



धरती आबा भगवान बिरसा मुंडा की पावन धरती, झारखण्ड पर

श्री नरेन्द्र मोदी
माननीय प्रधानमंत्री

का हार्दिक अभिनंदन और जोहार



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माननीय राज्यपाल, झारखण्ड



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श्री चम्पाई सोरेन
माननीय मुख्यमंत्री, झारखण्ड

BJP launches campaign to gather Delhiites feedback

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi BJP on Thursday launched a door-to-door campaign for gathering suggestions of the people for its manifesto and seeking their views on 'Viksit Bharat' ahead of Lok Sabha polls. In a press conference, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said the campaign will continue till March 15 in which the party workers will visit every household, markets and public places across the city carrying a form and boxes to gather feedback from the people. He said the party workers will also seek suggestions of separate groups like chartered accountants, professionals, sports persons, teachers, professors and theatre actors among others during the campaign. The party workers will provide a small form to the people in which they will write down their suggestions on developed India, a better Delhi and their expectations from Prime Minister Narendra Modi before depositing it in the box. A phone number (9090902024) was also released by the party for the people to give their suggestions

by recording their voice. People can also given their feedback through downloading NaMo app, Sachdeva said. Apart from party workers, social media influencers will also join the campaign, he said. An LED van will also visit different areas of the city to encourage people to give their suggestions for developed India and a better Delhi, Sachdeva said, and added "the manifesto 2024 will be peoples' manifesto based on their expectations". The Delhi BJP president claimed that the party fulfilled 529 of 530 suggestions provided by the people that were included in the manifesto for 2014 Lok Sabha polls. "In 2019, we delivered on 95 per cent or 222 of the 234 suggestions from people included in the manifesto," he said. Sachdeva emphasised on the role of election manifesto saying it was a game changer for the BJP in recent Assembly polls in Chhattisgarh. "In Chhattisgarh, everyone wrote off the BJP but the manifesto did the magic in the assembly polls. Our workers collected suggestions from door to door. The manifesto drafted on suggestions from the people paved



Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva & LoP Ramvir Singh Bidhuri on the Viksit Bharat Modi Ki Guarantee Rath address a press conference
Ranjan Dimri / The Pioneer

the way for the formation of the BJP government in the state," he said. In the press conference, State Secretary Harsh Malhotra, State Media Chief Praveen Shankar Kapoor and Media Relations Head Vikram Mittal were present. Earlier, senior Delhi BJP leaders including Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri discussed the party's preparations for the elections in Delhi. The BJP currently holds all the seven Lok Sabha seats. The process of candidate selection on the seven seats is underway. The Delhi BJP election committee has submitted a list of around 25-30 probables to the central leadership for consideration in ticket distribution for the Lok Sabha seats in Delhi. The Delhi Congress president Arvinder Singh Lovely also said that the party will gather feedback on people's problems in Delhi and added that its manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls is likely to be released in a week. "Though we are contesting on just three seats, we are focusing on making a manifesto for Delhi. This entire exercise will be completed in a

week, after which we will release a people's manifesto," Lovely said. Rahul Gandhi held direct discussions with the common people of Delhi such as labourers, homeless people, teachers, youngsters, women, farmers and RWAs (Residents' Welfare Associations) to get first-hand information about their problems, he added. Through the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, Gandhi understood the problems of the common people and took up their issues with the authorities for solutions, the Congress leader said. A manifesto is the soul of any party, it is the vision and a mirror of its thoughts. The Congress has always worked for the welfare of the people and addressed their problems, Lovely further said. He added, "The 50 issues in the Congress' manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections will be based on the five pillars of Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra — youth, women, bhagidari, workers and farmers — to give justice to the lower and the middle classes, the downtrodden and exploited sections, industrial workers and contract workers and others."

LG approves delayed lease deeds for workers housing

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena has paved the way for execution of lease deeds between the Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (DSIIDC) and original allottees of the flats under various Workers' Housing Schemes at Bawana and Narela in North-West Delhi which was initiated almost two decades ago.

The LG, who approved the uniform draft lease deed, however slammed the DSIIDC and noted on file that it was baffling to observe that even after a lapse of about two decades since the initiation of the first housing scheme in 2003-2004, the lease format is yet to be finalized. The RGHS-I was initiated in Bawana in 2003-04 and RGHS-II at Narela and Bawana in 2006-07. He said it is disturbing to note that despite explicit instructions of his predecessor in 2019 to explain the reason for delay in execution of lease deeds in respect of workers' housing schemes, the DSIIDC went on to cause another inexplicable delay of approximately 5 years before placing the matter for finalization of lease deed. He directed that no further delay can be allowed in the matter and the entire exercise of execution of lease deeds which would benefit around 5311 allottees has to be undertaken in a time bound manner. The matter pertains to the allotment of flats under various schemes - Rajiv Gandhi Housing Scheme (RGHS)-I (2820 allotments made in 2006-07 to individual industrial workers), RGHS — II (150+405 allotments made in 2014 and 2017 to individual industrial workers), Institutional



Allotment of 384 flats through MoU with Pragati Power Corporation Ltd (PPCL) in 2010, Institutional Allotment of 512 and 1040 flats through MoU with Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) in 2012 and 2015-18. It is important to note that in pursuance of the directions of Supreme Court in 1996, industries running in non-conforming areas in Delhi were relocated to industrial areas ie. Bawana & Narela. In order to provide functional and economical residence to the industrial workers and to avoid clustering of JJ Colony in and around those areas, Low-Cost Housing Schemes were introduced by the Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (DSIIDC). Saxena in his noting on file also said, that it was only after the persistence of other organizations like Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) and Pragati Power Corporation Ltd (PPCL) who were allotted flats through MoU, that the department was woken up from its slumber and this case reflects a deep sense of apathy and

indifference on part of the organization as a whole. The LG directed the administrative department to fix responsibility of officials/officers for causing delay in processing the instant matter and take stringent action against them as per extant rules/guidelines. Simultaneously, Saxena said the Administrative Secretary is directed to take a comprehensive review of such matters in the department which have been delayed inordinately and process the same expeditiously and the matter may be resubmitted within three weeks. The ACS (Industries) while endorsing the proposal has submitted that the draft lease deed has been prepared on the pattern of DDA lease deed and has been vetted by the Law Department. Allotments were made by the Department on the basis of allotment-cum-demand letters and possession letters. Further, allotments to CISF & PPCL were made on mutually agreed terms & conditions with the condition that a lease deed shall be executed subsequently in respect of the allotments made.

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 20-year-old BBA student in Greater Noida was allegedly strangled to death by four friends after an argument broke out and buried his body 6 ft deep inside a farmland in Amroha. Three of the accused were arrested on Wednesday evening after a gunfight with the police in Greater Noida in which the trio suffered gunshot injuries on their legs, officials said. The victim and the accused belonged to the Gajraula area in Amroha district, Uttar Pradesh, where the murder took place on Tuesday night, the officials said. The student, who belongs to a

business family, was enrolled for a Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) degree at a private university in Greater Noida. When he did not return to the university hostel after leaving it on Monday, an FIR was lodged at the local Dadri police station and an investigation was initiated, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Greater Noida) Saad Miya Khan said. "On February 27, the police received information that Bennett University student Yash Mittal had not returned to the hostel since February 26. Immediately, police teams were formed to investigate this case. When CCTV footage was reviewed, it was found that he left the university campus safely in a

car while talking to someone on the phone," Khan said. Later, as part of the probe, call data records were also checked, leading police to some suspects, including his friend Rachit Nagar who told the police about a party in Gajraula where Mittal was invited by his friends, the officer said. During the probe, Rachit Nagar told police that he, Yash Mittal, Shivam Singh, Shubham Singh, Sushant Verma and Shubham Chaudhary, who lived in Gajraula (Amroha), are friends with each other since November 2023," the DCP said. "On February 26, they had called Yash Mittal for the party in Gajraula. He went

there during which an argument broke out between him and others after which he was killed and his body was buried inside a farmland in Gajraula. We recovered the body from the farmland on Wednesday," Khan said. The argument broke out between the accused — all in their late 20s and financially weak — and Mittal, whose family is in the electronics business, after he told them that they were "surviving and having parties on his money", according to a police source privy to the probe. On Wednesday evening, the police here got to know that the accused were in Greater Noida's Dadri area. During a combing operation, a gunfight broke out during which the

accused suffered bullet injuries on their legs, and were later held, police said. The fourth accused — Shubham Chaudhary — is at large and efforts are underway to arrest him, police said. "The accused told the police that they had killed Yash on February 27 but to mislead the police and his family, they sent ransom messages on February 28," DCP Khan said. The police said they have lodged two FIRs against the accused — first for murder, criminal conspiracy, and evidence destruction, and the second after the encounter for an attempt to murder and under the Arms Act. Further legal proceedings in the case are underway, the police added.

DDA offers temporary house to tunnel rescue hero

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Hours after razing his house in a demolition drive, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) offered to move Wakeel Hassan, a rat-hole miner who was part of the Silkyara tunnel rescue operation, and his family to a temporary accommodation but he declined the offer. The authority has also clarified that removal of encroachments from its land has been a constant, regular and routine activity of authority, and they were no aware about his contribution in the rescue operation. "However given the contributions made by Hassan in the rescue operation it will still continue with its efforts to provide its help to his family," it said. Northeast Delhi MP Manoj Tiwari on Thursday also assured the miner that he will be given a house under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana very soon. Hassan's house was razed in a demolition drive carried out by the DDA in northeast Delhi's Khajoori Khas area. Several other houses were demolished during the drive. Hassan has earlier said that DDA officials also told him that he would soon be provided a house in the

The house was razed in demolition drive; he declines offer



Wakeel Hassan, one of the rat-hole miners who was part of the team that successfully rescued 41 workers trapped in Uttarakashi's Silkyara tunnel, at Khajoori Khas
Ranjan Dimri / The Pioneer

Govindpuri area but he refused to accept the offer as it was only a "verbal assurance". Standing by its action, the DDA later in a statement said that "in its role as an authority, it cannot allow encroachment on its land or unauthorised constructions in its development areas". The DDA also said Hassan was aware of his house's "status of encroachment" as it had been previously removed in 2016 and was encroached upon again in 2017. Having come to know about the contributions of Hassan in the rescue operation in Uttarakhand, the DDA

"extended its hand of support" to the family but it was refused, the DDA said in a statement. The DDA, however, clarified that "at no point of time before or during the demolition exercise, were the DDA officials aware of Hassan's role in the rescue operation in Uttarakhand. On Wednesday, the DDA said the demolition drive was carried out on land that was "part of planned development land". Late in the evening, when this fact came to light, officials of DDA, after having made alternate arrangements for shelter to Hassan and his family,

went on site and contacted him. "However, Hassan refused to avail any relief measure so offered and demanded a permanent house either at the same location or at any location in the same vicinity. To break the impasse, Senior officers of DDA also intervened and went to the site late at night which was of no avail," the DDA said. Some TV channels showed Hassan and his family sitting and having dinner amid the rubble of what used to be their home. He spent the night on a footpath with his wife and their two children. The family's neighbours' provided them with food and other necessary items. "It is again reiterated that the family was in the know of their status of encroachment. Hassan was also aware of his encroachment removed earlier in 2016 and he re-encroached on the land in 2017. However, this was a routine encroachment removal drive and DDA has not targeted any particular individual. Having come to know about the contributions of Hassan in rescue operation of the workers entrapped in Silkyara-Barkot tunnel, DDA extended its hand of support to the family which was not availed," it added.

TWO DAYS FLOWER FESTIVAL FROM MARCH 2

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) has announced a two-day-long flower festival called "Palaash 2024" on March 2 and March 3. The event will be hosted at DDA Greens at Shivaji Marg, Rohtak Road in Delhi. The festival will be inaugurated by Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena. The festival will present a stunning array of flowers, plants, and floral arrangements. Visitors can explore different varieties of flowers from indigenous to exotic, beautifully arranged to create captivating displays. It would be an opportunity for flower enthusiasts to appreciate the beauty and diversity of nature's creations. "Alongside the floral displays, the festival will feature entertainment avenues such as DJ play, ceremonial band performance, interactive selfie points and ride attraction for kids to tickle their hearts. These attractions will be adding vibrancy and surreal experience to the festival, allowing visitors to immerse



themselves in the saga of dance, music and joy. To

tantalize the taste buds of visitors, the festival will offer a

selection of delicacies from our rich street food. From snacks

to desserts, attendees can indulge in a culinary journey

while enjoying the floral extravaganza. This aspect of the festival always adds a gastronomic dimension, complementing the visual and cultural experiences on offer," the DDA said in a statement. DDA's flower festival is organised annually as an exhibition-cum-competition event amongst all Horticulture Divisions of Delhi Development Authority, vying for recognition as the foremost custodians of DDA Parks. The objective of the festival is to promote and encourage residents of city to collaborate with DDA towards the betterment of greens, also to foster the passion of horticulture enthusiasts towards the scrupulous upkeep of greens. The grassroot level workers get an opportunity to display their skills while a healthy competition amongst them is promoted. The event is named Palaash after the flower of Butea monosperma, which blooms in the capital during this time. In February last year, the inaugural flower festival was held at Swarn Jayanti Park Rohini.

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OPINION 6
LK ADVANI:
A RATNA OF BHARAT

WORLD 8
ISRAELI FORCES FIRE ON CROWD
WAITING FOR AID, 100 KILLED

MONEY 10
CABINET NOD TO ₹1.26 LAKH
CRORE CHIP MAKING UNITS

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RAHUL RULED
OUT, BUMRAH
RETURNS: BCCI
12 SPORTS

Sandeshkhali Shaitan Shackled

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■
BASIRHAT

In an apparent damage-control exercise, the Trinamool Congress expelled Sheikh Shahjahan, the don of Sandeshkhali, a day after his arrest. This action comes about two months after his men attacked a raiding team of Enforcement Directorate officials and, notably, a day before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Arambagh in Hooghly district of Bengal.

Speaking about the decision, TMC MP Derek O'Brien and State Minister Bratya Basu said Shahjahan was suspended from the party for six years and challenged the BJP leadership to take similar action against their leader and MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who is accused of assaulting women wrestlers. "There are two types of parties... One type of party talk, talk and talk while the other types like the Trinamool Congress... Walk the talk," O'Brien said.

Basu alleged that, taking advantage of some stray incidents "against which the TMC always takes a truthful decision," the Opposition parties like BJP were out to malign the Government. Alleged to be the "fund manager and rigging expert" of his party in large parts of North 24 Parganas, Shahjahan was arrested on

Wednesday night about two months after he hit the national headlines when his men beat up and seriously injured a raiding team of Enforcement Directorate officials. Apart from masterminding the attack on the ED team, Shahjahan, a Trinamool Congress leader and district board member of North 24 Parganas, is also charged with mass land-grabbing and alleged sexual assault on women in Sandeshkhali and the neighbouring riverine islands of the district.



ADG, South Bengal, Supratim Sarkar, said Shahjahan was arrested late on Wednesday night from the

Minakhan area, adding that he had been forwarded to Basirhat court. The TMC leader has been remanded to 10 days police custody, sources said.

A few of his cronies, including local TMC leaders Shibu Hajra, Uttam Sardar, and Ajit Maity, had already been arrested earlier. Earlier, the Calcutta High Court had instructed the police to arrest him without delay. Sandeshkhali has been in the national news after Shahjahan's men attacked the ED on January 5.

Subsequently, after about a month, emboldened by his absence from the area, hundreds of women rose up in revolt, complaining of land grab, sexual assault, and surrounded the local police station.

Since then, the area has been on the boil with successive visits of national commissions for women, SCs, and STs, almost all of whom have demanded the imposition of President's Rule in the area.

Regarding the TMC leadership's claim that they are the real party with a difference that acts against corrupt members, Bengal BJP president Sukanto Majumdar said, "It is all drama being enacted by Mamata Banerjee... to save her face... Shahjahan had been under TMC's protection for the past two months.

The CPI(M) also said Shahjahan was an asset of the TMC and "the party could not afford to expel him... Not only because his goons rig polls, but also because he knows too much about TMC's money laundering."

Meanwhile, the ED has moved the court, saying Shahjahan could tamper with the evidence for which the agency had raided his house.

The agency could soon seek his custody in the ₹10,000 crore ration scam that has landed senior TMC leader and former Bengal Minister Jyotipriya Mallick in jail.



Trinamool Congress leader Sheikh Shahjahan, accused of sexual violence and land grabbing in Sandeshkhali village, being produced at the Basirhat court, in North 24 Parganas, on Thursday PTI

NEWS BREAK

India blasts Pakistan for raising Kashmir at UNHRC

UNITED NATIONS/GENEVA: In a strong retort to debt-trapped Pakistan after it raised the issue of Jammu and Kashmir at the UN Human Rights Council, India has said it cannot pay any attention to a country which is soaked in red due to the bloodshed from terrorism that it sponsors around the world. First Secretary in the Permanent Mission of India to the UN in Geneva Anupama Singh exercised India's Right of Reply at the ongoing high-level segment of the 55th regular session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on Wednesday. India exercised the Right of Reply to respond to Türkiye and Pakistan after the two countries made references to Kashmir in their statements at the high-level segment.

Cancellation of protesting farmers visas sought

Chandigarh: In a development regarding the ongoing farmers' protest, DSP Ambala Joginder Sharma has revealed that efforts are underway to cancel the passports and visas of individuals allegedly involved in violence. "We have identified involved in violence coming to Haryana from Punjab in the name of farmers' protest. We have identified them with CCTV cameras and drone cameras. We will request the Ministry and embassy to cancel their Visas and passports. Their photos, name and address will be given to the passport office. We are working on canceling their passports", DSP Ambala Joginder Sharma said.

