus is now on the Olympics. We are hoping that 5-6 wrestlers will qualify," Singh told PTI. The three-member committee,

under the chairmanship of Bhopender Singh Bajwa was constituted on December 23 after the newly-elected WFI, led by Sanjay Singh, had allegedly flouted its own rules. Earlier this month, the ad-hoc panel organised the trials to select the teams for the Asian Championships and the Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Kyrgyzstan to be held next month.

The protesting duo of Vinesh Phogat and Bajrang Punia competed in the trials and the former made the cut for Olympic qualifiers in the 50kg category. Following the successful completion of the trials, the reins of the sport have now been formally handed over to WFI despite the continuing suspension imposed by the sports ministry. The IOA instructed WFI to appoint a "Safeguarding Committee" to address concerns of sexual harassment and other issues such as adherence to rules. "...As instructed by the UWW, it is imperative that the WFI appoint a Safeguarding Committee/ Officer at the earliest to address the concerns of abuse and harassment and to ensure adherence to all rules, regulations, and guidelines set forth by the UWW and other relevant authorities," the IOA letter added. "Furthermore, the WFI is also directed to conduct the elections of the Athletes Commission in a time-bound manner, in accordance with the established procedures and guidelines.

"This step is essential to promote athlete representation and participation in the decision-making processes of the WFI." The order also instructed the WFI to "repay the loan" provided by the IOA to the ad-hoc panel for managing wrestling affairs when the national body was under suspension.

Kenny retires from cycling

AP ■ LONDON

Laura Kenny, Britain's most successful female Olympic athlete, announced her retirement from cycling on Monday because she wants to spend more time at home with her family.

The 31-year-old Kenny has won five Olympic gold medals and had been expected to compete at the Paris Games in July. She gave birth to her second child last year and told the BBC on Monday that being at home was proving more and more alluring to her. "It's been in my head a little while, the sacrifices of leaving

the children and your family at home is really quite big and it really is a big decision to make," Kenny said. "More and more, I was struggling to do that. More people asking me what races was I doing, what training camps was I going on - I didn't want to go ultimately and that's what it came down to."

Her husband, Jason Kenny, is also a cyclist and Britain's most decorated Olympian. "I knew the minute I was getting those feelings. Once I said to Jase, I don't think I want to ride a bike anymore," she said. Laura Kenny won gold in the team pursuit and the omnium



at both the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games and the madison at the 2020 Olympics. She also won a silver medal in the team pursuit in 2020 and is a seven-time world champion

and 14-time European champion. Kenny said the "absolute highlight" of her career was the London Games in 2012, during which her relationship

with Jason Kenny became public. "I never thought I would go to a home games, let alone go on to win two gold medals," she said. "When I look back, I'm like, 'Wow, those two weeks did really change my life.'" Britain's team performance director, Stephen Park, described Laura Kenny as "one of the greatest sporting talents our country has ever produced."

"She has been a beacon of inspiration for so many, young and old," Park said, "and I'm sure that the entire British cycling community will join me in wishing her the very best in the next chapter of her life."



Superb 67 earns Diksha T 15 finish

PTI ■ LONGWOOD (US)

India's Diksha Dagar turned in one of the best rounds of the final day, a superb 4-under 67, to sign off at Tied-15 at the IOA Golf Classic at the Alaqua Country Club here.

The two-time Ladies European Tour champion and third on the Merit list in 2023, Diksha had eight birdies, a double bogey and another late bogey as she made a massive jump up the leaderboard on the Epson Tour event.

Diksha has been in fine form with two Top-10s on the LET so far and she will play another week on the Epson Tour, as she tees up at Atlantic Beach next week.

Diksha, who started the week with a modest 75, squeezed inside the cut with a second round 71. And then she produced a superb round at the challenging course. She birdied first, sixth and eighth but suffered a setback with a double bogey on Par-5 ninth. Four more birdies

followed on the back nine on 10th, 11th, 13th and 16th before she dropped a shot on Par-4 17th and closed with a par.

She found each fairway on the final day and needed just 27 putts as against 32 and 30 on the first two days. She also reached the green in regulation in 15 of the 18 holes, way better on the first two days.

Jessica Peng, who was sitting four shots behind second-round leader Lindsey McCurdy, shot a superb 67 with five birdies against one bogey to win the title.