India's infrastructure friendly GDP Soars to 8.4 per cent



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's economic growth accelerated to 8.4 per cent in the October-December quarter of this fiscal, mainly due to double-digit growth in manufacturing and good showing by mining & quarrying and construction sectors. The GDP (gross domestic product) growth was 4.3 per cent in the October-December 2022 quarter, according to the data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Thursday. The manufacturing sector's output, as per the gross value added in the third quarter of this fiscal, grew by 11.6 per cent compared to a contraction of 4.8 per cent in the year-ago period. Mining and quarrying grew at 7.5 per cent in the third quarter, up

from 1.4 per cent a year ago. The construction sector kept the growth momentum at 9.5 per cent against the same growth rate in the year-ago period. However, the output of the farm sector declined by 0.8 per cent during the quarter compared to a growth of 5.2 per cent a year ago. The national accounts data showed electricity, gas, water supply, and other utility services segment has grown by 9 per cent year-on-year against an 8.7 per cent rise. The GVA growth in the services sector — trade, hotel, transport, communication and services related to broadcasting — was 6.7 per cent during the third quarter against 9.2 per cent. Financial, real estate and professional services grew by 7 per cent in the third quarter over 7.7

per cent earlier. Public administration, defence and other services posted 7.5 per cent growth against 3.5 per cent in the third quarter of the last fiscal. The NSO also released the second advance estimate for the current fiscal and pegged the economic growth at 7.6 per cent against 7.3 per cent estimated in the first advance estimate released in January. "Real GDP or GDP at Constant (2011-12) Prices in the year 2023-24 is estimated to attain a level of ₹172.90 lakh crore, against the first revised estimates of GDP for the year 2022-23 of ₹160.71 lakh crore. The growth rate of GDP during 2023-24 is estimated at 7.6 per cent compared to the growth rate of 7.0 per cent in 2022-23," the NSO statement said. According to the statement, the nominal GDP or GDP at current prices in 2023-24 is estimated to attain a level of ₹293.90 lakh crore against ₹269.50 lakh crore in 2022-23, showing a growth rate of 9.1 per cent. It stated that the GDP at constant (2011-12) prices in Q3 of 2023-24 is estimated at ₹43.72 lakh crore against ₹40.35 lakh crore in Q3 of 2022-23, showing a growth rate of 8.4 per cent. The GDP at current prices in Q3 of 2023-24 is estimated at ₹75.49 lakh crore compared to ₹68.58 lakh crore in Q3 of 2022-23, showing a growth rate of 10.1 per cent, it stated.

Congress survives Himachal Tremor

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■
NEW DELHI

With Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu taking responsibility for Congress leader Abhishek Manu Singhvi's defeat in the Rajya Sabha polls, Priyanka Gandhi, a member of Congress' first family, once again proved to be the saviour for the party in preserving the Government in the state.

After intense deliberations within the party, the nominated central observers, and Priyanka, who serves as general secretary without any specific charge, Himachal Pradesh Assembly Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania on Thursday disqualified six Congress MLAs who had cross-voted in the recent Rajya Sabha polls for the lone seat in the state."

They had also abstained from voting on Budget in the Assembly, defying a party whip to vote in favour of the Government on the Finance Bill. The ruling Congress had sought their disqualification on this ground. Following the



Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, former Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, HP Congress Committee (HPC) president Pratibha Singh with central observers and others during a Press conference in Shimla on Thursday PTI

disqualification of the rebel legislators, the effective strength of the House has reduced from 68 to 62 while the number of Congress MLAs has shrunk from 40 to 34 and the Government is safe as of now though Opposition Leader Jairam Thakur maintained that the Government will fall any day due to the disgruntled legislators and intense internal fighting. Addressing the media in Shimla, party observers

Bhupinder Hooda, D K Shivakumar said after one-to-one meetings with the Congress MLAs and deliberations with Sukhu and State Congress chief Pratibha Singh, differences have been ironed out. He also said it has been decided to form a coordination committee to sort out all internal matters and no leader would go to the press. The political crisis in Himachal Pradesh was triggered by cross-voting by six Congress MLAs in Rajya Sabha elections.

India expands footprint in Indian Ocean region

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India and Mauritius are natural partners in the maritime domain to combat traditional and non-traditional challenges in the Indian Ocean region, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday after virtually inaugurating a new airstrip, a jetty and six community development projects in the island nation.

The India-assisted projects in Agalega island of Mauritius are seen as significant as they are expected to boost connectivity as well as maritime security and surveillance in the strategic waters in the region.

After inaugurating the projects along with Mauritian Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth, Modi

announced that Mauritius will be the first country to join India's Jan Aushadhi scheme, which is an initiative aimed at providing quality medicines at affordable prices. In his remarks, Modi flagged concerns over challenges in the Indian Ocean region and said India and Mauritius are "natural partners" in the maritime domain to deal with them. "Many traditional and non-traditional challenges are emerging in the Indian Ocean Region. All these challenges affect our economy. India and Mauritius are natural partners in the field of maritime security to deal with the challenges," he said at the virtual ceremony. "We are actively working to ensure



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Mauritian counterpart Pravind Jugnauth jointly inaugurate several India-assisted development projects at the Agalega Island in Mauritius, via a video conference, on Thursday PTI

security, prosperity and stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are cooperating together in all areas like monitoring of exclusive economic zone, joint patrolling, hydrography, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief," he said. Modi's comments came amid increasing concerns in New Delhi over China's growing military forays into the Indian Ocean region which is largely considered as the backyard of the Indian Navy. He said the inauguration of the airstrip and jetty at Agalega island will further advance the cooperation. The Prime Minister described Mauritius as an important partner under India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy and that the bilateral development partnership has been

an important pillar of the strategic relations. "Our development partnerships are based on the priorities of Mauritius. Be it Mauritius's needs related to EEZ (exclusive economic zone) security, or health security, India has always respected the needs of Mauritius," he said. Modi said the basic objective of India's efforts is to bring about meaningful changes in the lives of common people in Mauritius. "Today holds a special significance for our development partnership. I am extremely happy that today we are seeing the completion of the commitment I had made in 2015. In India these days it is being called 'Modi's Guarantee'," he said. The Prime Minister also talked about the "vibrant, strong and

unique" partnership between India and Mauritius, adding the island nation is New Delhi's special partner under its vision of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth For All in the Region). "Our relations have gained unprecedented momentum in the last 10 years. We have achieved new heights in mutual cooperation," he said. The inauguration of these projects came weeks after the launch of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) systems and RuPay card services in Mauritius. "We are making history today on the island of Agalega with the inauguration of a new airstrip, a new jetty and several other development projects," Jugnauth said at the event.

PM to gift development projects worth Rs 35,700 crore in Jharkhand today

PM to dedicate Sindri Fertiliser Plant, North Karanpura Super Thermal Power Project, Chatra, flag off three new trains in the state

PNS : RANCHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will reach Sindri, Dhanbad, Jharkhand and participate in a public programme, where he will inaugurate, dedicate and lay the foundation stone of multiple development projects worth Rs 35,700 crore in Jharkhand.

At the public programme in Sindri, Dhanbad, Prime Minister will inaugurate, dedicate to the nation and lay the foundation stone of multiple developmental projects related to fertiliser, rail, power, and coal sector.

The Prime Minister will dedicate to the nation the Hindustan Urvarak & Rasayan Ltd (HURL) Sindri Fertiliser Plant. Developed at



a cost of more than Rs 8900 crore, the fertiliser plant is a step towards self-sufficiency in the Urea Sector. It will add about 12.7 LMT per annum indigenous urea production in the country benefiting the farmers of the country. This is the third fertiliser plant to be revived in the country, after the revival of fertiliser plants

at Gorakhpur and Ramagundam, which were also dedicated to the nation by the Prime Minister in December 2021 and November 2022 respectively.

The PM will inaugurate, dedicate and lay the foundation stone of several rail projects worth more than Rs 17,600 crore in Jharkhand. The projects include 3rd & 4th Line connecting Sone Nagar-Andal; Tori- Shivpur first & second and Biratoli-Shivpur third railway line (part of Tori- Shivpur Project); Mohanpur - Hansdiha new rail line; Dhanbad-Chandrapura rail line, among others. These projects will expand the rail services in the state and lead to socio-economic development in the region. The PM will also flag



State BJP Chief Babulal Marandi along with party senior leaders takes stock of preparations for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhanbad at Barwadda Airport in Dhanbad on Thursday. PNS

off three trains during the programme. This includes Deoghar - Dibrugarh train

service, MEMU Train Service between Tatanagar and Badampahar (Daily) and long-

haul freight train from Shivpur station. The PM will also dedicate

to nation important power projects in Jharkhand including the Unit 1 (660 MW) of North Karanpura Super Thermal Power Project (STPP), Chatra. Developed at more than Rs 7500 crore, the project will lead to improved power supply in the region. It will also boost employment generation and contribute to socioeconomic development in the state. Also, the PM will also dedicate to nation projects related to the coal sector in Jharkhand.

Modi will also attend BJP's huge public meeting to be held at Dhanbad (Barwadda) airport on March 1. He will be welcomed by party workers at the airport. Giving information, State General Secretary and Rajya Sabha MP Aditya Sahu said that on Friday at 10

AM Modi will reach Sindri from Durgapur, where he will inaugurate the HURL Fertilizer Plant.

After this the Prime Minister will come to the public meeting organized by BJP at 11 AM and address the workers. He said that lakhs of workers from Dhanbad, Giridih and Koderma Lok Sabha constituencies will participate.

State BJP president Babulal Marandi along with senior party leaders today took stock of preparations for the PM's visit in Dhanbad. The State BJP is trying to make the PM's first visit to Jharkhand ahead of the Lok Sabha elections and grand event and all preparations are being done to bring a huge crowd in the programme.

Not a single mistake pardonable in election work: CEO



CEO K Ravi Kumar during a training programme in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

On the instructions of Chief Electoral Officer, Jharkhand, K Ravi Kumar a 3-day training program has been organized for the Executive Magistrates, BDOs, COs, CDPOs from all the districts for the preparations for the Lok Sabha elections 2024. This training program was organized from Tuesday 27th February to Thursday 29th February in the auditorium of Jharkhand Education Project.

In the training programme, the officials from all the districts were not only given theoretical training through PPT but were also

given practical training in the same manner as is expected from them during elections in their respective areas. During the training, many trainers including the Chief Electoral Officer gave detailed information on various topics and duties related to the Lok Sabha elections, and also established communication with all these regional officials and resolved their doubts.

During the workshop, detailed training was given on postal ballot, polling station management, responsibilities of sector officials, various IT applications, fake news etc. and other topics.

Chief Electoral Officer K Ravi Kumar told the officials present that all those officials will go to their respective areas and conduct awareness campaigns among the voters and motivate them to check their names in the voter list immediately or through the Voter Helpline App. Check through this medium so that there is no person who, despite being eligible, is deprived of voting on the day of voting due to his name not being in the list.

During name check, if you find any person whose name is not there, then get his name added immediately.

He said that the voters who check their names should take a photo along with the voter slip or voter list and post it on social media with the above hashtag so that other people are also inspired to do this work.

While concluding, he said that election work is a very serious matter where not a single mistake comes under the category of forgiveness, hence it is hoped that everyone will perform their tasks with full seriousness.

JSSC-CGL paper leak: Over 1.5 Lakh posts on social media

PNS : RANCHI

A massive Twitter (X) campaign is being run by the candidates of Jharkhand to protest against the JSSC-CGL paper leak issue. This Twitter campaign of students is also getting immense support on social media. Hashash conduct jssc_fair_exam is trending at number 1 on social media X. Till the time of filing the report on Thursday 1, 69,000 people have used the hashtag.

It is noteworthy that student organizations had called for a Twitter campaign in support of the demand for fair examination of JSSC CGL.

Only objective of this Twitter campaign is that the government and the commission should publish the dates of all the examinations as soon as possible. Order a CBI inquiry into the paper leak in JSSC-CGL exam. The examination should be conducted through a clean agency. The students have said in a warning tone that if the government fails to do so, a statewide agitation will be launched very soon. The candidates have also warned of boycotting the government in the upcoming elections.

A Twitter campaign is being run today against the JSSC CGL paper leak case. A massive Twitter (X) campaign is being run in Jharkhand. The campaign has started on Twitter from 10 am with the hashtag #Conduct_jssc_fair_exam. Job nahi to badleenge Jharkhand government. According to the information received, the candidates will run the campaign with the above

hashtag till 6 pm.

The campaign will run from 10 am to 6 pm. Students and teachers preparing for competitive examinations in Jharkhand are participating in this. He says that the only purpose of this Twitter campaign is that the government and the commission should publish the dates of all the examinations as soon as possible. The CBI should order an investigation into the paper leak in the JSSC-CGL exam. The examination should be conducted through a clean agency. The students have said in a warning tone that if the Government fails to do so, a statewide agitation will be launched very soon. The candidates have also warned of boycotting the Government in the upcoming elections.

Leader of Opposition Amar Bauri has supported the students. He has tweeted from his social media handle and wrote that #conduct_jssc_fair_exams, this is the anger of the youth. It was said that 5 lakh jobs will be provided every year, this useless government could not even provide 5000 jobs.. Amar Bauri further said that this promise before the elections is clear. Since then, the Chief Minister had told the youth that the JMM-Congress-RJD government will conduct 4-5 JSSC-JPSC examinations every year, but now their farewell year has come and see what the youth of the state have gained and lost! This thugbandhan government. History will remember it as a job seller, the most corrupt and useless government and the youth of the state will work to overthrow it in the upcoming elections.

Rs 5 L stolen by breaking vehicle's window

PNS : RANCHI

The criminals escaped with Rs 5 lakh by breaking the glass of the car in broad daylight. This incident took place on Thursday afternoon near Rajendra Chowk of Doranda police station area of the State Capital where the criminals escaped with a bag containing Rs 5 lakh after breaking the glass of the car. The police started investigation in the case with the help of CCTV footage. Hark Bahadur Tamang of Doranda withdrew Rs five lakh from the State Bank of India near Rajendra

Chowk in the afternoon and kept it in a bag in his car. While going home, he parked the car near the temple inside JAP office and went to visit the temple. When he came out after some time, we saw that the glass of the car was broken. When he peeked inside the car, he was shocked. A bag containing Rs five lakh was missing from the car. He informed the surrounding people and the police. Police reached the spot and are busy investigating. Two miscreants riding a bike have committed the incident by breaking the glass of the car.

CCL CMD meets CM to get advice on boosting coal production

PNS : RANCHI

Central Coalfields Limited (CCL), Chairman cum Managing Director (CMD), Dr B Veera Reddy met Chief Minister, Champai Soren in Jharkhand Legislative Assembly today. On this occasion, he requested the Chief Minister for guidance to achieve the target of 2023-24 in the production and dispatch of coal. He informed the Chief Minister that by achieving the production and dispatch targets, the state's revenue collection will increase.

Meanwhile, 9 personnel retiring from various departments of CCL Headquarters, Director (Technical/Operations), Ram Babu Prasad, General Manager (M&S), Rajesh Mishra, Quality Department, Ramakant Mishra, Chief Manager (Mining), NIMS Department, Manoj Kumar,



CCL CMD Dr. B. Veera Reddy greets Chief Minister Champai Soren, in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

Chief Manager (Excavation), CCMC Department, Ranjan Samanta, Chief Manager (Environment), Forest Department, Basant Kumar Manjhi, Sub Engineer, Municipal Administration Department, Ghanshyam Singh, Chief Pharmacist, A-1,

Gandhinagar Hospital, Braj Bihari Singh, Foreman Incharge, A-1 and Shrikant Thakur, Foreman (Electrical), A-1, were given a fond farewell by the CCL family by organizing a "Honor-cum-Farewell Ceremony". On this occasion, CCL

CMD Dr. B. Veera Reddy, Director (Finance), Pawan Kumar Mishra, Director (Personnel), Harsh Nath Mishra and Director Technical (Planning/Project), B Sairam was present. It may be noted that in the month of February, 112 employees retired from the entire CCL including the headquarters.

On this occasion, a short film on the work experiences of retired personnel was screened. In this video, the employees shared the memorable moments of their entire service period. Expressing good wishes towards the company, the retired employees said that the company has been an integral part of our lives throughout our service period. He thanked everyone and wished for the continued development of the company. With his versatile talent and leadership skills, Ram

Babu Prasad has always made important contributions to the progressive progress of the company. He performed important tasks while working in various subsidiary companies of Coal India including CCL. It may be noted that Shri Prasad had taken charge as Director (Technical/Operations) in CCL on May 2022. During his tenure the company continuously achieved new heights.

CMD, Dr Reddy, while congratulating the retiring employees on the successful completion of their service, said that as a result of the contribution of all of you, the company is moving on the path of success. We will definitely miss your experience. Due to the hard work and meaningful efforts of all of you, the company is reaching new heights. Dr Reddy wished all the retiring employees all the best for the second phase of their lives.

Cabinet nod to free electricity to Tana Bhagats

PNS : RANCHI

The Jharkhand Cabinet meeting was held at Project Bhawan on Thursday. The meeting was presided over by Chief Minister Champai Soren. The cabinet has decided that 200 units of free electricity will be given to Tana Bhagats.

Tana Bhagats, a small Oraon religious sect in Jharkhand known for being peaceful and their adherence to the Gandhian way of life, are up in arms, having participated in two violent protests this year. It has left the administration mystified and struggling to come up with an appropriate response. Subsidy will be available on usage of more than 200 units.

In the meeting, a target has been set to build 20 lakh Abua houses in the next 4 years. Former CM Hemant Soren had launched the scheme on November 15 to provide houses to the homeless and those who were deprived of the benefit under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). Under this flagship scheme, beneficiaries will receive Rs 2 lakh in four installments to construct a three-room house in phases.

In another cabinet decision, Civil surgeons will be able to sanction an amount up to Rs 5 lakh for the treatment of serious illness. State employees will get Rs 5,000



for the uniform. Rural Development Minister Alamgir Alam said that the state government bills will now be paperless. There will be online arrangements for bills.

Approval was given for the approval of "Jharkhand State University (Amendment) Bill, 2024 for the establishment of Sir JC Bose University, Giridih.

For the implementation of the nutrition campaign under the centrally sponsored "Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Nutrition 2.0", approval was given for the creation of various posts on contract basis for the duration of the project for State level SPMU, District level Help Desk and Child Development Project level Help Desk.

Administrative approval was given for the repair work of PCC Lining and structures located on various chains of Patjor distributary, Haripur distributary and Rameshwar distributary coming out of

Mayurakshi Left Bank Canal Scheme under Dumka district.