In contrast, McCurdy, who ended second, scored 72 and lost by one shot. Jessica (66-69-67) totalled 11-under and McCurdy (66-65-72) finished at 10-under.

The victory for Peng came after being a professional for seven years, even though her rookie season with the Epson Tour was in 2022.

Korea's Kum-Kang Park (68-68-68) was third and Dewi Weber (66-66-73) was fourth.

Alcaraz defeats Medvedev to defend his Indian Wells title



AP ■ INDIAN WELLS

Carlos Alcaraz arrived at Indian Wells full of doubt about his twisted right ankle. He's leaving as a two-time champion.

He defeated Daniil Medvedev 7-6 (5), 6-1 for the second straight year in the BNP Paribas Open final on Sunday, earning his first title since winning Wimbledon last year.

Iga Swiatek beat Maria Sakkari 6-4, 6-0 in just over an hour to win the women's title, with Swiatek losing just 21 games in six matches during the 12-day tournament - an average of 3.5 games per match.

Alcaraz sprained his ankle at the Rio Open in late February. His first practice at Indian Wells lasted 30 minutes without any movement. His first practice with his fellow pros "was really tough for me," he said in a Tennis Channel

interview. Alcaraz outlasted Jannik Sinner in a three-set semifinal after needing three sets to get out of his second-round match.

"After every match I was feeling better," Alcaraz said. "I was getting more confident after every match. Winning a Master 1000 again, a really important tournament to win, gives you motivation to keep going."

Alcaraz became the first man to defend his Indian Wells title since Novak Djokovic won three in a row from 2014-16. He beat Medvedev 6-3, 6-2 last year in the Southern California desert.

"It's definitely your court, you like it here," Medvedev told Alcaraz during the victory ceremony. "Hopefully you can one day let me play a little bit better here."

Medvedev led 3-0 in the first set while Alcaraz had eight

unforced errors over those games. The Spaniard won three games in a row to tie it, 3-3.

The players held serve the rest of the set, with Alcaraz serving a love game to get into the tiebreaker. He led 3-0 and 5-2 before Medvedev tied it 5-5. Alcaraz won the next two points to close it out.

Alcaraz got the only two breaks in the second set, when Medvedev had one winner and nine errors.

For the match, Alcaraz hit 25 winners and had 26 unforced errors, while Medvedev had 11 winners and 23 unforced errors.

Swiatek improved to 20-2 this year, with her wins leading the WTA Tour.

It was a repeat of the 2022 final, in which Swiatek beat Sakkari 6-4, 6-1. Sakkari hasn't defeated the Polish star since 2021.

Swiatek raced to a 3-0 lead in the opening set. Sakkari recovered to win three straight games, including a break of Swiatek. She served a love game to tie it, 4-4. Swiatek lost just two points on her serve the rest of the set, wrapping it up with a forehand winner in the corner.



Trabzonspor fans invade pitch, attack Fenerbahce players in Turkey

AP ■ ANKARA (TURKEY)

Turkish police have detained 12 people after fans of top tier soccer club Trabzonspor invaded the pitch following a home loss against Fenerbahce, touching off violent scuffles between the fans and visiting players.

The Trabzonspor fans charged onto the pitch as Fenerbahce players celebrated their 3-2 win following the final whistle of the Turkish Superlig game in the Black Sea coastal city of Trabzon late Sunday.

Some Fenerbahce players hit back at fans who kicked or punched them, the state-run Anadolu Agency reported. Security staff later helped the Fenerbahce players down the tunnel into the locker rooms.

The incident came just months after the president of top-flight club Ankaragucu was arrested for punching a referee following a match, prompting the Turkish Football Federation to briefly suspend league games.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya announced on X, formerly known as Twitter, on Monday that police detained 12 people in connection with the violence.

Yerlikaya said among those detained were a person who threw a projectile at Fenerbahce coach Ismail Kartal during the match, a man who was the first to invade the pitch, a fan who grabbed the corner flag and charged toward the players and a person who hit Fenerbahce goalkeeper Dominic Livakovic.

Earlier, Yerlikaya said an investigation was ongoing and that those who invaded the pitch would be identified.

PGA Tour player directors prepare for meeting with Saudi leader of LIV Golf

AP ■ PONTE VEDRA BEACH (US)

Players on the PGA Tour board negotiating with Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund have a meeting planned Monday with the Saudi leader backing rival LIV Golf, something Rory McIlroy said should have happened long ago.

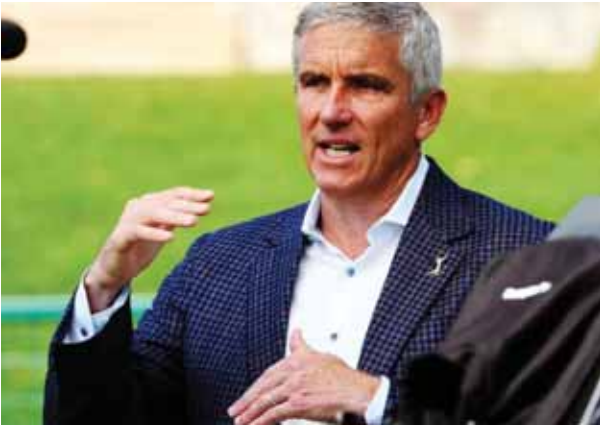
He also said Yasir Al-Rumayyan, the governor of the Public Investment Fund, wants to be "productive" in golf, while Greg Norman and others involved in LIV are disruptive.

McIlroy won't be part of the meeting, and details remained vague on where it would be held and whether it would be anything more than an ice breaker with Al-Rumayyan. "I doubt we will get into anything substantive in the

first meeting," said Patrick Cantlay, one of six player directors on PGA Tour Enterprises, the new commercial venture that already has a minority investor in Strategic Sports Group, a consortium of U.S. Sports owners.

McIlroy gave up his seat on the board in November and was replaced by Jordan Spieth. The other four player directors are Tiger Woods, Adam Scott, Peter Malnati and Webb Simpson.

McIlroy met with Al-Rumayyan last year at the DP World Tour Championship in Dubai. In fact, he said on a British soccer podcast at the start of the year that he had a part in the PGA Tour meeting with PIF in the first place, which led to the stunning June 6 announcement of a



proposed partnership. Cantlay confirmed there were "plans to have a meeting" on Monday at an undisclosed location.

"I think it should have happened months ago, so I am glad that it's happening,"

McIlroy said. "Hopefully that progresses conversations and gets us closer to a solution." The solution ultimately would be patching together golf, with players like Masters champion Jon Rahm, Dustin Johnson, PGA champion Brooks

Koepka and Bryson DeChambeau among those now with LIV and suspended from PGA Tour-sanctioned events except the four majors.

The PGA Tour's deal with PIF was supposed to be completed by the end of last year. But with government inquiries, and interest from private equity groups, the deal wasn't done.

The tour aligned with SSG, and Rahm defected to LIV. SSG has pledged up to \$3 billion, including \$1.5 billion for a player equity program.

McIlroy drew a distinction between Al-Rumayyan and LIV Golf, particularly Norman, the CEO and commissioner of the rival league. McIlroy had said at the end of 2022 that Norman needed to "exit stage left" for there to be any meaningful conversations.

"I have spent time with Yasir and the people that have represented him in LIV I think have done him a disservice, so Norman and those guys," McIlroy said Sunday at The Players Championship.

"I actually think there's a really big disconnect between PIF and LIV," he said. "I think you got PIF over here and LIV are sort of over here doing their own thing. So the closer that we can get to Yasir, PIF and hopefully finalize that investment, I think that will be a really good thing."

Malnati said there was "massive resistance" to Saudi involvement because of the surprise June 6 announcement — PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan, with board members Ed Herlihy and Jimmy Dunne - were the only ones involved.

IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
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APPENDIX IV [Rule 8(1)] POSSESSION NOTICE
(For Immovable property)

Whereas the undersigned being the Authorised Officer of the IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited) under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13(12) read with rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a demand notice dated 25.11.2023 calling upon the borrower, co-borrowers and guarantors 1. Ranbir Jangre, 2. Bindu Jangre 3. Mahabir Jangre to repay the amount mentioned in the notice being Rs. 6,29,262.07/- (Rupees Six Lac Twenty Nine Thousand Two Hundred Sixty Two And Seven Paise Only) as on 26.11.2023 within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said Demand notice.