Administrative approval of Rs 639.2006 crore was given for the Pirtand Mega Lift Irrigation Scheme to provide irrigation facilities by lifting water through underground pipelines in Pirtand block under Giridih district.

Administrative approval was given for the second revised estimate of Rs 130.28.04 lakh for Ramrekha Reservoir Scheme. Approval was given to amend the medical reimbursement rules of employees/officers of various cadres of the state government. Special allowances of Instructor (Glider) / Flight Instructor Incharge (Glider) working permanently under the Cabinet Secretariat and Monitoring Department (Civil Aviation Division) of the State Government were approved. Approval was given for upgradation of 166 government high schools to +2 high schools under Jharkhand state.

BJP ruckus over JSSC exam paper leak issue



Ministers Rameshwar Oraon, Satyanand Bhokta, Banna Gupta along with others during the ongoing Budget session of state assembly in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

On the fifth day of the budget session the JSSC paper leak issue was raised by BJP members both inside and outside the house at Jharkhand Assembly. Before the session proceedings, BJP MLAs once again demonstrated outside the House raising the issue of Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission (JSSC) paper leak. BJP MLA Anant Ojha said that this state government is not serious for the youth. That is why the government is not agreeing for CBI probe. He said that is the fault of those students who prepare for the exam for a long time and the exam gets cancelled after the paper leak even before the exam.

Countering the Bharatiya Janata Party's allegations, Congress said that the state government is capable of conducting an investigation and action has also been taken after the investigation. The investigation is also going on. In such a situation, the demand for a CBI inquiry is being made only to give it a

political colour, whereas everyone knows what the conclusion of the CBI inquiry was on the JPSC scam case. Congress MLA Umashankar Akela said that BJP does not have any issue. That is why these people are protesting just to complete the formality.

CPI (ML) MLA Vinod Singh clearly said that if the state government wants, it can investigate any big or small case impartially. Many people have also been arrested in the paper leak case. But when BJP demanded a CBI investigation, he raised questions and said that BJP avoids saying anything on the matter of CBI or central agencies. Because the CBI had also investigated the JPSC case but nothing came out of it.

The BJP has been demanding a CBI probe on the JSSC paper leak for the past few days. On Wednesday, on the demand of BJP MLAs for a CBI investigation, Labor Employment Department Minister Satyanand Bhokta said that the Special Investigation Team (SIT) of the state government is inves-

tigating the entire matter. If the government is not satisfied with the SIT investigation, then it will consider conducting an investigation by another investigating agency.

Satyanand Bhokta, while talking to journalists outside the House, said that at present the investigation into the paper leak case is going in the right direction. There is no need to get a CBI investigation done for this.

The JSSC CGL examination was held on January 28, but its question paper was leaked ahead of the examination. Following this, the SIT was formed to identify and arrest the accused at the earliest. The Jharkhand government has constituted an SIT to investigate the question paper leak of the JSSC Combined Graduate Level (CGL) examination.

A special task force was formed under the leadership of Ranchi Sadar Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Sanjeev Kumar Besra. Many policemen, including four police inspectors, are included in the SIT.

Temple Bill passed in Karnataka Assembly again after its defeat in Council

PTI ■ BENGALURU

A bill that sought to collect funds from temples with over Rs 10 lakh annual income, which was defeated by the opposition BJP-JD(S) combine in the legislative council last week, was taken up for reconsideration and passed by the legislative assembly once again on Thursday.

The Karnataka Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments (Amendment) Bill, 2024, will now be sent to the Governor directly for his assent, following which it will become law.

The bill was defeated by a voice vote in the upper house, where the opposition has a majority, on February 23, after it was passed by the assembly on February 21. Piloting the bill in the assembly on Thursday, Muzrai Minister Ramalinga Reddy said: “the bill was passed by the assembly earlier, but was defeated in the council, I request the assembly to once gain pass the bill.

“Speaker U T Khader then put the bill for vote and it was passed by a voice



vote. ‘Muzrai’ refers to grants made by the government for religious and charitable purposes as well as the upkeep of religious and charitable institutions, according to the Karnataka Government Gazetteer. The department of Religious and Charitable Endowments is, hence, popularly known as the Muzrai department. It administers about 35,000 Hindu religious institutions which receive grants from the Government of Karnataka Opposition

BJP and JD(S) were not present in the assembly when the bill was passed on Thursday, as they had staged a walkout earlier in the day, demanding the Congress government’s resignation for its “inaction” in nabbing the culprits who allegedly shouted the ‘Pakistan zindabad’ slogans, after Congress member Syed Naseer Hussain was declared elected to the Rajya Sabha. The Muzrai department’s amendment bill had created a huge controversy, as

it angered the opposition, especially the BJP, which has claimed that the ruling Congress was trying to fill its “empty coffers” with temple money.

The Congress then sought to turn the tables on the saffron party, pointing out that it had effected an amendment in 2011 to seek funds from high-income Hindu shrines.

The bill among other things, proposes to collect five per cent from temples whose gross income is between Rs 10 lakh and less than Rs one crore and 10 per cent from temples whose income is above Rs one crore, to be put into a Common Pool Fund, administered by ‘Rajya Dharmika Parishath’, which is proposed to be used for Archakas’ (priests) welfare and upkeep of ‘C’ category temples (state controlled) whose annual income is less than Rs five lakh.

The act that was earlier amended in 2011 had made way for five per cent of the net income of temples with annual income between Rs five lakh and Rs 10 lakh and 10 per cent of the net income of temples with annual income of over Rs 10 lakh to come into the fund.



Protection bund coming up along IB for safety of border farmers in JK: IG BSF

PTI ■ SAMBA/JAMMU

Encouraging border residents to cultivate their land ahead of border fence, a top BSF officer on Thursday said the Home Ministry has approved a plan for the construction of a protection bund along the International Border for the safety of farmers and it will be completed within next five years.

Inspector General of Border Security Force (BSF), Jammu frontier, D K Boora was speaking at a function organised at Chamliyal village near the zero line in Samba district to hand over a cheque of Rs 3 lakh to a villager who helped in the recovery of a grounded Pakistani drone in January.

Samba Senior Superintendent of Police Vinay Kumar and other prominent people attended the function.

“We want the farmers to tend their land ahead of the border fence as the BSF is there for your protection. We will provide you with all the assistance and if you are concerned that you won’t be able to cultivate your produce, we will not allow such a situation to develop in the first place,” the BSF officer said.

Boora, however, said in case the farmers on the Indian side are not able to reap their produce, the BSF will not allow the other side to cultivate as well.

He said the home ministry has already approved a proposal for the construction of a protection bund along the IB for the safety of the farmers working in their fields ahead

of the border fence.

“The protection bund will be completed within the next four to five years, depending on the availability of the funds. After the completion of the protection bund, you can carry out your work easily without any threat (from the enemy),” he said.

Boora said there are rules in place while moving ahead of the border fence and “we need to follow those rules. BSF is deployed on the borders in J-K, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram and all these areas are protected by border fences and the rules are the same everywhere.”

Boora said the central government has announced many schemes for the development of border villages and the impact of these schemes will be visible on the ground in the next five years.

Highlighting the importance of border residents in safeguarding the country, border security is incomplete without the cooperation of the border population.

“We are proud of our border population in Jammu region who are nationalist by core,” he said, adding that in neighbouring Punjab, drug smuggling from across the border is a major challenge.

“The drugs are coming by drones and other means in Punjab because there are some elements who are promoting the business. When our own people are involved in such criminal activities, it becomes difficult (for the law enforcing agencies to tackle the

situation),” he said, adding that when the border residents are nationalists, the entire focus of the border guarding forces remains on the front rather than looking behind.

Highlighting the cooperation of the border residents in securing the borders of the country, he said Dass had done a very good job for which he was rewarded.

SSP Sharma said the police headquarters had announced rewards to anyone sharing information regarding anti-national activities and Dass was handed over the cheque of Rs 3 lakh for helping in the recovery of enemy drones in January this year.

He said there is also a reward of Rs 5 lakh for anyone who locates the trans-border tunnel, used by anti-national elements to tranship terrorists, explosives, and contraband consignments into Jammu and Kashmir from across the border.

“People have always been supportive in providing information to the forces. The rewards were announced just to glorify, certify and celebrate such people,” he said.

Dass thanked the BSF and the police for rewarding him and said it is the duty of every individual to expose the enemy conspiracies and safeguard the country alongside the forces.

“I was doing spray in my agriculture land on January 17 when I found a drone lying on the ground. I immediately informed BSF who later gave me Rs 50,000,” he said, thanking police for the reward of Rs three lakhs.

Caste census report submitted amid objection by Lingayats, Vokkaligas

PTI ■ BENGALURU

The much awaited Socio-Economic and Education Survey report, generally known as the ‘caste census’, was submitted to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah by Chairman of the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes K Jayaprakash Hegde on Thursday.

The report comes amid objections to its findings by certain sections of society and even within the ruling Congress. “We don’t know what is in the report.

The government has received the report, it will be placed before the cabinet, and will be discussed and decided there,” Siddaramaiah told reporters after receiving it. People of Karnataka’s two dominant communities — Vokkaliga and Lingayat — have expressed reservations about the survey, calling it unscientific, and have demanded that it be rejected and a fresh survey conducted. According to some analysts,



successive governments have been shying away from releasing the report as the findings of the survey are allegedly contrary to the “traditional perception” of the numerical strength of various castes in Karnataka, especially the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, making it a politically sticky issue. Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar, who is also the state Congress President, is from the Vokkaliga community. He was a signatory, along with a couple of other ministers, to a memorandum submitted by the community to the chief

minister, requesting him to reject the report along with the data. The All India Veerashaiva Mahasabha, the apex body of Veerashaiva-Lingayats, has also expressed its disapproval over the survey, calling it unscientific, and demanded that a fresh survey be conducted. The Lingayat body is headed by veteran Congress leader and MLA Shamanuru Shivashankarappa. Moreover, several Lingayat ministers and MLAs too have raised objections to the survey and its findings, putting the

Congress government in a tough spot.

In 2015, the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government of 2013-2018 had commissioned the ‘caste census’ in the state at an estimated cost of Rs 170 crore. The Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes under its then chairperson H Kantharaju was tasked with preparing the Socio-Economic and Education Survey Report.

The survey work was completed in 2018, towards the end of Siddaramaiah’s first tenure as chief minister, but the report was not accepted or made public.

The commission under its current Chairman Jayaprakash Hegde was to submit the report in November last year. However, as some more time was sought, the government had extended his tenure for the submission of the report. With pressure mounting on the Siddaramaiah government from certain sections to make the survey findings public, following the

release of the Bihar government’s caste survey report a few months ago, the chief minister had earlier said that a decision would be taken once he receives the report.

But the survey was mired in controversies even before the report was submitted to the government, amid deep divisions within the ruling Congress, stiff opposition by the two dominant communities against its acceptance, and the survey’s original ‘work-sheet’ copy going missing. As the two politically influential communities of Vokkaligas and the Lingayats have expressed strong disapproval of the survey, the caste census report seems to be a political hot potato for the government.

It may set the stage for a confrontation, given that Dalits and OBCs among others are demanding for it to be made public. Political parties in the state have indulged in a blame game over successive governments not acce

10 customs stations in NE digitised to expedite clearance process in cross border trade

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday virtually inaugurated Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) at 10 land customs stations (LCS) in the northeastern region to expedite the clearance process in cross-border trade. The process was till now undertaken in the manual mode, which took more time. “EDI implementation is poised to empower members of the trade community and all stakeholders in the customs clearance process through reduction in dwell-time and costs associated with cross-border trade,” North East Commissioner of Customs (Preventive) M Rahman told reporters here. Onboarding these LCSes into the department’s electronic ecosystem compliments the government’s Act East Policy, committed towards optimisation of market linkages and development in the region, he added.



Most of these LCSes had been notified from 1948 onwards to facilitate trade and movement of people across the international borders, the official said. “Out of the 10 LCSes, nine are along the Bangladesh border, namely Baghmara, Bholaganj, Borsora, Dawki, Ghasuapara and Shella Bazar in Meghalaya; Golakganj and Karimganj Steamergat in Assam, and Khowaghhat in Tripura, which collectively covers around 1,640 km,” Rahman said. Besides, one LCS, Zokhawthar in Mizoram along the India-

Myanmar border, covering roughly 900 km, has also been digitised, he added.

“The export basket at these LCSes comprises mainly of minerals and agricultural produce, while the import basket comprises processed food items, cement and plastic products,” Rahman said. The linking of these LCSes onto the EDI platform will enable a more secure and seamless ecosystem for paperless transactions of documents and enable online payments of duty and refund, he added.

Divisiveness is in Congress DNA: BJP MP

PTI ■ NAGPUR

Bharatiya Janata Party MP Tejasvi Surya on Thursday claimed divisiveness is “inherent in the Congress’ DNA,” amid allegations of pro-Pakistan slogans being raised in the corridors of the Karnataka legislature complex.

Addressing a press conference in Maharashtra’s Nagpur city, the Lok Sabha member from Bengaluru South alleged that Congress is the original party “responsible for dividing the country.”

He also said that BJP president JP Nadda will address a rally of the ‘Namo Maha Yuva Sammelan’ organised in Nagpur on March 4. More than one lakh youth from Maharashtra will participate in the congregation, the BJP’s Yuva Morcha president said.

On Tuesday, supporters of Congress leader Syed Naseer Hussain allegedly shouted “Pakistan zindabad” slogans after his Rajya Sabha election victory at the Karnataka Vidhana Soudha, which houses the legislature and state secretariat.

Asked about it, Surya alleged that Congress is the original party “responsible for dividing the country.”

“Divisiveness is inherent in the DNA of the Congress party. It would be a mistake to hope



for anything else other than this from the Congress,” he claimed.

He said south India will be the BJP’s fortress in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The BJP will win all the 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka and get a historic mandate in Telangana and Tamil Nadu, Surya said.

He said the BJP will also have Lok Sabha members from Kerala and the party’s vote percentage will increase in Andhra Pradesh.

The country’s youth made a big contribution in the BJP’s win in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha polls, he said, adding that most of them were first-time voters who wanted a change.

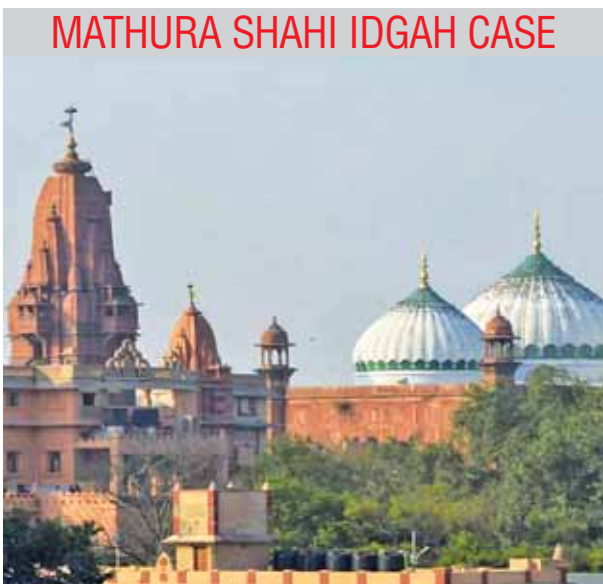
The youth empowered and energised BJP’s win. The development made by the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been youth-centric in the last 10 years, Surya said.

as about 57 lakh records of ‘Kunbis’ have been found so far, and that he has been demanding reservation for the remaining people.

“They (those in the government) expect that we should talk to them respectfully. When our people are getting arrested without any fault, why should we? What was the reason that curfew was imposed in Antarwali Sarati?” he asked.

Jarange said the 10 per cent reservation for the Maratha community is acceptable if facilities for the SEBC (Social Economic Backward Class) are included in it. “This 10 per cent reservation should be included in the OBC quota,” he added.

On the Prakash Ambedkar-led Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi’s proposal that Jarange contest the upcoming Lok Sabha poll from Jalna, the activist said he respects the VBA chief as he has supported their agitation since the beginning. “But contesting elections is not my way. I will keep working for my community,” he added.



Suit seeking removal of mosque barred by law of limitation: HC told

PTI ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The counsel for the Shahi Idgah managing committee on Thursday argued in the Allahabad High Court that the suit seeking “removal” of the mosque adjoining the Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura is barred by the law of limitation.

The limitation law sets a specific time period to seek a legal remedy. Taslima Aziz Ahmadi, appearing for the Muslim side, told the court that the two parties in the case entered into a compromise on October 12, 1968, which was confirmed in a civil suit decided in 1974.

The limitation to challenge a compromise is three years but the suit was filed in 2020 and thus the present suit is barred by limitation law, she told the court.

The high court was also informed that the suit has been filed for possession after

the removal of the Shahi Idgah structure as well as for “restoration of the temple and for a permanent injunction”. The prayer in the suit shows the structure of the mosque is there and the committee of management is in possession of the same, Ahmadi said.

“In this way, a question/dispute has been raised on Waqf property and thus provisions of Waqf Act will apply and in such it is the Waqf tribunal who has jurisdiction to hear the matter and not a civil court,” she said. After hearing the argument, the High Court fixed March 13 as the next date of hearing the plea regarding the maintainability of the suit seeking “removal” of the Shahi Idgah mosque, which the Hindu side claims has been built on 13.37-acre land of Katra Keshav Deo temple. In May last year, the high court transferred to itself all 15 cases related to the Sri Krishna Janmabhoomi-Shahi Idgah Masjid dispute.

PTI ■ CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR

Quota activist Manoj Jarange on Thursday claimed that if he is arrested, crores of Marathas will stage a hunger strike.

Talking to reporters at a private hospital in Maharashtra’s Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, where he is currently undergoing treatment after ending his fast at his native Antarwali Sarati village in Jalna three days back, Jarange said the Maratha community is fighting for its rights.

The government still has a chance to implement the “sage soyre” (blood relatives of Kunbi Marathas) draft notification. The community will appreciate it, he said.

The draft notification was issued in January for issuing certificates to eligible Kunbi (OBC) Marathas. Jarange has reiterated his opposition to the 10 per cent quota granted to the Maratha community recently by the Maharashtra legislature under a special category. The activist has been under fire for

If I am arrested, crores of Marathas will go on hunger strike: Jarange

using intemperate language against Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday as he alleged the BJP leader was trying to kill him.

Assembly speaker Rahul Narwekar on Tuesday directed the state government to set up a special investigation team (SIT) and conduct a comprehensive inquiry into the Jarange’s remarks against Fadnavis.

“The Maratha community and I will not give up the demand of quota for the relatives (of Marathas who have Kunbi certificates), even if I am put in jail. It seems the report (of SIT) is about to get ready before the inquiry. No matter wherever they keep me, I am ready to go anywhere,” he said. I am not greedy even for a single



rupee. Let them arrest me. The route by which I will be taken to jail, they (government) will find crores of Maratha community members

sitting on hunger strike along the route,” Jarange added. The activist claimed nearly 1.5 crore persons have got reservation till now

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DOMESTIC POLITICS

AMID GLOBAL AGENDA

India advocates for a balanced voice in shaping a multilateral world order



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

As elections draw closer, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been frequenting India's south more than championing the causes of the global south across available diplomatic platforms. One reason is that his party seems to have a weaker presence down south. Earlier, as a strategic choice, PM Modi chose to inaugurate a Hindu temple in a Muslim country during his last foreign trip in the current tenure. Even as he did so, statements regarding continuity of policies and outlook were subtly delivered when PM Modi confidently told his audience that he already has invitations from several foreign governments for the middle and latter part of 2024, indicating confidence in his potential third term. A third term for Modi would have wider ramifications for a whole bunch of issues, not to mention foreign policy, given India's rising economic clout and confidence, making it a significant player in global affairs. India is expected to be the third-largest economy after the US and China in PM Modi's next term, which, besides putting a couple of stars on the shoulder, will also mean a heavy lift of responsibilities. One of the significant achievements for Mr. Modi, particularly during his second term, has been uplifting the India-US relationship and situating it in the Indo-Pacific context. While the India-US bilateral is by far at its strongest ever in history, the two nations have managed to work through several plurilateral platforms, the most important being the QUAD (a grouping of the US, India, Australia, and Japan), each having significant stakes and interests in the Indo-Pacific, while also wary of the dragon in the region, never stopping short of using any overt or covert means to push its assertive agenda.



While some of the world's finest diplomats, policymakers, and think tanks were deliberating on global issues last week, EAM Jaishankar found some time to speak to a whole bunch of policy strategists on the relevance of QUAD and the way forward. EAM highlighted the changing nature of India's foreign policy outlook over the last decade when he mentioned "remarkable changes in India's bilateral relationships with its three Quad partners. With the US, we put behind ideological hesitations of history. With Japan, we gave longstanding goodwill much more practical shape. And with Australia, we actually made a real beginning in seriousness." Even though there hasn't been a QUAD leaders summit since May last year, backroom meetings between foreign ministers from the member countries to discuss issues of regional and global importance haven't taken a backseat. Given the political compulsions, it might be difficult for India to host the QUAD leaders summit this year, as it will be too close to the US elections by the time the new Indian government is in place. However, the significant targets India aims to achieve through the QUAD group, as highlighted by EAM, namely, "it reflects the growth of a multipolar order. Two, it is a post-alliance and post-Cold War thinking. Three, it is against spheres of influence. Four, it expresses the democratizing of the global space and a collaborative, not unilateral, approach. And five, it is a statement that in this day and age, others cannot have a veto on our choices," shall remain in focus. It is this message of continuity of policies that the Indian government is highlighting to the domestic and international audience at a time when instability is the norm for most, including powerful nations in the world. India has effectively managed the QUAD as a non-military arrangement, unlike NATO, with shared interests of all members in the region. Mr. Jaishankar highlighted in his address, "Among Quad countries, there is a growing comfort in working with each other given the strong consensus we have in our strategic outlooks. India's bilateral partnerships with each of these three Quad countries have also transformed in recent years." The message is clear: India will continue to push for a multilateral world order with a fair share of voice on international forums.

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

Protests stress need for climate-smart agriculture



KOTA SRIRAJ

There is a pressing need for proactive measures aimed at protecting both farmer livelihoods and national food security



The ongoing farmer protests that began on February 13th have already claimed five lives and resulted in Delhi bearing the brunt of economic losses to the tune of 300 crores as nearly five lakh traders who did regular business in Delhi from adjoining states suspended their businesses given the unrest. Since 2020, farmer protests have unfortunately assumed a regular frequency not only in Delhi and Punjab but across India. According to consultancy firm Verisk Maplecroft estimates, India has accounted for the biggest global share of farmer protests in the past three years. The farmer protests 2.0 again highlight the fault lines in India's agricultural viability and this time the farmers are demanding conclusive government action. The protesting farmers want a firm minimum support price (MSP) that is backed by a legal guarantee for all crops. Another demand is to implement the recommendations of the MS Swaminathan committee on agriculture which will enable increasing MSP to 50 per cent above the weighted average cost of production. Other demands include better sugar cane prices and a pension of Rs 10,000 a month for every farmer above the age of 60. The government is engaged in feverish negotiations with the farmer unions to break the impasse. However, a breakthrough achieved may be short-lived, as the government would have only successfully attended to the symptoms and not to the problem itself. India's agri sector contributes only 15 per cent to the GDP but engages 58 per cent workforce. This lopsided proportion is made worse by the fact that 85 per cent of the farmers operate in less than five acres of land half of which in many parts of India may be dry and barren. This translates to low yields, low earnings and high debt and when combined with increasing challenges of climate change on agriculture, the problem assumes a much larger and ominous proportion. Climate change whether it is unseasonal rain, hailstorms, floods, or drought, India's agri-sector has seen it all. The lingering uncertainty due to environmental issues



BEST FARMING PRACTICES NEED TO BE PROMOTED ACROSS THE SECTOR TO ENSURE CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION

keeps the farmers on their toes leading to income insecurity and mounting debt. An example is the casualty in the current protests of a marginal farmer whose 8-acre agricultural land had 8 lacs of debt on it, making it virtually impossible for the farmer to pay it off and continue with another crop. Climate change-driven issues such as these have made the farmers demand an MSP law to act as a safety net for the time, effort and risk they invest in farming. The perennial shortage of water resources is the first symptom of climate change's impact on the agri sector. According to Rainfed Atlas, it is estimated that between 52% and 55% of the farming community have no means of irrigation and are dependent on rain-fed agriculture. But due to climate change temperatures are spiralling and rainfall has become more erratic, with longer dry spells resulting in droughts and shorter periods of more intense rainfall causing floods. This results in a domino effect whereby crop yield is adversely impacted while high Co2 levels cause low nutritional value of crops. This translates to low marketability of the produce therefore causing financial distress and rising debt for the farmers. The impact of climate change on the agri-sector and the sluggish government response in managing its fallout has come as a double whammy for the farmer community. The lack of robust insulation measures that seek to protect the sector from the vagaries of climate extremities is now having a telling impact on productivity. The cereal crop productivity of most cereals is slated to decrease due to an increase in temperature and CO2 levels, and the decrease in water availability. According to estimates, there will be a projected loss of 10-40% in crop production by 2100 if no climate change adaptation measures are

taken. A one-degree Celsius increase in temperature may reduce yields of major food crops by 3-7%. Given these troubling projections, the government must extricate the agri-sector from the clutches of climate change. This alone can ensure the best interests of farmers, safeguard national food security and protect livelihoods. An audit of the agri-sector at the micro-level is essential to identify and remove processes that are detrimental to natural resources. This will ensure weeding out of inefficient water-intensive practices and allow optimal use of the precious resource. Similarly, best farming practices need to be promoted across the sector to ensure climate change adaptation and mitigation in the sector. For example, the raised-bed planting of wheat in the Indo-Gangetic plains enables 20-25% savings in irrigation water and also helps in reduced herbicide use. Measures such as these combined with water accounting methodologies can build long-term sustainability, efficiency and resilience of the agri-sector besides immensely benefiting the marginal farmers. The government must also initiate climate-smart agriculture strategies which aim at adapting agriculture to climate change. This can be done by implementing technologies that help farmers plan crops by considering the climate specifics of their area through easy-to-use apps on their smartphones. This can be done by prioritising botanical research to develop crop species that are more tolerant to water deficiencies and extreme temperatures. Additionally, ecologists can evolve effective soil management methods that reduce the depletion of topsoil, promote carbon sequestration, and reduce chemical application. Advanced farm irrigation technologies can also help proper water saturation levels in the soil, prevent water flooding,

and help avoid top-soil runoff. The government must focus on specially developed software solutions for agriculture that can help in real-time monitoring of the crops and allow farmers to accurately calculate the required inputs, which reduces costs in the short term and protects nature in the long term. Technology-assisted cover crops for instance can not only help prevent soil erosion, and promote water retention and nitrogen fixation but also serve as organic manure for fodder. Smart agri-software can help farmers implement differentiated applications of fertilisers which can help decrease soil pollution and increase crop nutrient levels. The software can also have in-built weather-related tools that provide timely alerts of extremities, elaborate weather forecasts to schedule farming events and enable prediction of general climate change tendencies by analysing historical weather data. Currently, the agri-sector problems and farmer grievances are dealt with on a reactive basis; this is evident in the form of chronic farmer agitations that come back every year. The government must realise that a lasting solution is only possible if actual problems, including the impact of climate change on agriculture, are addressed with the participation of all stakeholders of the sector. The collaboration of farmers, policymakers, environmentalists, botanical scientists and technology experts can help chalk out long-term strategies and solutions and ensure a robust agri-sector that is resilient against climate change onslaughts. Farmer protests are a symptom of climate change's impact on agriculture. Protecting the sector from adverse impacts will automatically ensure farmer well-being and prosperity.

(The author is a policy analyst. The views are personal)

New India: Roti, kapda, makaan, vigyan and aatmasamman

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has prioritised inclusive growth and sustainable development, empowering every section of society

The Modi government's comprehensive strategy for tackling fundamental aspects of development such as food security (Roti), clothing (Kapda), housing (Makaan), science and technology (Vigyan), and self-respect (Aatmasamman) stands as a remarkable example of effective policymaking. These initiatives have not only brought about socio-economic transformation but have also significantly contributed to the nation's advancement. The Modi government has aimed to uplift and empower every section of society. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Government of India has prioritised inclusive growth and sustainable development. Through numerous flagship



ANIL AGRAWAL

schemes, significant strides have been made towards building a stronger, more resilient India. As we reflect on the journey of India's transformation over the past decade, it becomes evident that the Roti, Kapda, Makaan, Vigyan, and Aatmasamman initiatives have played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's socio-economic landscape. Moving forward, it is imperative to build

upon these foundations and continue striving towards a more prosperous and equitable future for all. Through revolutionary initiatives, the government has aimed to enhance agricultural productivity and bolster the textile industry, thereby encouraging research in science and technology, stimulating economic growth, and creating employment opportunities for Aatmanirbhar Bharat. A pivotal aspect of the Modi government's initiatives has been the empowerment of Bharat, ensuring self-reliance and dignity for every citizen. This vision extends to promoting social justice, gender equality, and skill development, encapsulating the ethos of "Aatmanirbhar Bharat." Initiatives aimed at uplifting

marginalised communities exemplify the government's commitment to fostering an inclusive society. **Roti: Transforming Food Security in India** The Modi government has taken a multifaceted approach to food security, encompassing macro and micro levels. Initiatives like PMGKY and ONORC have bolstered vulnerable groups' food access, provided relief during crises, and built resilience. Prioritising nutrition through POSHAN Abhiyaan demonstrates a commitment to tackling deficiencies. **Kapda: Enhancing Textiles and Khadi** The remarkable growth in Khadi's turnover, from Rs. 31,154 crores in 2013-14 to Rs. 1,34,630 crores in 2022-23,

underscores its economic revitalization. This surge in demand has propelled production and employment opportunities, reflecting the government's commitment to nurturing indigenous industries. India's textile exports have increased from \$12 billion in 2010-11 to \$39.2 billion in 2017-18. The textile industry in India is currently a \$75 billion industry and is expected to grow to \$300 billion by 2025-26. **Makaan: Revolutionising Housing** In a nation as vast and diverse as India, characterized by historical socioeconomic disparities, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) has emerged as a transformative force. This initiative transcends mere housing provision; it catalyses

profound change. Through Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G), expansive coverage underscores the unwavering dedication of the Modi government and the vision of converting mere structures into cherished homes and dreams into tangible realities, marking a testament to the government's commitment to the well-being and prosperity of its citizens nationwide. The "Housing for All" scheme represents a multifaceted approach to address the critical issue of housing in India. The Light House Projects (LHPs) stand as a pioneering initiative under the visionary Global Housing Technology Challenge-India (GHTC-India), spearheaded by the Government of India since its launch in 2019.

Vigyan: Advancing the Space Sector India has emerged as a prominent space power in the world, with significant global implications. Chandrayaan-3 hailed as India's lunar triumph, reaffirms India's technological prowess and solidifies its position as a leader in space exploration, paving the way for future lunar endeavours, including human exploration. Aditya-L1, a state-of-the-art coronagraphy spacecraft meticulously crafted by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), embarked on a pioneering mission to explore the mysteries of the sun's atmosphere, particularly focusing on the corona and chromosphere.

Aatmasamman: Empowering Bharat Once an individual has secured all the necessities for a comfortable life, the concept of "Aatmasamman," or self-respect. Beyond material needs, self-respect becomes the cornerstone of emotional and psychological well-being, encompassing a profound sense of dignity, worth, and integrity. Stand Up India Scheme, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme, Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) have been supportive of empowering numerous sections of society.

(The author is a Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, views are personal)

Israeli forces fire on crowd waiting for aid, 100 killed

Palestinian deaths in Gaza pass 30k

AP ■ RAFAH (GAZA STRIP)

Israeli troops fired on a crowd of Palestinians waiting for aid in Gaza City on Thursday, witnesses said. More than 100 people were killed, bringing the death toll since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to more than 30,000, according to health officials. Hospital officials initially reported an Israeli strike on the crowd, but witnesses later said Israeli troops opened fire as people pulled flour and canned goods off of trucks. Israeli officials acknowledged that troops opened fire, saying they did so after the crowd approached in a threatening way. The officials insisted on anonymity to give details about what happened, after the military said in a statement that “dozens were killed and injured from pushing, trampling and being run over by the trucks.” Gaza City and the surrounding areas in the enclave’s north were the first targets of Israel’s air, sea and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas’ Oct 7 attack. The area has suffered widespread devastation and has been largely isolated during the conflict. Trucks carrying food reached northern Gaza this week, the first major aid delivery to the area in a month, officials said



Palestinians living in Lebanon hold placards and their national flags during a protest to demand a ceasefire and support Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, in front of the headquarters of U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in Beirut, Lebanon on Thursday.

AP/PTI

Wednesday.

Aid groups say it has become nearly impossible to deliver humanitarian assistance in most of Gaza because of the difficulty of coordinating with the Israeli military, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order, with crowds of desperate people overwhelming aid convoys. The UN says a quarter of Gaza’s 2.3 million Palestinians face starvation; around 80% have fled their homes.

Kamel Abu Nahel, who was being treated for a gunshot wound at Shifa Hospital,

said he and others went to the distribution point in the middle of the night because they heard there would be a delivery of food. “We’ve been eating animal feed for two months,” he said.

He said Israeli troops opened fire on the crowd, causing it to scatter, with some people hiding under cars. After the shooting stopped, people went back to the trucks, and the soldiers opened fire again. He was shot in the leg and fell over, and then a truck ran over his leg as it sped off, he said.

UK descending into mob rule: Sunak

Critics accuse him of undermining protest rights

AP ■ LONDON

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said Britain is descending into “mob rule” because of the pressures created by protests against the Israel-Hamas war — words criticised as alarmist by a human rights group. Sunak told a meeting of police leaders on Wednesday that there was a “pattern of increasingly violent and intimidatory behaviour” that’s intended to “shout down free debate and stop elected representatives doing their job.”

“There is a growing consensus that mob rule is replacing democratic rule,” he said, according to a transcript released by the prime minister’s office. “And we’ve got to collectively, all of us, change that urgently.”

Tom Southerden of Amnesty International said Thursday that talk of mob rule “wildly exaggerates the issue and risks delegitimising the rights of peaceful protest.” Mass protests have drawn hundreds of thousands of people to central London almost weekly to call for a cease-fire in a conflict that has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory. Israel says Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and abducted roughly 250, in the Oct. 7 attack.

The protests have been overwhelmingly peaceful, though there have been dozens

Sunak calls on police chiefs to get tough on ‘mob’ protests

London (PTI): British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called on the country’s police chiefs to use the full spectrum of their powers to ensure that protests are not allowed to descend into “mob rule.”

The British Indian leader was speaking after a meeting at 10 Downing Street on Wednesday during which ministers and senior police chiefs agreed to sign up to a new “democratic policing protocol.”

It comes in the wake of growing security concerns for British MPs and some violent incidents during large-scale marches on the streets of the UK in protest over the raging Israel-Hamas conflict.

of arrests over signs and chants allegedly supporting Hamas, a banned organisation in Britain. Jewish organisations and many lawmakers say the mass marches have created an intimidating atmosphere for Jewish Londoners — though members of the Jewish community have been among those on pro-cessa-fire marches.

Divisions over the conflict in Gaza have convulsed British



politics, with some lawmakers saying they fear for their safety after receiving threats over their positions on the war. Reports of both antisemitic and anti-Muslim abuse in Britain have soared since Hamas’ Oct 7 attack on Israel, which triggered Israel’s invasion of Gaza. A debate last week in the House of Commons on whether to call for a cease-fire descended into chaos amid allegations the speaker of the house had bent parliamentary rules in response to pressure from pro-Palestinian activists.

During the debate, protesters projected “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” — a slogan some see as calling for the destruction of Israel — onto Parliament’s Big Ben clocktower. On Saturday, Sunak suspended Conservative lawmaker Lee Anderson from the

party for saying London Mayor Sadiq Khan, who is Muslim, was controlled by Islamists and had allowed them to take charge of the city.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators protested at the house of a Conservative lawmaker earlier this month, while environmental activists have targeted Sunak’s family home in northern England.