The borrowers having 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 under sub-section (4) of section 13 of Act read with rule 8 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 on this 14th day of March 2024.

The borrowers 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 THE IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited) for an amount of Rs. 6,29,262.07/- (Rupees Six Lac Twenty Nine Thousand Two Hundred Sixty Two And Seven Paise Only) and interest thereon.

The borrower's attention is invited to provisions of sub-Section (8) Of Section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

Description of the Immovable properties
All That Piece And Parcel Of Part Of Old Kh No 107/1, New Kh No 107/3, Admeasuring 0.37 Acr. I.E. 0.150 Hectare, Vill Mehandi, Gram Panchayat Mehandi, Old Ph No 24, New Ph No 14, Rnm Rahaud, Tahsil And Block Pamgarh, Near Janjgir Champa, District Janjgir, Champa, Chhattisgarh - 495556, And, Bounded As : East : Nahar West : Manohar North : Seller South : Nanki

Date : 14th March 2024
Place : Janjgir
Loan Account No : 86768990.

Authorised Officer
IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
(erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited)



KOHLI JOINS RCB TRAINING CAMP

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Superstar Virat Kohli on Monday made his first appearance in the training session of his franchise Royal Challengers Bangalore ahead of the IPL beginning March 22. Kohli, who was out of the country for the birth of his second child, arrived in India

on Sunday. The former India and RCB captain was seen taking rounds of the Chinnaswamy Stadium as part of his warm-up. Skipper Faf du Plessis also attended the session. RCB, who have never won the IPL, begin their campaign against reigning champions Chennai Super Kings in Chennai on Friday.

Kohli's performance in the lucrative T20 league will be closely tracked as the event precedes the T20 World Cup in the USA and Caribbean. The 35-year-old played his first T20 since the 2022 World Cup back in January against Afghanistan. Skipper Rohit Sharma also made a comeback in that series

and is expected to lead India in the T20 World Cup beginning June 1. Kohli also missed the five-match home Test series against England due to his family commitments. The batting great had a memorable IPL last year, aggregating 639 runs including two hundreds and six half-centuries.



Rishabh might find it very difficult to get back his fluency at IPL onset: Gavaskar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Rishabh Pant will find it "very difficult" to be at his fluent best at the beginning of the IPL but Sunil Gavaskar expects that his knees will react better once he starts batting more and more in match situations. Having survived a horrific car crash in December, 2022, Pant will make a comeback to competitive cricket after more than 14 months as Delhi Capitals captain after an extensive rehabilitation programme. "It'll be very difficult. But the good thing is he (Pant) has played some cricket. So he has got some practice. To get fluency in batting is a little tough," Gavaskar told 'Star Sports'. He then explained his point of view. "When you talk of a knee injury, the pivoting that takes place. Wicket-keeping is difficult as well, but even in batting, the knee is quite important. So, maybe, in the beginning, we won't see the real Rishabh Pant that we are

used to," the maestro said. Pant's presence and his chatty nature also adds to the entertainment quotient, Gavaskar admitted. "To find a wicket-keeper like him who comments from behind the stumps, that's full-on entertainment because there are a lot of wicket-keepers who would like to disturb your concentration by saying different things." "....But Rishabh Pant has the ability to say such a thing that whoever he is targeting, they also laugh, they also enjoy it. But when enjoying it, their concentration goes down a bit, right? The advantage is for his team then." Gavaskar is also interested in how Shubman Gill's maiden captaincy stint turns out. "That is going to be the most important thing: the way he can handle the captaincy. Will it affect and impact his batting? And the second thing is there is a commonality in our initials; both of us are SG's, and if we go even further, my initials are SMG, and he has Shubb-Man Gill in his name."

Pooran or De Kock to don keeping gloves in IPL

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Lucknow Super Giants skipper KL Rahul is all set to play for his franchise from the opening IPL game after getting all clear from the National Cricket Academy but he has been advised against wicket-keeping in the first few games.

Rahul had once again suffered a strain in his quadriceps during the first Test against England in Hyderabad and even though he was expected to join the team by the third game, the stylish right-hander felt a tightness in his muscles and skipped all the remaining games.

It is unbelievable batting with Virat: Du Plessis

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Royal Challengers Bangalore skipper Faf du Plessis says Virat Kohli's infectious energy, which easily rubs off on everyone, is the secret of the brilliant on-field and an equally fulfilling off-field equation he shares with the Indian superstar. Du Plessis, who took over the team's captaincy after Kohli decided to step down at the end of the 2021 season, said batting with the prolific right-hander is an "unbelievable experience". "It's unbelievable batting with him. He is one of the favourite guys I like to bat with. He brings out so much energy in me, like sometimes, I feel I am fist bumping my glove though his hand because he gets so passionate being out there in the middle," Du Plessis told 'Star Sports'. "It's really infectious the way he gives that energy.... How this guy is always on and how does he manage it...On the field while catching balls, we both are very competitive and make sure we get those good catches for the team," the stylish right-hander said. He might not be the skipper anymore but Kohli's inputs and role in lifting the fielding



unit's energy is also something that Du Plessis admires. "He is really important to me in terms of field (placements) I think. He leads in so many things as far as a team is concerned but fielding is where he sets the tone and energy on the field," the former South African captain said. Off the field, Du Plessis, called Kohli, "a terrible influence" on him. "We both love food and we both really into our fashion that another things we spend a

Trying to hasten my recovery during WC led to prolonged rehab, admits Hardik

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Hardik Pandya's bid to hasten his comeback towards the business end of last year's ODI World Cup game actually aggravated his ankle injury and in the process delayed his possible return by five months. Pandya had twisted his ankle trying to stop the ball on his follow-through during India's fourth World Cup game against Bangladesh in Pune on October 19. Initially, he had eyed a comeback during home T20Is versus Afghanistan but after a prolonged rehabilitation, his comeback vehicle turns out to be upcoming IPL — a cash-rich league that catapulted the colourful Baroda all-rounder into instant stardom around a decade back. "My injury was a freak one. It had nothing to do with my past injuries or my fitness. I tried to stop the ball and twisted my ankle. When I got injured, my injury from day one clearly showed that I would be out of the World Cup," Pandya said during a media interaction organised by Mumbai Indians here on Monday. Pandya was itching to make a comeback by semi-finals but his desperation proved to be counter-productive in the long run. "We pushed but it would have been an uphill task that I would be fit for the World Cup semifinals or the final. When we pushed, it kind of triggered the injury and my recovery took longer (than expected)." Pandya admitted that his urge to represent India half-fit during World Cup semi-final was unjustifiable. "I had a recurrence. My injury kind of expanded more and the question was that 'do I want to represent India at 50 per cent?'. The answer was no, because India deserves better than that and I myself would not be able to justify the fact that I am coming (back) not completely ready," he said.



"From there, the whole focus was that that I will come back as soon as possible, but with injuries and something like the freak injury which I had, you have to give time. "It is not something which goes away with physiotherapy, it is just natural body recovery which we need to do and obviously the whole MI thing came. I was sitting at home, working hard and this news came and it was even more special," Pandya added about his switch to MI from Gujarat Titans. Pandya said he was back to full fitness around the time India played a three-match T20I series against Afghanistan at home, but did not have enough opportunities to play. The all-rounder was recently a

part of the Reliance One team at the DY Patil T20 tournament, which marked his return to professional cricket after a the lay-off. "When I got fit, the Afghanistan series (had) just started. I have been fit since then (but) there were no games to play," he said. "When I got injured, I had no clue how bad it was. When I went for the scans, it just showed just a little niggle which would be fine. But as a couple of hours progressed, it showed the real picture - my ankle was swollen. "I straight away went to the NCA next day to fasten my process and make sure that I come back. Again, we tried everyday making sure that I am available for the World Cup

Bangladesh beat Sri Lanka by four wickets

PTI ■ CHATTOGRAM (BANGLADESH)

Concussion substitute Tanzid Hasan hammered 84 off 81 balls to help Bangladesh beat Sri Lanka by four wickets in the third one-day international and seal a 2-1 victory in the series on Monday. Opting to bat first, Sri Lanka posted 235 all out in exactly 50 overs courtesy of Janith Liyanage's 101 off 102 balls for his maiden century. Soumya Sarkar, who felt neck stiffness and complained of a headache and vision difficulties after his head hit the ground while saving a boundary, was substituted by Tanzid and the replacement proved his worth with an innings laced with nine fours and four sixes to see Bangladesh home with 9.4 overs left. After Tanzid's fluent start, Rishad Hossain — one of the three changes made by Bangladesh for the match — struck an unbeaten 18-ball 48 containing five fours and four sixes to steer the hosts to 237-6.