The prime minister met police chiefs after announcing a 31-million-pound (\$40-million) fund to step up security for lawmakers after politicians reported threats and intimidation connected to the war.

At Wednesday’s meeting, the government told police chiefs that protests at politicians’ homes “should generally be considered to be intimidatory,” Sunak told officers to take a “robust approach...to protect our democratic processes from intimidation, disruption, from subversion.”

British lawmakers have a tradition of meeting regularly with constituents in their local communities, but security has been tightened after several attacks in the last decade.

In 2016, Labour lawmaker Jo Cox was killed by a far-right extremist, and Conservative David Amess was murdered in 2021 by an attacker inspired by the Islamic State group. Sunak’s comments follow several years of increasingly stringent restrictions on peaceful protest by the Conservative government.

It has passed new laws to

clamp down on broadly defined “public nuisance,” punishable by up to 10 years in prison, and giving police more powers to restrict protests judged to be disruptive. Hundreds of environmental activists have been arrested and sometimes jailed for blocking roads and other nonviolent acts.

“Freedom of expression and assembly are absolutely fundamental rights in any free and fair society,” said Southerden, law and human rights director at Amnesty UK.

“The UK has undergone a major crackdown on protest rights in recent years, with peaceful protest tactics being criminalised and the police being given sweeping powers to prevent protests taking place,” he said.

Voters in the town of Rochdale in northwest England went to the polls Thursday to elect a lawmaker, after a chaotic special election campaign dominated by the Gaza war. The Labour Party disowned its candidate, Azhar Ali, for claiming that Israel allowed Hamas’ Oct 7 attack to happen as a pretext to invade Gaza. His name remains on the ballot, alongside candidates including George Galloway, a former Labour lawmaker who is campaigning against Labour’s stance on the Israel-Hamas war, and Simon Danczuk, yet another former Labour legislator who now represents the right-wing Reform UK.

White House: Biden doing everything to improve visa process

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden is doing everything he can to improve the process related to the sought-after H-1B visa, Green Card backlog and other issues related to the country’s legal immigration system, the White House has said.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

“One of the steps, if we look at the H-1B visa process, we have taken action to improve that and the process and backlog for lawful permanent residents (Green Card) who are eligible to become US citizens,” White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters at her daily news conference on Wednesday.

A Green Card, known officially as a Permanent Resident Card, is a document issued to immigrants to the US as evidence that the bearer has been granted the privilege of residing permanently.

Jean-Pierre was responding to questions about the feeling among a section of Indian Americans that the president is not putting as much effort into addressing the woes of legal immigrants as he is doing for illegal immigrants.

Biden heads to the southern border with Mexico in Texas on Thursday. “Just last month, for example, as a part of our efforts to strengthen the integrity of our immigration system and reduce the potential for fraud, the Department of Homeland Security pub-

lished a final rule relating to H-1B visa,” Jean-Pierre said.

“So, the changes promote fairer and more equitable outcomes and, so, we will continue our work to improve the system within our authorities and that has certainly been a priority,” she said and added that the administration takes that “very seriously” and is continuing to do everything that it can to improve the visa process.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has announced the launch of myUSCIS organisational accounts that will allow multiple people within an organisation, as well as their legal representatives, to collaborate on and prepare H-1B registrations, H-1B petitions and any associated Form I-907, Request for Premium Processing Service.

A new organisational account is required to participate in the H-1B Electronic Registration Process starting in March 2024, the USCIS said.

“We are working expeditiously to address any technical issues that may arise for legal representatives whose accounts migrated when they logged into their online account on or after February 14, 2024, including impacts on cases other than H-1B filings,” it said.

The initial registration period for FY 2025 H1B cap will open at noon Eastern on March 6, and run through noon Eastern on March 22.

During this period, prospective petitioners and their representatives, if applicable, must use a USCIS online account to register each beneficiary electronically for the selection process and pay the associated registration fee for each beneficiary, its media alert said.

SC sets April arguments over whether Trump can be prosecuted for election interference

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The Supreme Court on Wednesday agreed to decide whether former President Donald Trump can be prosecuted on charges he interfered with the 2020 election, calling into question whether his case could go to trial before the November election. While the court set a course for a quick resolution, it maintained a hold on preparations for a trial focused on Trump’s efforts to overturn his election loss.

The court will hear arguments in late April, with a decision likely no later than the end of June. That timetable is much faster than usual, but assuming the justices deny Trump’s immunity bid, it’s not clear

whether a trial can be scheduled and concluded before the November election. Early voting in some states will begin in September.

The court’s decision to intervene in a second major Trump case this term, along with the dispute over whether he is barred from being president again because of his actions following the 2020 election, underscores the direct role the justices will have



in the outcome of the election. Trump’s lawyers have sought to put off a trial until after the election. In the end, the timing of a possible trial could come down to how quickly the justices rule. They have shown they can act fast, issuing a decision in the Watergate tapes case in 1974 just 16 days after hearing arguments.

The decision in Bush v. Gore came the day after arguments in December 2000. By taking up the legally untested question now, the justices have created a scenario of uncertainty that special counsel Jack Smith had sought to avoid when he first asked the high court in December to immedi-

ately intervene. In his latest court filing, Smith had suggested arguments a full month earlier than the late April timeframe. Trump wrote on Truth Social that legal scholars “are extremely thankful” the court stepped in to decide on immunity. “Presidents will always be concerned, and even paralyzed, by the prospect of wrongful prosecution and retaliation after they leave office,” he wrote.

A Smith spokesperson declined to comment. The trial date, already postponed once by Trump’s immunity appeal, is of paramount importance to both sides. Prosecutors are looking to bring Trump to trial this year while defense lawyers have been seeking delays in his criminal cases.

US Pres continues to be fit for duty, says his physician

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Joe Biden “continues to be fit for duty” and “fully executes” all of his responsibilities, his physician has said after an annual health checkup, asserting that the 81-year-old US President does not have any major health concerns. The White House on Wednesday shared a memo with President Biden’s “current health summary” following his annual routine physical at Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre. Biden, whose health has been under scrutiny ahead of November’s presidential election, underwent the assessment on Wednesday. “He continues to be fit for duty and fully executes all of his responsibilities without any exemptions or accommodations,” Dr Kevin O’Connor, physician to



the US President, wrote in a memo shared with reporters. Biden’s annual medical checkup included speciality consultation with several Presidential Specialty Consultants.

These specialities included Optometry, Dentistry,

Orthopedics (Foot and Ankle), Orthopedics (Spine), Physical Therapy, Neurology, Sleep Medicine, Cardiology, Radiology and Dermatology.

Soon after his return from Walter Reed, Biden told reporters that doctors told him he looked too young. The think you look too young,” he said amidst laughter. “No, there is nothing different than last year. Everything is great,” the president said, responding to questions on his health checkup.

It is a White House tradition to publicise the annual health checkup of the US President in the form of a memo from the president’s physician.

The White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters at her daily news conference that Biden’s doctors decided against a cognitive

test. Such a test is being demanded by several of his political opponents, including Indian-American Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley.

“The President doesn’t need a cognitive test. That is not my assessment. That is the assessment of the President’s doctor. That is also the assessment of the neurologist who has also made that assessment as well,” Jean-Pierre said.

“The President’s doctor has said, if you look at this, the President, who is also the Commander-in-Chief, passes a cognitive test every day, as he moves from one topic to another topic, understanding the granular level of these topics,” she said.

“You saw him talk about a fighting crime today. Tomorrow, he’s going to go to

the border. Next week, he’s going to give a State of the Union Address,” she added.

Asserting that this is a very rigorous job, she said that Biden has been able to do it every day for the past three years. “And let’s not forget, he is also leading a historic presidency, which is also important to note in everything that we’ve been able to do — he’s been able to get done over the past three years,” the press secretary said.

Biden is the oldest president in the history of the United States.

The president’s health was in the news earlier this month after a special counsel investigating Biden for improperly storing classified documents suggested he was suffering from mental decline due to his age.

I2U2 continues to be priority for Biden admn

Washington (PTI): The grouping of India, Israel, the UAE and the US continues to be a priority for the Biden administration and is not on the back-burner due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the White House has said, underlining that the President is “deeply committed” to making sure that the I2U2 initiatives make progress.

The I2U2 grouping was conceptualised during the meeting of the foreign ministers of the four countries held on October 18, 2021. The I2U2’s first summit was held on July 14, 2022, to establish the group.

The grouping remains critically important, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters at the White House here on Wednesday.

Asked if the grouping is now on the back-burner or no longer active because of the Israel-Hamas conflict, the official said, “No, not at all, still a priority.”

“The I2U2 remains critically important and the president is deeply committed to making sure that we continue with the I2U2, obviously with our partnership among our four countries and beyond through innovative, inclusive and science-based solutions to advance... let’s not forget, enhance food and energy security space operations and other ventures, advancing projects on water conservation, waste management and other areas,” Jean-Pierre said. So, there is a strong future for the I2U2 and “we’re looking forward to continuing that partnership” and it has not taken on the back-burner, the White House official said. “It certainly continues to be a priority,” Jean-Pierre said.

EU to release billions of frozen euros to Poland

Brussels: The European Union’s powerful Commission announced on Thursday that it will begin releasing billions of euros to Poland that were frozen over the previous government’s policies that the bloc said amounted to widespread backsliding on fundamental democratic principles.

The move had been expected after Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised “good news” last week to reward Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk for his efforts to overturn a series of measures imposed by the previous conservative government that went against EU judicial cornerstones. Thursday’s move cemented a sea change in relations. Both sides had openly clashed.

Macron says he will swim in River Seine

Paris (AP): French President Emmanuel Macron boldly promised to swim in the River Seine being cleaned up for the Paris Olympics as he toured the new complex that will house athletes on Thursday. Macron cited pollution-reduction in the Seine as one of the Games’ positive long-term impacts. He noted “extraordinary” public-funded investments being poured into making the river — largely off limits to bathers since 1923 — swimmable again.

Asked by a journalist whether he would bathe in it, Macron replied, “Me, yes, I’ll go.”

But he refrained from saying when. “I’m not going to give you the date. There’s a risk you’ll be late,” he said.

Regardless of whether he does indeed don trunks,

Macron’s visit to the future high-security Olympic village served to highlight how the Paris Games are helping to transform some disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the French capital’s poorer suburbs.

The eco-friendly village led to nearly 2,000 jobs being created, with 1,136 going to local residents. It cost about 2 billion Euros (USD 2.2 billion), most of it investment by property developers but also including 646 million Euros (USD 700 million) from public funds. The Olympic construction company, Solideo, transferred the village to Paris Games organizers on Thursday, symbolically handing over a large key, with Macron watching.

“It’s a very big day,” Macron said. “It’s a demonstration that France is a nation of builders.”

Idaho halts execution by lethal injection after 8 failed attempts to insert IV line

AP ■ KUNA

Idaho halted the execution of serial killer Thomas Eugene Creech on Wednesday after medical team members repeatedly failed to find a vein where they could establish an intravenous line to carry out the lethal injection. Creech, 73, has been in prison half a century, convicted of five murders in three states and suspected of several more. He was already serving a life term when he beat a fellow inmate, 22-year-old David Dale Jensen, to death in 1981 — the crime for which he was to be executed.

Creech, one of the longest-serving death row inmates in the US, was wheeled into the execution chamber at the Idaho Maximum Security Institution on a gurney at 10 a.m.



Three medical team members tried eight times to establish an IV, Department of Correction Director Josh Tewalt told a news conference afterward. In some cases, they couldn’t access the vein, and in others they could but had concerns about vein quality. They attempted sites in his arms, legs, hands and feet. At one point, a medical team member left to gather more supplies. The warden announced he was halting

the execution at 10:58 a.m.

The corrections department said its death warrant for Creech would expire, and that it was considering next steps. While other medical procedures might allow for the execution, the state is mindful of the 8th Amendment’s ban on cruel and unusual punishment, Tewalt said. Creech’s attorneys immediately filed a new motion for a stay in US District Court, saying “the badly botched execution attempt” proves the department’s “inability to carry out a humane and constitutional execution.” The court granted the stay after Idaho confirmed it would not try again to execute him before the death warrant expired; the state will have to obtain another warrant if it wants to carry out the execution. “This is what happens when unknown individuals

with unknown training are assigned to carry out an execution,” the Federal Defender Services of Idaho said in a written statement. “This is precisely the kind of mishap we warned the State and the Courts could happen when attempting to execute one of the country’s oldest death-row inmates.” Six Idaho officials, including Attorney General Raul Labrador, and four news media representatives, including an Associated Press reporter, were on hand to witness the attempt — which was to be Idaho’s first execution in 12 years. The execution team was made up entirely of volunteers, the corrections department said.

Those tasked with inserting the IVs and administering the lethal drug had medical training, but their identities were kept secret.

Pak’s newly-elected lawmakers sworn in

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan’s newly-elected lawmakers were sworn in on Thursday during Parliament’s maiden session after President Dr Arif Alvi summoned the National Assembly after delaying the process for several days. The National Assembly was summoned after Alvi’s initial refusal due to differences with the caretaker government over the issue of former prime minister Imran Khan’s party-backed candidates being allotted the reserved seats.

The opening session of the 16th Parliament, headed by the outgoing Speaker of the previous Parliament, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, began after a delay of more than an hour. Ashraf administered the oath to the newly-elected lawmakers amidst unruly scenes as 71-year-old Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-backed lawmakers chanted slogans against alleged vote rigging in the February 8 general elections. After the oath-taking, the lawmakers signed the register roll of the National Assembly to officially become members.

The new oath-taking lawmakers included the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) supremo Nawaz Sharif, PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Co-chairman Asif Zardari and PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

Early on Thursday, Alvi approved a move from the caretaker parliamentary affairs ministry to summon the newly-elected National Assembly’s first session on February 29, according to a statement posted by the president’s X account.

“Subject to some reservations, President Dr Arif Alvi has summoned to convene the National Assembly on February 29 in exercise of the powers conferred by Article 54(1) of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan,” the statement said.

It said that the president accorded his approval keeping in view “the mandate and implications of the timeline given in Article 91 (2) and sub-



ject to some reservations and expecting the resolution of the issue of the reserved seats before the 21st day [after the general elections].”

The late-night statement also took issue with the tone of the summary sent to Alvi by the caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, adding that the president was calling the session as he expected that the issue of reserved seats would be settled by the 21st day after the polls, as envisaged in the law.

According to constitutional provisions, the meeting of the National Assembly must be convened within 21 days of the elections, and February 29 is the mandated date under Article 91. The newly-elected National Assembly will elect the new speaker and deputy speaker. The election for the post of prime minister is expected on Saturday, and former premier Shehbaz Sharif is poised to be elected as the new leader of the House under a post-election deal between the PML-N and the PPP.

On Monday, Alvi, a close aide of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan and a former senior member of his party, rejected a move from the caretaker parliamentary affairs ministry to summon the National Assembly’s first session, maintaining that all reserved seats be allocated before its summoning.

Winning independent candidates of former-cricketer-turned-politician Khan’s PTI joined the rightwing Sunni

Ittehad Council (SIC) to receive the party’s share of reserved seats for women and minorities in the national and provincial assemblies. Candidates of the PTI fought as independents after the party could not directly participate in the February 8 elections due to the non-allotment of its iconic electoral symbol - the cricket bat.

A five-member bench of the Election Commission of Pakistan began the open hearing on the SIC’s plea seeking allocation of reserved seats and the counter-pleas filed against it earlier this week.

The House was already meeting at 10 am on Thursday as National Assembly outgoing Speaker Ashraf decided to convene the lower house of parliament session after Alvi’s denial.

Alvi’s statement said that returning the move for a National Assembly session was “very much in accordance with the provisions of Article 48(1)” of the Constitution.

“It is not understood on what grounds it has been taken as a partisan act, though it was also aimed at the completion of the National Assembly in accordance with Article 51 of the Constitution,” it said. Alvi’s decision not to summon the session was heavily criticised by the PML-N and the PPP parties, whose leaders on Tuesday warned that it might lead to “legal consequences”.

The PTI had alleged massive rigging in the election and vowed to raise their voice inside and outside the Parliament.

‘Sending Western troops to Ukraine risks global N-conflict’

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed on Thursday to fulfil Moscow’s goals in Ukraine and sternly warned the West against deeper involvement in the fighting, saying that such a move is fraught with the risk of a global nuclear conflict.

Putin’s warning came in a state-of-the-nation address ahead of next month’s election he’s all but certain to win, underlining his readiness to protect Russian gains in Ukraine. In an apparent reference to French President Emmanuel Macron’s statement earlier this week that the future deployment of Western ground troops to Ukraine should not be “ruled out”, Putin warned that it would lead to “tragic” consequences for the countries who decide to do that.

Putin noted that while accusing Russia of plans to attack NATO allies in Europe, Western allies were “selecting targets for striking our territory and selecting the most efficient as they think striking assets and talking about the

possibility of sending a NATO contingent to Ukraine”.

“We remember the fate of those who sent their troop contingents to the territory of our country,” the Russian leader said. “Now the consequences for the potential invaders will be far more tragic.”

Speaking before an audience of lawmakers and top officials, Putin said the West should keep in mind that “we also have the weapons that can strike targets on their territory, and what they are now suggesting and scaring the world with, all that raises the real threat of a nuclear conflict that will mean the destruction of our civilisation”.

“Don’t they understand it?” he said, alleging that Western leaders are playing with options of deeper involvement in the conflict, as in a simulation. “Those people haven’t been through any tough challenges and they have forgotten what war means.”

The strong statement followed earlier warnings from Putin, who has issued frequent reminders of Russia’s nuclear

might since he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 as he sought to discourage the West from expanding its military support for Kyiv.

Putin emphasised that Russia’s nuclear forces are in “full readiness,” saying that the military has deployed potent new weapons, some of them tested on the battlefield in Ukraine. The Kremlin leader said they include the new Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile that has entered service with Russian nuclear forces, along with the Burevestnik atomic-powered cruise missile and the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed drone, which are completing their tests.

He added that the Kinzhal and Zircon hypersonic missiles have proven their efficacy on the battlefield in Ukraine. At the same time, he rejected Western leaders’ statements about the threat of a Russian attack on NATO allies in Europe as “ravings” and again dismissed Washington’s claim that Moscow was pondering the deployment of space-based

nuclear weapons. Putin charged that the US allegations were part of a ploy to draw Russia into talks on nuclear arms control on American terms even as Washington continues its efforts to deliver a “strategic defeat” to Moscow in Ukraine.

“Ahead of the US election, they just want to show their citizens, as well as others, that they continue to rule the world,” he said. “It won’t work.”

In his speech that focused heavily on economic and social issues ahead of the March 15-17 presidential vote, Putin argued that Russia was “defending its sovereignty and security and protecting our compatriots” in Ukraine, charging that the Russian forces have the upper hand in the fighting. He hailed Russian soldiers and honoured those who were killed in fighting with a moment of silence.

Putin has repeatedly said that he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 to protect Russian interests and prevent Ukraine from posing a major security threat to Russia by

joining NATO. Kyiv and its allies have denounced it as an unprovoked act of aggression. The Russian leader has repeatedly signalled a desire to negotiate an end to the fighting but warned that Russia will hold onto its gains.

Putin, 71, who is running as an independent candidate in the March 15-17 presidential election, relies on the tight control over Russia’s political system that he has established during 24 years in power. Prominent critics who could challenge him have either been imprisoned or are living abroad, while most independent media have been banned, meaning that Putin’s reelection is all but assured. He faces token opposition from three other candidates nominated by Kremlin-friendly parties represented in parliament.

Russia’s best-known opposition leader Alexei Navalny, whose attempt to run against Putin in 2018 was rejected, died suddenly in an Arctic prison colony earlier this month, while serving a 19-year sentence on extremism charges.

Russian rocket successfully puts Iranian satellite into orbit

AP ■ KIVY

Moscow (AP): A Russian rocket on Thursday successfully put an Iranian satellite into orbit, a launch that underlined increasingly close cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. Russia’s state-run Roscosmos corporation said that a Soyuz rocket blasted off from the Vostochny launch facility in the country’s far east to carry the Iranian satellite and 18 Russian satellites into orbit. The Iranian state TV said the 110-kg (242-pound) satellite has three cameras to take images for environmental, agricultural and other purposes. Iran’s state TV said the satellite will be put into orbit around the North and South Poles, synchronised to be in the same fixed position relative to the Sun, and will be fully functional after a calibration of its systems. Thursday’s launch comes after Russia put into orbit the Iranian Khayyam satellite in 2022.

Russian onslaught targets more Ukrainian towns and villages

AP ■ KIVY

Russian forces are pushing hard against more Ukrainian towns and villages in eastern and southeastern Ukraine as Moscow tries to press its current advantage in weapons and troops, Kyiv officials said Thursday. Despite Russia’s apparent offensive momentum on the ground, Ukraine claimed it has shot down 11 Russian warplanes in less than two weeks as the Kremlin’s forces pushed forward.

With the war starting its third year, Russian forces have been bludgeoning some Ukrainian defensive positions into submission, deploying overwhelming amounts of artillery and troop numbers in an effort to punch through defensive lines at targeted points. Though Russia’s gains have been small, slow and costly, Ukraine doesn’t have enough reservists and has a severe shortage of artillery

shells as the supply of military aid from Western partners has waned. The Russian army is trying to seize the towns and villages of Tonenke, Orliivka, Semenivka, Berdychi and Krasnohorivka in the eastern Donetsk region, Ukraine’s army chief Col Gen Oleksandr Syrskiy said on social media.

Those are places where Ukrainian military officials had said they would form a new line of defence after Ukrainian troops pulled out of Avdiivka on Feb 17. In the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region, Russian forces are focusing on retaking Verbove and Robotyne, towns that Ukraine won back in last

summer’s counteroffensive in 2023, Syrskiy said.

Syrskiy, who was appointed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to lead the country’s military on Feb 8, accused some of his commanders of making “miscalculations” in assessing the enemy and taking countermeasures.

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s air force commander Mykola Oleshchuk said his units shot down two Russian Su-34 jets overnight. That made a total of 11 warplanes, including an early warning and control A-50 plane, that Ukraine claims to have downed since Feb 17.

“The enemy has increased

its air presence in the east. Our top military leadership reacted accordingly,” air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said on national television. A major question for Kyiv officials is how they can unlock further military help from their partners. Emergency US national security funds for Ukraine are still on hold amid a political dispute in Washington.

The Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, Ruslan Stefanchuk, addressed an open letter to US House Speaker Mike Johnson asking him to put to a vote the Biden administration’s proposal to send \$60 billion of aid to Ukraine.

Sunni Ittehad Council faces uncertainty over failure to submit member list

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The allocation of reserved seats to Pakistan’s Sunni Ittehad Council may be in jeopardy after it was revealed that the right-wing party has not provided its list of members for the reserved seats, it emerged on Thursday.

The religious party of the Sunni Muslim sect came to prominence after the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of former jailed prime minister Imran Khan asked its independently elected members to join SIC to claim its share in the 70 seats reserved for women and non-Muslims in the 266-member National Assembly. However, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has been refusing to allocate the reserved seats to the party, prompting the PTI to express outrage and protest at the maiden session of Parliament on Thursday.

Speaking on the floor of the Assembly, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) senior leader Khawaja Asif questioned how the PTI could demand reserved seats when the SIC had not submitted a list of its members on reserved seats before the ECP.

Legally, every party should provide before elections a list of members it wants to be elected on reserved seats.

Separately, ECP on Wednesday reserved its judgment on the petitions relating to the allotment of reserved seats to the SIC after hearing arguments from the parties. A five-member commission headed by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sikandar Sultan Raja heard the petitions.

The News International reported that during the hearing, CEC Raja handed over a letter written to the ECP by the SIC to PTI lawyer Senator Barrister Ali Zafar and said they don’t want reserved seats and you are forcing it. The CEC said the Council

head wrote a letter to the ECP on February 26 and said they don’t have a list of reserved seats since no one contested the election from the SIC platform.

Barrister Ali Zafar expressed ignorance about the letter and said that the SIC did not inform the PTI about any such letter and asked the ECP to consider the extraordinary situation faced by the PTI and allot reserved seats to the SIC after independent members joined it.

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) lawyer Farooq H Naek started his arguments and said that no SIC member won the general seat, and the Council did not submit any priority list to the ECP. Under Section 104 of the Elections Act, the new list could not be submitted after the expiry of the nomination papers date and the existing list could be changed.

He also maintained that if a name was deleted from the current list for reserved seats, the political party could give more names. The ECP could not issue a directive to ask the SIC to seek a priority list at this time. According to the formula given in Article 51 of the Constitution, seats were allotted. “If the stipulated time passes, then the list cannot be given,” Naek added.

PML-N lawyer Azam Nazeer Tarar said the SIC did not participate in the general elections. The ECP wrote a letter to all political parties about the implementation of election rules, but the Council replied that their party did not field any candidates.

Tarar said, “The Section 104 clearly states that whoever is participating in the elections, under Section 104, must have a priority list for reserved seats. If a political party has been rejected by the people, then how can independent members go and ask for reserved seats.” The ECP bench reserved its verdict on the petition after hearing the arguments of the parties.

Pakistan National Assembly to meet after session summoned by Prez

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan’s newly-elected Parliament will meet on Thursday for its maiden session as President Dr Arif Alvi finally summoned the Assembly after differing with the caretaker government over the issue of former prime minister Imran Khan’s party-backed candidates being allotted the reserved seats.

Early on Thursday, Alvi approved a move from the caretaker parliamentary affairs ministry to summon the newly-elected National Assembly’s first session on February 29, according to a statement posted by the president’s X account.

“Subject to some reservations, President Dr Arif Alvi has summoned to convene the National Assembly on February 29 in exercise of the powers conferred by Article 54(1) of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan,” the state-

ment said. It said that the president accorded his approval keeping in view “the mandate and implications of the timeline given in Article 91 (2) and subject to some reservations and expecting the resolution of the issue of the reserved seats before the 21st day [after the general elections].”

The late-night statement also took issue with the tone of the summary sent to Alvi by the caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, adding that the president was calling the session as he expected that the issue of reserved seats would be settled by the 21st day after the polls, as envisaged in the law. According to constitutional provisions, the meeting of the National Assembly must be convened within 21 days of the elections, and February 29 is the mandated date under Article 91. The newly elected Parliament will

meet on Thursday for its maiden session amidst a row over the alleged rigging of votes.

In the opening session, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, the outgoing Speaker of the previous Parliament, would administer the oath to the new members and adjourn the session for the next Assembly to elect the new speaker and deputy speaker.

The election for the post of prime minister is expected on Saturday, and former premier Shehbaz Sharif is poised to be elected as the new leader of the House. On Monday, Alvi, a close aide of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan and a former senior member of his party, rejected a move from the caretaker parliamentary affairs ministry to summon the National Assembly’s first session, maintaining that all reserved seats be allocated before its summoning.

Kishida vows no more fundraising parties

AP ■ TOKYO

Japan’s beleaguered prime minister renewed his apology over his governing party’s corruption scandal, promising to not hold any more parties to not hold any more parties himself as leader during a political ethics committee

Thursday. Fumio Kishida has fought against plummeting support ratings since his governing party’s corruption scandal rocked the government. The scandal, considered the biggest in decades, centres on political funds raised through party event tickets bought by individuals, companies and organisations. It led to 10 people — lawmakers and their aides — being indicted in January.

While Kishida himself is not the focus of the scandal and was not even invited to the hearing, the surprise announcement of his personal appearance broke a deadlock between the opposition lawmakers and his governing party Wednesday

when the five implicated attendants refused to go public, holding up a hearing. Kishida expressed a “sense of crisis” that the deadlock on the hearing would further deepen the public’s distrust in politics.


The ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s resistance to have a fully open session fuelled public criticism that Kishida’s party is taking the corruption lightly and trying to hide something.

Kishida’s action could help ease criticisms that he was too slow and lax in addressing the public’s distrust and taking anti-corruption measures. In his opening statement, Kishida renewed his apology for triggering public distrust in politics, and promised to take leadership in reforming his party, saying seniority-based tradition, lack of compliance and a sense of privilege among lawmakers need to be removed if they were part of the problem.



PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY
MARINE DEPARTMENT
No. MD/AACTS/WK/R-07/2023/247 Date: 26.02.2024
e-Tender/ Call Notice (e-TCN) No.MD/ACCTS/WK/R-07/2023/74 dtd. 16/01/2024
Name of the Work: Engagement of 01 no. All Weather Steel Hull Vessel along with Manning Crew on hire for a period of 5 (five) years for deployment at Paradip SPMS on round the clock 24x7 basis. Pollution Response-cum-SPMS Security Duties. Estimated cost put to tender: Rs.42,91,10,000/- . Last date & time of submission of tender through on-line bidding is 15:00 hours on dt.18.03.2024. For further details, please log on to the website: https://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app
Sd/- Deputy Conservator,
Paradip Port Authority
PPA/PR/92/2023-2024 dtd.28.02.2024

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Online applications are invited for the various Teaching and Non-Teaching posts in the University. Online registration of application for these posts will start w.e.f. 04-03-2024 and end on 25-03-2024. Last Date for submitting Hard Copy of the Online submitted application is 02-04-2024. For further details visit University Website: <http://www.gndu.ac.in>.
Amritsar REGISTRAR
29.02.2024
NA/12/22431/2023/33022
Dated CHD :- 2/29/2024



Office of the Superintending Engineer
3rd Circle, Public Works Department, Pithoragarh
Email : sepwdpth@rediffmail.com

Letter No. : 1064 / 13 P.I.U.-03/2024 Dated : 29/02/2024

National Competitive E-Tender Notice
The Superintending Engineer 3rd Circle, Public Works Department Pithoragarh invites tender through E-Tendering (**Two Bid System**) on behalf of “Hon’ble Governor of Uttarakhand” for following works. All other information will be available online from date **05-03-2024** at 5.00 PM onward on website <http://www.uktenders.gov.in>

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Earnest Money (in Lac)	Cost of Tender (₹)	Validity of Tender (day)	Period of Completion (months)	Contractor's Category of Registration
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Construction of (03 no.), 24.00 mtr. Span R.C.C. Bridges, reconstruction of damaged walls & other protection work in Tanakpur-Jaulivi Motor road along Indo-Nepal Border in District Champawat of Uttarakhand State. (km. 12.000 to 55.000).	68.30	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	12	Category 'A' & higher for Road & Bridge works, in State Govt./ Govt. of India



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e/sealed tenders are hereby invited for the purchase and supply of following items:-

Sr. No.	Name of Work/Item	Period/Tentative City
1.	For Verka Head Office, Chandigarh Empanelment of statutory auditor for Verka Jalandhar Dairy.	2023-24 to 2025-26
2.	For Verka Chandigarh Dairy a) Sealed tender for hiring of five seater Tata Xenon / Mahindra Bolero Pickup or equivalent vehicle along with driver. b) e-Tender for providing Manpower as per requirement of milk plant, Chandigarh/ Milkfed Head Office, Sec-34, Chandigarh.	01No.
3.	For Verka Mohali Dairy a) Hiring of:- • Passenger vehicle/taxi for officers in Delhi area. • Insulated vehicles of minimum 01 MT capacity for 2 nd leg delivery of verka milk and milk products in Delhi-NCR area. • Insulated and refrigerated vehicles for the supply of Verka milk and milk products in Punjab, Tricity & adjoining areas and Rai (Sonipat) area.	02 No's (no. may increased or decreased) 08 No's (no. may increased or decreased)
4.	For Verka Bathinda Dairy a) Manpower required for job Contract. b) Hiring of:- • Insulated vehicles for supply of packed milk and fresh milk products in Milk shed area. • Vehicles for Sale Depot, Bathinda & Verka Bathinda Dairy for Supply of Ghee, Butter, Powder, Panjiri, Tetra Pack & other Products all Punjab & other States. • Road Milk Tankers for transportation of Milk within/outside Punjab.	Annual One year with extension up to one year/ 05 No's. As per requirement Capacity 15 tons and above
5.	For Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy Disposal of the unserviceable material.	One time Basis/ Annual
6.	For Verka Amritsar Dairy a) Sealed tender for hiring of godown for storage of skimmed milk powder. b) e-tender for hiring of:- • Deep freezer (Cold Store) for storage of White Butter at -18°C or below. • Refrigerated Container. c) Steam Coal. d) Fabrication of incubation room (including door) with puf panel and Supply, installation, testing & commissioning of heating units. e) Outsourcing of Manpower. f) e-Tender for the purchase of:- • Electronic weighing balance capacity 200kg. • Ventilation fan for Dairy Barn. g) Construction of:- • Boundary Wall approx. 600 feet. • Record Room approx.20x6.35 mtr.	01 No. Annual/01No. 01 No. 1500 MT Complete Job 02 Years 50 No's 100 No's Complete Job
7.	For Verka Jalandhar Dairy a) Steam Coal having calorific value not less than 5500kcal/kg. b) Job contract for :- • Pest and Rodent Control services. • Providing labour through service provider who is having is having EPF/ESI no. and Labour proving License.	2000 MT Annual As per requirement.
8.	For Verka Sangrur Dairy Hiring of:- • SS Road Milk tankers Cap.15, 18, 20, 23, 25, 30 kl. for transportation of milk from Verka Sangrur Dairy to other plants of Punjab and outside punjab. • Diesel Car. • Mahindra Bolero Camper or equivalent to lift milk product from milk plant/stores to various milk bar field/extension work.	02 No's 02 No's Annual/01 No.
9.	For Verka Ferozepur Dairy a) Hiring of:- • Diesel Car for Marketing Section. • Insulated vehicles for supply of packed milk and Butter ASC Ferozepur and ASC Fazilka Milk in shed area. b) Supply of freshly cut firewood for boiler	01 No. Annual 550 Tons
10.	For Verka Ludhiana Dairy Supply, Installation and Commissioning of:- • GLC Machine. • RP-HPLC Machine.	One time purchase 01 No. 01 No.
11.	For Verka Mega Dairy, Bassi Pathana Engaging of outsource agency for providing of Security Supervisor/Guards.	Annual

NOTE:
1. For complete details regarding above tender (NIT), please visit our website i.e. www.verka.coop & e Tendering portal i.e. eprocure.punjab.gov.in.
2. Corrigendum, if any, will be uploaded on website only.

Incharge (Purchase)

Cabinet nod to ₹1.26 lakh crore chip making units

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved setting up three semiconductor-making units by firms, including Tata Group and Japan's Renesas, at an investment of Rs 1.26 lakh crore as part of an attempt to cut India's dependence on imports to meet requirements of chips. The units which will make chips for sectors including defence, automobiles and telecommunications, will begin construction within the next 100 days, Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told reporters after the cabinet meeting. The three units will be set up under the 'Development of Semiconductors and Display Manufacturing Ecosystem' programme that provides government support of up to Rs 76,000 crore. Tata Electronics Pvt Ltd will set up a semiconductor fab in partnership with Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp at Dholera in

Gujarat. The plant will have a capacity to produce 50,000 wafers per month and will involve an investment of Rs 91,000 crore. Tata Semiconductor Assembly and Test Pvt Ltd (TSAT) will set up a semiconductor unit in Morigaon, Assam, at an investment of Rs 27,000 crore. CG Power in partnership with Renesas Electronics Corp and Stars Microelectronics of Thailand will set up a unit in Sanand in Gujarat at an investment of Rs 7,600 crore. In June last year, the Cabinet approved a proposal of Micron for setting up a semiconductor unit in Sanand, Gujarat. The approvals are part of the Modi government's ambitions to make India a chipmaker for the world and cutting reliance on countries like Taiwan. Vaishnaw said the Tata plant at Dholera will produce high-performance compute chips with 28 nm technology for electric vehicles (EV), telecom, defence, automotive, consumer electronics, display and power electronics.