(end) and we had to take a call after the 12th day," he added. Asked if Pandya will bowl in the IPL, the MI skipper replied in "affirmative". **WAITING FOR UPDATE ON SURYAKUMAR YADAV:** Meanwhile, MI head coach Mark Boucher said the team is waiting to hear from the Indian cricket board on the fitness status of star batter Suryakumar Yadav. "We are awaiting updates on Suryakumar from the BCCI. We have always been under a cloud of fitness issues but we have a world-class medical team. We may lose one or two in terms of fitness but we have to move on as it is sport," Boucher said. It has already been reported by PTI last week that world's No.1 ranked T20 batter, who is recuperating from a sports hernia surgery, is likely to miss the first few games but his rehabilitation as far as World T20 is concerned is on track. **MI WON'T HAVE A POLICY OF RESTING PLAYERS:** Boucher, however, said that there would be no policy of resting the players keeping this year's T20 World Cup in mind. "As the coach of Mumbai Indians, I am going to be a little bit biased and hoping to see my best players play all games. I have a soft spot for my players and I do understand that they might have niggles and that's when I will fall back on my medical team and work with them accordingly," he said. Talking about Rohit Sharma, Boucher said the Indian skipper was "fantastic" against England in the recently-concluded Test series and hoped to have his rich form continuing in the IPL. "Rohit has been in a fantastic touch. The way he was hitting the ball against England was fantastic. I am looking forward to seeing him go out and express himself. If he has a fantastic season, we will be there in the dying stages of the tournament," Boucher said.

Last year taught us a lot of things: Mandhana

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Royal Challengers Bangalore skipper Smriti Mandhana said she got solid backing from the management after their failure to win the Women's Premier League last year, which went a long way in them lifting the title here on Sunday. She said the 2023 campaign "taught us a lot of things" as her team beat Delhi Capitals by eight wickets to land the title here. With this, RCB's spirited bunch has managed to achieve what their men's team could not do over 16 years, and Mandhana thanked their loyal fanbase for always supporting the side. "Last year taught us a lot of things, as a player, as a captain and as a team. The management, the way they backed me during the review

after the season...they have been through a lot and a big thumbs up (to them)," Mandhana said at the post-match presentation. On the title triumph, she said, "The feeling has not sunk in yet, maybe it will take time. Hard for me to come out with a lot of expressions. Only thing I want to say is I am proud of the bunch. "We have been through ups and downs but they have stuck at it, and the way we have gotten past the line (tonight), it was amazing. Our Bangalore leg was really good. We had two tough losses (in Delhi). That is what we talked about. "The last league match was like a quarter, then the semi and then the final. In such tournaments, you have to peak at the right time." The spin pair of Shreyanka Patil (4/12) and Sophie



Molineux (3/20) helped RCB bowl out DC for 113, and then, talismanic skipper Mandhana (31), Sophie Devine (32) and Elysse Perry (35 not out) saw them home with three balls to spare. The Royal Challengers made 115 for two in 19.3 overs, a far easier victory than that tight-looking final over finish. Mandhana added, "For them (management) to have this trophy, it is amazing for them. I am not the only one who has won the trophy, the team has won. For RCB as a franchise to win, it is really, really special. "This win is definitely one of the top five maybe. A World Cup (win) would top it. I have a message for all the RCB fans, the most loyal fan base. Nothing would have been possible without their support. Ee Sala Cup Namde (The Cup will be ours this

time) always comes up, and now I just want to say Ee Sala Cup Namdu (The Cup is ours this time)." DC, led by Meg Lanning, will rue the missed chance of bettering their runners-up position from WPL 2023, but she admitted that her team was outplayed on the day. Lanning said, "Disappointing to not get it done tonight. We played some good cricket through the tournament. But it was about not playing well on the day. Congratulations to RCB, they outplayed us. But we can be proud of our efforts throughout." On their batting collapse, she said, "It all happened relatively quickly, as it tends to do. Crazy things happen, and every game has been pretty close. You can never sort of rest and think it is under control because there are so many good teams.