The unit in Assam will have a capacity of 48 million per day for automotive, electric vehicles, consumer electronics, telecom, and mobile phones. The CG power semiconductor unit will manufacture 15 million chips for consumer, industrial, automotive and power applications. "Within a very short time, India's semiconductor mission has achieved four big successes. With these units, the semiconductor ecosystem will get established in India. India already has deep capabilities in chip design. With these units, our country will develop capabilities in chip fabrication. Advanced packaging technologies will be indigenously developed in India with today's announcement," he said adding the three units will generate direct employment of 20,000 advanced technology jobs and about 60,000 indirect jobs. These units will accelerate employment creation in downstream automotive, electronics manufacturing, telecom

manufacturing, industrial manufacturing, and other semiconductor-consuming industries. Construction of Micron's Sanand unit is progressing at a rapid pace and a robust semiconductor ecosystem is emerging near the unit, he said. Tata Electronics' partner PSMC is renowned for its expertise in logic and memory foundry segments. PSMC has 6 semiconductor foundries in Taiwan. Power management chips the two will manufacture are high voltage, high current applications. TSAT semiconductor is developing indigenous advanced semiconductor packaging technologies including flip chip and ISIP (integrated system in package) technologies. Renesas is a leading semiconductor company focussed on specialised chips. It operates 12 semiconductor facilities and is an important player in microcontrollers, analogue, power, and System-on-chip (SoC) products.

Sebi bans entities for manipulative trades in V Marc India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Sebi on Thursday barred 12 entities, including promoter of V Marc India Ltd, from the securities market for engaging in a fraudulent scheme to manipulate volumes and price of the company's shares. Additionally, the regulator impounded wrongful gains of Rs 6.38 crore made by some of the entities from the manipulative scheme, according to an interim order. This case primarily deals with

fraudulent and manipulative trading in the scrip of V Marc India Ltd, listed on NSE's SME segment, prima facie orchestrated by the promoter and company management, along with connected parties. In its order, Sebi, prima facie, found that V Marc's promoter and MD Vikas Garg and Sandeep Kumar Srivastava, former Whole Time Director of the company-- engaged the services of Priyesh Kurani to 'operate the market'. It further noted that Kurani, in

turn, in addition to using his own and his connected entities' trading accounts, engaged accounts of persons connected to Garg to manipulate the scrip. Further, Garg and the company management channelled funds through their connected entities to Kurani for executing the fraudulent scheme. The alleged fraudulent scheme was set in motion as soon as the scrip was listed on April 8, 2021. "The impact of this alleged fraudulent scheme is

evident in the manner volumes surged and prices increased after which most of the entities -- PV Manipulators-- as well as the IPO subscribers - exited fully. The shares offloaded, were purchased by public shareholders leading to the increase in their numbers as well," Sebi said. Accordingly, Sebi has restrained 12 entities "from buying, selling or dealing in the securities market or associating themselves with the securities market, either

directly or indirectly, in any manner whatsoever until further orders". Apart from Garg, Srivastava and Kurani, the other entities barred by Sebi are -- Sudhir Gupta, Dharini Kurani, Rekha Kurani, Surbhi Aggarwal, Vinod Vilas Sable, Seema Garg, Madhu Srivastava, Jai Kishorr Singhal and Seema Agarwal. Sebi's examination which covered the period from April 9-30, 2021, was aided by data obtained from the mobile device of Kurani, seized

following the 'search and seizure operation' carried out by the regulator at his residence in May 2022, in the context of investigation into the matter of 'Front Running of Trades of Axis Mutual Fund'. The data from the device, particularly messages exchanged on WhatsApp involving entities referred to in this order, including a copy of a signed agreement between certain entities, has served as important evidence in this case.

Royalty rates for critical, strategic minerals approved

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved the amendment in the MMDR Act to specify the royalty rate on 12 critical and strategic minerals, an official statement said. A decision in this regard was taken at a meeting of the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Ministry of Mines said in a statement. "The Union Cabinet...

Approved the amendment of Second Schedule to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 (MMDR Act) for specifying rate of royalty in respect of 12 critical and strategic minerals," the statement said. The 12 critical and strategic minerals are beryllium, cadmium, cobalt, gallium, indium, rhenium, selenium, tantalum, tellurium, titanium, tungsten, and vanadium, it said. This completes the exercise of the rationalisation of royalty rates for all 24 critical and strategic minerals, the Ministry said. The government notified the royalty rate of four critical minerals, namely glauconite, potash, molybdenum and platinum group of minerals

on March 15, 2022 and of 3 critical minerals lithium, niobium and rare earth elements on October 12, 2023. As per the statement, the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2023, which has come into force from August 17, 2023, had listed 24 critical and strategic minerals in Part D of the First Schedule of the MMDR Act. The amendment provided that mining lease and composite licence of these 24 minerals shall be auctioned by the central government. The approval for specification of rate of royalty will enable the Centre to auction blocks for these 12 minerals for the first time in the country. Royalty rate on minerals is an important financial consideration for the bidders in auction of blocks, the statement said. Further, manner for calculation of Average Sale Price (ASP) of these minerals has also been prepared by the Ministry of Mines, which will enable determination of bid parameters, it said. The Second Schedule of the MMDR Act provides royalty rates for various minerals.

Markets close higher, RIL gains after mega merger

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty closed with gains on Thursday in a highly volatile trade amid the scheduled monthly expiry of derivative contracts. The 30-share BSE Sensex rebounded 195.42 points or 0.27 per cent to settle at 72,500.30. During the day, the benchmark oscillated between a high of 72,730.00 and a low of 72,099.32. The broader Nifty of NSE gained 31.65 points or 0.14 per cent to close at 21,982.80. "Domestic benchmark traded near a flat-line trend throughout the session, but some buoyancy emerged by the end of the day. Investors adopted a cautious wait & watch approach on the verge of a heavy economic data week," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services. Among Sensex shares, IndusInd Bank, Mahindra & Mahindra, HCL Tech, Power Grid, Maruti, State Bank of India, Titan, Asian Paints, Nestle and UltraTech Cement were the major gainers.



Reliance Industries climbed nearly 2 per cent intra-day before closing more than half-a per cent higher after the company and Walt Disney announced the signing of binding pacts to

merge their media operations in India to create a Rs 70,000 crore behemoth. Hindustan Unilever, Bharti Airtel, Tata Motors, ITC, Tech Mahindra and Axis Bank were

among the laggards. "Markets traded volatile on the monthly expiry day but managed to end marginally higher," said Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research, Religare Broking Ltd. In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.84 per cent and smallcap index went up by 0.50 per cent. Among the indices, services jumped 1.46 per cent, power climbed 1.01 per cent, commodities (0.79 per cent), industrials (0.74 per cent), metal (0.74 per cent) and capital goods (0.65 per cent). In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong settled lower while Shanghai ended in the green. European markets were trading mostly in the green. The US markets ended marginally lower on Wednesday. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,879.23 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark fell by 790.34 points or 1.08 per cent to settle at 72,304.88 on Wednesday. The Nifty slumped 247.20 points or 1.11 per cent to settle at 21,951.15. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.43 per cent to USD 83.32 a barrel.

FDI inflows decline in April, December 2023

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in India declined 13 per cent to USD 32.03 billion in April-December 2023, dragged down by lower infusion in computer hardware and software, telecom, auto, and pharma sectors, according to the latest government data. FDI inflows stood at USD 36.74 billion during the corresponding nine months of the preceding fiscal. Inflows during the October-December quarter of the current fiscal, however, rose by 18 per cent to USD 11.6 billion as against USD 9.83 billion during the same quarter of 2022-23. The total FDI — which includes equity inflows, reinvested earnings and other capital — declined by about 7 per cent to USD 51.5 billion during the period under review against USD 55.27 billion in April-December 2022, the data from the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) showed. During the nine-month period of this fiscal, FDI equity inflows decreased from major countries, including Singapore, the US, the UK, Cyprus and the UAE. Investments fell significantly from the Cayman Islands and Cyprus to USD 215 million and USD 796 million, respectively, during April-December 2023 as against the two comparative figures of USD 624 million and USD 1.15 billion recorded in the year-ago period. However, inflows increased from Mauritius, the Netherlands, Japan and Germany.

Protect investors in small, midcap schemes: Sebi to mutual funds

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Capital markets regulator Sebi has asked mutual fund houses to put in place a framework to safeguard investors, who invested in smallcap and midcap schemes, amid a "froth building up" in these categories. Also, the regulator has suggested steps such as restrictions on inflows in these segments, portfolio rebalancing, and laying guidelines to safeguard investors from the first-mover advantage of redeeming investors. This came in the backdrop of strong flow in the small and midcap schemes of mutual funds over the last few quarters. In a communication to Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) on Tuesday, Sebi asked the industry body to inform trustees of all the mutual fund houses to frame a policy to protect the interest of investors of smallcap and



midcap schemes. "In the context of the froth building up in the small and mid-cap segments of the market and the continuing flows in the small and mid-cap schemes of mutual funds, trustees, in consultation with unitholder protection committees of the AMCs shall ensure that a policy is put in place to protect the interest of all investors," the regulator said. The market regulator said that "appropriate" and "proactive measures" should be taken by Asset Management Companies (AMCs) and fund managers to protect investors.

Key infrastructure sectors growth slows to 15 months low in January

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The growth of eight key infrastructure sectors slowed to a 15-month low of 3.6 per cent in January, on account of poor performance of sectors like refinery products, fertiliser, steel and electricity, according to the official data released on Thursday. The growth of eight core sectors — coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery

products, fertiliser, steel, cement and electricity — was 4.9 per cent in December. It was 9.7 per cent in January 2023. The previous low level of growth rate was recorded at 0.9 per cent in October 2022. Cumulatively also, the growth rate in the output of these sectors slowed down to 7.7 per cent as against 8.3 per cent in April-January 2022-23. The output growth of

refinery products and fertiliser was in the negative zone. And the pace of increase in the output of coal, steel, and electricity decelerated during the month under review. However, crude oil, natural gas, and cement production recorded positive growth in January. The eight core sectors contribute 40.27 per cent to the country's Index of Industrial Production (IIP).

Lagged deposit growth to constrain credit growth for banks

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Lagged deposit accretion poses the risk of constraining credit growth for banks in FY25, India Ratings and Research said on Thursday. Maintaining its "neutral" outlook on the banking sector for FY25, the agency said the deposit growth is likely to moderate to 12-13 per cent in

FY25 from the 13.8 per cent estimated for ongoing fiscal year. The loan-to-deposit ratio for the sector is at a five-year high of 81 per cent, which makes deposit growth as a crucial part in banks' credit book expansions, it said. The agency said it expects credit growth to come at 20.5 per cent in FY24, including the positive impact of the HDFC twins merger, and

added that the same number will come at over 15 per cent in FY25. The loan book mix for banks is likely to change in FY25 due to the dip in shares of exposures to the retail and non-bank lenders segments, the agency said, adding that a revival in private capex will help increase the share of corporate lending in the overall pie.

AgriTech startup Otipy joins ONDC to sell fruits, vegetables

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

AgriTech startup Otipy on Thursday said it has joined Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) to sell fruits and vegetables to consumers in Delhi-NCR and Mumbai. In a statement, Otipy said this integration ensures its catalogue is visible on various apps, making it easy to discover and enabling smooth transactions on the growing network. As Otipy onboards ONDC, it is set to expand its customer reach, making its products available to a wider audience through popular ONDC seller apps like Pincode (by PhonePe) and Paytm apps. This move aims to strengthen the brand's presence in Delhi-NCR and Mumbai, the statement said. Moreover, Otipy will also focus on bulk procurement directly from farmers and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs).



"As we join the ONDC Network, it helps us in expanding our reach to varied customer segments. Through the network, we not only plan to enrich buyer choices but also elevate the shopping experience, facilitating inclusivity in a dynamic e-commerce landscape," Varun Khurana, Founder and CEO of Otipy, said. "With Otipy on the Open Network, it not only stands to benefit from an extensive reach of the network but also reinforces its commitment to fostering a sustainable and inclusive e-commerce framework," T Koshy, Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer of ONDC, said.

Cabinet okays ₹75,000 crore rooftop solar scheme

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Thursday approved a rooftop solar scheme, PM-Surya Ghar: Mufti Bijli Yojna, with an outlay of Rs 75,021 crore, to provide up to Rs 78,000 subsidy for the installation of solar plants and 300 units free power for one crore households. Briefing media after the Union Cabinet meeting, I&B Minister

Anurag Thakur informed that approval has been given for the scheme for installing rooftop solar and providing free electricity up to 300 units every month for one crore households. "The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved PM-Surya Ghar: Mufti Bijli Yojana with a total outlay of Rs 75,021 crore for installing rooftop solar and providing free electricity

up to 300 units every month for one crore households," an official statement said. The Prime Minister launched the scheme on 13th February 2024. The scheme provides a central financial assistance (CFA) of 60 per cent of system cost for 2 kW systems and 40 per cent of additional system cost for systems between 2 kW to 3 kW capacity. The CFA will be capped at 3 kW.

At current benchmark prices, this will mean Rs 30,000 subsidy for 1 kW system, Rs 60,000 for 2 kW systems and Rs 78,000 for 3 kW systems or higher. The households will apply for subsidy through the National Portal and will be able to select a suitable vendor for installing rooftop solar. The National Portal will assist the households in their decision-making process by providing

relevant information such as appropriate system sizes, benefits calculator, vendor rating etc. Households will be able to access collateral-free low-interest loan products of around 7 per cent at present for installation of residential RTS (rooftop solar) systems up to 3 kW. Other Features of the scheme include a Model Solar Village to be developed in each district to act as a

role model for adoption of rooftop solar in rural areas. Besides, Urban Local Bodies and Panchayati Raj Institutions shall also benefit from incentives for promoting rooftop solar (RTS) installations in their areas. The scheme provides a component for payment security for renewable energy service company (RESCO) based models as well as a fund for innovative projects in RTS.

New records, tales of grit emerge

Khelo India University Games 2023

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

It has been tales of grit and determination at the Khelo India University Games (KIUG) Ashtalakshmi 2023, which comes to an end on Thursday, with new meet records achieved and paths set for future star players of the country. The athletics section boosted of at least four new KIUG records at the events played at the Indira Gandhi stadium here. Pole vaulter M Gowtham of University of Madras cleared the distance of 5m to take home the men's pole vault gold medal. Javelin thrower Jyoti of Chaudhary Devi Lal University, who had won the gold medal in the National Open Athletics meet in Bengaluru in October last year, came up with a throw of 53.16m in her fourth attempt to clinch the women's javelin throw gold, and also set a new meet record. In the women's 800m event, Panjab University's Amandeep Kaur clocked 2:11.27s to clinch the gold

medal with a new Games record, while Vikash of Chandigarh University registered a new Games record in men's 1500 m clocking 3:50.70s to take the gold. Chandigarh University looks poised to top medals' tally with 28 golds in its kitty already, followed by Lovely Professional University with 17 golds and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, with 12 golds. The KIUG 2023 were held in 18 venues across seven cities of North East, with Guwahati hosting the opening ceremony which was attended by Union Sports and Youth Affairs Minister Anurag Thakur, among others. More than 4,500 players from over 200 universities competed in this fourth edition of KIUG. The KIUG is a part of the Indian government's Khelo India initiative that was launched in 2016, focussing on promoting grassroots sports and identifying young talents from across the country. For some like Mrinal



Chauhan of Lovely Professional University, a second spot in the Recurve men on debut at the KIUG was no mean feat. With limited financial means

to pursue archery which involves high cost training equipment as his family depends on the earnings of his father's stationery shop, Mrinal's early struggles are

now nearly over. Support through the (Tagert Olympic Podium) TOP scheme, a flagship initiative by the ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, meant that he

could take forward his passion, honing his skills at the Tata Archery Academy in Jamshedpur. "TOPS has allowed me to dream bigger, aim higher.

Now, I don't have to dependent on my father for my financial needs as I get stipend every month," the 20-year-old said, adding that the Games were also a vital preparation for the upcoming trials leading to the Paris Olympics qualification events. Jyoti Kattimai of Karnataka University may have failed to make a podium finish, but her story of fighting tough financial constraints to make this far is an inspiration in itself. With her father working as a scrap dealer and mother as a housekeeping staff in the same sports hostel in Dharwad where Jyoti trains, it has been a tale of long struggle for the 24-year-old. Jyoti's family of eight members (including four sisters) expanded to 13 after two of her elder sisters returned home with their children after a few years of marriage, and the family just about pulling along. She may have had to remain contend with the fifth spot in the 800m for women, but Jyoti hopes to keep on

pursuing her game with her coach Shamla Patil being her biggest support, who also sponsors her university fees. The vital role of coaches in shaping a player or a team cannot be stressed enough, and Bharati Vidyapeeth's rugby team credit their coach for the show they could put up. Coming in as defending champions, the team did not have high hopes for a podium finish as the core of their team that won the gold in Lucknow last year had passed out of the varsity. But the team with almost all new players was marshalled brilliantly by Prashant Arvind Singh, who works as a gym instructor in Mumbai, to clinch the bronze medal here. "It is a big thing for us because we reached here after only 15 days of preparation. We will return next year and win our third gold," said Prashant, who has also represented India at the U-19 level and was part of the silver medal-winning Maharashtra team in the National Games held in Goa last year.

Athletes to be issued digital certificates: Anurag

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Sports Minister Anurag Thakur on Thursday announced that the government will issue digital certificates to registered athletes across the country, a move which would ensure a transparent account of their participation and performance. The digital certificate will have dates of the athletes' participation in competitions and serve as proof of their achievements. "With athletes at the heart of our progressing and growing sporting ecosystem, the sports ministry has made a crucial decision to promote the

'issuance of digital certificates to athletes," wrote Thakur on 'X'. The ministry has directed all National Sports Federations (NSFs) to only release merit and participation certificates through the DigiLocker. The minister had first announced his plan to simplify things for athletes and National Sports Federations (NSFs) during the National Sports Day on August 29 last year. On Thursday, the minister said, "Keeping up with our policy of athlete-first, NSFs have been advocated to issue certificates to athletes via DigiLocker, an initiative of



Ministry of Electronics and IT." He said the digital certificates will add a new aspect to sports administration and management of sportspersons. "This decision has been taken

to ensure the accessibility, security and veracity of documents and promote transparency and efficiency in the sports administration of the NSFs. This will further lead to ease of living for our sportspersons across the

nation. "From June 1 this year, only certificates issued by the (sports) federations through DigiLocker shall be valid and no physical certificates issued will be recognised for government and other benefits. We have advised the federations that their affiliated units must also start issuing the certificates through the DigiLocker from January 1 next year," added Thakur. Enumerating the benefits of issuing sports certificates through DigiLocker, Thakur said it will make access and sharing of certificates easy, eliminate the need for

physical copies, provide a secure environment for storing and verifying documents and ensure their integrity and authenticity. This, he said, would streamline the certificate issuance process and reduce administrative burden. "These certificates are proof of the athletes' commitment, effort, and accomplishments in their respective sports, and are currently distributed through outdated and inefficient, conventional methods," he said, adding that NSFs must put in place technology-based tools and solutions to serve the interest of sports, especially athletes.



Bajrang refuses to appear in selection trials under WFI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Rejecting the Wrestling Federation of India's invitation to compete in the upcoming national trials, ace Indian wrestler Bajrang Punia has moved an urgent joint petition in the Delhi High Court, seeking a stay on the selection competition here on March 10-11. It has been learnt from reliable sources that Bajrang, Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik and her husband Satywart Kadiyan moved the court on Wednesday and the matter will be heard on Friday. While Bajrang did not confirm filing a petition, he questioned the government's silence on the issues concerning Indian wrestling. The Indian team for the Asian Wrestling Championships Olympic Qualifier in Kyrgyzstan next month will be selected on the basis of the trials at Delhi's IG Stadium. Bajrang told PTI from Russia, where he is training for the last two months, that he has spent a fortune abroad but he won't compete in trials if they are conducted by the Sanjay Singh-led WFI. "I would not spend Rs 30 lakh on my training if I were to not compete in the trials, but how the suspended WFI is conducting the trials? I don't get what the government's compulsion is (on allowing WFI to

conduct trials)?" Bajrang said. "I don't understand how a sports body suspended by the Indian government issue a circular and announce the trials. Why is the government silent? We will appear in the trials only if the ad-hoc panel or the government conducts it. How can a suspended body announce the trials?" he asked. WFI president Sanjay Singh had appealed to the protesting wrestlers to forget the past and appear for the trials. The trio had led a prolonged protest at Jantar Mantar, demanding the arrest of then WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who they had accused of sexual harassment. Bajrang, the Tokyo Olympics bronze winner, said that not just him but Sakshi Malik and Vinesh Phogat will also skip the trials. "This decision to not appear in trials is a joint decision taken by us. We are together in this," he said. PTI tried to reach out Sakshi and Vinesh for confirmation but the former did not return calls and the latter could not be contacted. Asked specifically if they have moved court against the trials, Bajrang denied the development but a source in the WFI confirmed to PTI that four wrestlers have approached the Delhi High Court.

Manchester Derby can further expose gulf between City and United

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Jim Ratcliffe's determination to bring down Manchester City is abundantly clear. So is his admiration, it seems, for the team he calls "the enemy." Since becoming co-owner of Manchester United last week, Ratcliffe has spoken about the "driven and elite environment" that has been created at City in its Abu Dhabi-controlled regime. He described City's 4-0 win over Real Madrid in last season's Champions League semifinals as "the best football I have ever seen." He was even behind United's recent appointment of one of City's former top executives, Omar Berrada, as the new chief executive in what United said was the first step on a journey "to put football and performance on the pitch back at the heart of everything we do." Ratcliffe acknowledged United was a "long way behind" City. Just how far might be placed into sharp focus this weekend. It's the 192nd Manchester derby on Sunday, pitting two rivals at opposite stages of their modern development: City, the English, European and world club champion, vs.



United, a fallen giant looking to be kickstarted by the riches and passion of a locally born billionaire. Few are giving United a hope in the Premier League clash at Etihad Stadium - privately, maybe even Ratcliffe will not expect a win, either - but his recent investment in United, not forgetting his comments about knocking City and fellow local rival Liverpool "off their perch" within three years, provides the narrative and backdrop to a fixture that, for the most part, has been one-sided in recent years. Take last season's match at the Etihad, for example, where Erling Haaland and Phil Foden scored hat tricks in City's 6-3 thrashing of United. Or this season's match at Old

Trafford, where United was overrun and ultimately humiliated in a 3-0 loss in October. City comes into the derby following a 6-2 win at Luton in the FA Cup highlighted by a five-goal performance by Haaland. United has actually won seven of its nine games in all competitions in 2024 but barely ever convinces, which leaves Ten Hag under permanent pressure. Tellingly, Ratcliffe, in his round of post-takeover interviews, never gave his complete backing to the Dutchman. March will also see United take on its other big foe, Liverpool, in the FA Cup quarterfinals. It's a month of great opportunity for Ten Hag and his players but also one of potential danger, if United was to lose to City - and therefore further jeopardize its Champions League qualification ambitions - and Liverpool. Fifteen points separate second-placed City and sixth-placed United, and that could be 18 by Sunday evening. More important for City is the points gap to leader Liverpool, which stands at one heading into the weekend. Liverpool plays first, away to Nottingham Forest.

Kostyuk, Saville and Boulter advance to quarterfinals of Cymbiotika San Diego Open

AP ■ SAN DIEGO

Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine, Daria Saville of Australia and Katie Boulter of England advanced to the quarterfinals of the Cymbiotika San Diego Open. Kostyuk continued to build on the form that saw her reach her first major quarterfinal last month at the Australian Open. The sixth seed knocked off the last remaining wild card by beating 18-year-old Taylah Preston of Australia, 6-4 6-3 on Wednesday. For Kostyuk, 21, it was almost like facing a mirror image of herself. "I was playing her for the very first time. She's still very young. She reminds me a little bit of me," said Kostyuk, who finished with 25 winners to 17 unforced errors, including nine double-faults. "I knew I had to fight and grind. It was very close." Preston, who notched her first tour-level main-draw singles win in the opening round against Magdalena Frech, impressed with her natural power and clean groundstrokes. She has jumped from No. 819 to No. 153 in a matter of one year, and will reach yet another career high when the updated WTA rankings are released



on Monday. Saville, a qualifier, saved a match point to overcome Germany's Tatjana Maria in a dramatic 3-hour, 14-minute marathon, 5-7 7-6(2) 6-2. Serving to stay in the match at 4-5, 30-40 in the second set, Saville hammered a crosscourt forehand winner to keep her hopes alive. She eventually forced a third set in a tiebreak. It was anything but a comfortable matchup for the 29-year-old baseliner. "There was no comfort ever, at all," said Saville, who avenged a quarterfinal loss to Maria in Barranquilla in 2023. "I think I kind of experienced today, tonight, probably what I do to players. It was a fun match - only because I won in

the end. But it was a tough battle." The 47th-ranked Maria's unconventional slice-and-dice game repeatedly left Saville scrambling for answers, but the 36-year-old managed to convert only six of her 23 break-point opportunities in taking the loss. "I needed two hours to adjust, three hours," said Saville of facing her crafty veteran foe. It's going to be really important for me to do the right recovery and get ready for the next round." It marked the fourth win of the week for Saville including the qualifying rounds.

Praggnanandhaa commits blunder, loses second round match in Prague

PTI ■ PRAGUE

Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa committed a time-pressure blunder as he suffered defeat at the hands of Parham Maghsoodloo of Iran in the second round of Prague Masters Chess tournament here. The defeat ended Praggnanandhaa's impressive 47-game unbeaten streak in Classical Chess. The 18-year-old Praggnanandhaa also lost the top ranking in live ratings among Indians -- a spot reclaimed by the legendary Viswanathan Anand who is

also the brand ambassador of this event. D Gukesh, meanwhile, came up with an impressive performance with black pieces to beat Nguyen Thai Dai Van of Czech Republic while the other three games in the 10-player round-robin event ended in a draw. With seven rounds still to come, Iranian GM Maghsoodloo is sitting pretty on two points, a half point ahead of Gukesh and Nodirbek Abdusattarov of Uzbekistan who played out a draw with India's Vidit Gujrathi. Praggnanandhaa, Gujrathi,



Richard Rapport of Romania and David Navara of Czech Republic share the fourth spot on one point each while Vincent Keymer of Germany and Mateusz Bartel of Poland are on joint eighth spot with 0.5 point in their kitty. Van is the only player yet to open his account. Praggnanandhaa went down fighting from a position he would have easily saved on another day. Playing the black side of a London System, the Indian did not have much trouble in equalizing and Maghsoodloo kept on looking for ways to complicate the

position. At some point in the middle game, Praggnanandhaa even looked better but with the clock ticking away it was not an easy task to finish. Maghsoodloo by then had trained his eyes to go for the black king and all he needed was a blunder that created several threats. It was over in 38 moves. Gukesh's perseverance paid off against Dai Van in a reverse Benoni game wherein the latter played white. Gukesh just kept himself in the game by slow and steady improvement right through and his tactic proved right as the Czech player fell

prey and gave up a rook for minor piece. Wasting no time, Gukesh converted to an endgame and found a beautiful finish towards the end to force matters. The game lasted 52 moves. Gujrathi accepted an early pawn sacrifice by Abdusattarov out a Four Knights opening. Playing black, the Uzbek never looked like in any real danger despite the material deficit and in the end drew in just 35 moves. In other games, Bartel Mateusz had an easy game with Rapport while Keymer did not find any

difficulty in signing peace with Navara. In the Challengers section, R Vaishali lost her second straight game against Ediz Gurel of Turkey. Results Round 2 (Indians unless stated): Parham Maghsoodloo (Iran, 2) beat R Praggnanandhaa (1); David Navara (Cze, 1) drew with Vincent Keymer (Ger, 0.5); Nguyen Thai Dai Van (Cze, 0) lost to D Gukesh (1.5); Vidit Gujrathi (1) drew with Nodirbek Abdusattarov (Uzb, 1.5); Richard Rapport (Romania, 1) drew with Bartel Mateusz (Pol, 0.5).

RAHUL RULED OUT OF FIFTH TEST, BUMRAH RETURNS: BCCI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Senior India batter KL Rahul will not feature in the fifth and final Test against England in Dharamsala owing to an injury while pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah will return to the team, the BCCI said on Thursday.

Rahul, who continues to feel sore in his right quadriceps, has travelled to London to get an expert opinion on his injury.

The wicketkeeper-batter became unavailable after the series-opener in Hyderabad in January and as per the BCCI, he was 90 per cent fit before the third Test in Rajkot earlier this month.

“Mr. KL Rahul, whose participation in the final IDFC First Bank Test was subject to fitness, has been ruled out of the fifth and final Test in Dharamsala. The BCCI Medical Team is closely monitoring him and



coordinating with specialists in London for further management of his issue,” the Board said in a release. Meanwhile Bumrah, who was released from the squad for the fourth Test in Ranchi in

line with the team’s workload management policy, will link up with the squad in Dharamsala for the final Test, beginning March 7. India have already taken an unassailable 3-1 lead,

following the victory in the fourth Test in Ranchi. Rahul’s absence from the final Test means Rajat Patidar remained with the squad but the MP batter can’t be sure of his place in the playing

eleven, having aggregated only 63 runs in six innings. All-rounder Washington Sundar has also been released from the squad.

“He will join Tamil Nadu - his Ranji Trophy side - for their Ranji Trophy Semi-final fixture against Mumbai, starting March 2nd, 2024. He will join the India squad after the completion of the domestic fixture for the fifth Test, if need be,” the BCCI said.

Rahul needs to be fully fit before the IPL where he will lead Lucknow Super Giants and is expected to bat in the middle order to bolster his chances of making the India squad for the T20 World Cup in the USA and the Caribbean.

It is the same quadriceps injury that had sidelined Rahul for almost four months last year. Having got injured during the IPL, Rahul returned to action during the Asia Cup

in September last and made instant impact. In the Test tour of South Africa last year, Rahul was the only century-maker for India in the drawn series.

The BCCI also said senior pacer Mohammed Shami is recovering well after undergoing a surgery on February 26 for his right heel problem.

“He is recovering well and will soon head to the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru to commence his rehabilitation process,” the Board said of Shami.

India’s updated squad for fifth Test: Rohit Sharma (C), Jasprit Bumrah (VC), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Rajat Patidar, Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel (WK), KS Bharat (WK), Devdutt Padikkal, R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohd. Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Akash Deep.



Even Rohit, Kohli should play domestic cricket when free: Kirti

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Member of the 1983 World Cup-winning team Kirti Azad on Thursday backed the BCCI’s directive for cricketers to play Ranji Trophy, saying it’s a good move and the rule should be applicable to every India team player, including Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli.

The out-of-favour duo of Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer were excluded from the list of centrally-contracted players after they ignored the directive to play Ranji Trophy. “It (directive) is a very good move. Everybody should be playing Ranji Trophy cricket, but currently the emphasis is on the IPL. It is good, it is entertaining but the real cricket is the (five) days’ cricket. Playing in domestic cricket is good, it keeps you in touch.

“But whenever you are free, even if you’re a Rohit Sharma or a Virat Kohli, you should go back and play domestic cricket for the state. That (state) gave you the opportunity to be a player, get selected and then play for the country.

He felt that penalising just Ishan and Iyer wasn’t right. “Just to penalise the two is not correct, I think everybody should be penalised. Everybody should be seen with the same mirror,” Azad told PTI Video.

Azad declined to comment on whether this was the potential end of the road for Ishan and Iyer after their names were excluded from the list of centrally-contracted players.

“My question is, are they playing enough domestic cricket? They are playing T20

cricket, nowadays and every other state has a T20 cricket league. Back in the days when we were starting our careers, players like Bishan Singh Bedi, Madan Lal, Surinder Amarnath, Mohinder Amarnath, Chetan Chauhan, Sunil Gavaskar, Sandeep Patil, Karsan Ghavri played alongside youngsters like me and Ravi Shastri.

“All these senior Test team players would play for their sides, would play for the pride of their state which seems missing in the youngsters nowadays,” he added.

He questioned why India players had issues playing domestic cricket while England cricketers willingly played county cricket when not in the national side.

“Look at county cricket; there are 20-plus counties and there are numerous three-day and four-day games along with T20 cricket, but every player is involved there. If a player is left out of the Test squad, then he returns to play for his county.

“So why can’t we have our players playing those domestic matches, that’s the big question,” he added.

He praised players like Dhruv Jurel and Sarfaraz Khan for finding the balance between T20 cricket for their IPL teams and playing Ranji Trophy.

“There are players like Jurel, Sarfaraz who do play T20 cricket but, at the end of the day, are also representing their states in the Ranji trophy. The bowlers also get into the rhythm of bowling longer spells when they regularly play domestic cricket. It (Ranji) is not a form of slam-bang and thank you,” he said.



Smith pushes for rule reform

PTI ■ WELLINGTON

Australian batting star Steve Smith has said that the cricketing authorities should urgently address the issue of pacers persistently bowling bouncers to a leg side field, as it restricts a batter’s ability to hit the ball “anywhere in front of the wicket”.

The former Australia captain, who is playing the opening Test against New Zealand here, added a bowler should be allowed just one or two such deliveries, after which he should be warned or the delivery be called a wide.

“I think there could be some slight rule changes in terms of balls going down the leg side when you set that field.

“You really can’t hit the ball anywhere in front of the wicket really, and I feel like it is almost like when a (left-arm) spinner comes over the wicket and they get the warning down the leg side and then they start getting “wided” Smith was quoted as saying by Sydney Morning Herald.

“If you’re bowling balls consistently in that area down leg, it should be a similar ruling to the spinner if that makes sense. Basically bowl one or two, then get a warning and then get wides called,” he added.

Smith, who made a 31 in Australia’s first innings on the opening day of the Test here as Australia ended day one at 279/9, added that if the ball is drifting too much down leg, it’s impossible for a batter to play any kind of stroke.

“To have those catchers (fielders) there in position, it can be challenging for sure. The only thing I’d like to see is if you get too much down leg, you can’t really score anywhere else, and all the fielders are there. That would be the only change I wouldn’t mind seeing,” added Smith. Smith has found himself getting bogged down by pace bowlers over the years as they use the tactic to stop the flow of runs, or force him to play a hook shot in frustration to one of the fielders.

Smith praised New Zealand pace bowler Neil Wagner, who announced his retirement from Test cricket on Tuesday, for his accuracy.

“Ultimately it is a good skill what Neil’s been able to do, the way he can get the ball between throat and chest height consistently, not bowl his two (bouncers) for the over and just carry on doing it,” Smith said. “It’s a good skill and it can be challenging, particularly for guys that are pullers of the ball.”

Irfan questions denial of contracts to Iyer, Kishan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former India pacer Irfan Pathan has questioned the BCCI’s decision to deny central contracts to Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer for ignoring a diktat to play Ranji Trophy, saying that players like Hardik Pandya have not been judged on the same parameter.

The BCCI on Wednesday terminated Kishan and Iyer’s central contracts, while Pandya, who has not featured in Tests since 2018, secured a place in Grade A.

“If players like Hardik don’t want to play red ball cricket, should he and others like him participate in white-ball domestic cricket when they aren’t on national duty?” he questioned BCCI’s decision, in his post on X.

“If this doesn’t apply to all, then Indian cricket won’t



achieve the desired results!” he added. The 25-year-old Kishan did not turn up for Jharkhand throughout the team’s campaign in Ranji Trophy despite not being on national duty since leaving from the tour of South Africa in December last, citing personal reasons. He has instead focussed on preparing for the IPL next month. He is competing in the ongoing DY Patil T20

Tournament in Mumbai and will be turning up for the Mumbai Indians in the IPL.

Iyer did not make himself available for Mumbai’s Ranji quarterfinal against Baroda after being excluded from the Indian team following the second Test against England, citing a groin injury.

He, however, has been picked for the Ranji semifinals starting March 2 and will be back to lead Kolkata Knight

Riders in the IPL beginning on March 22.

Irfan believes that the duo will come back strongly.

“They are talented cricketers, both Shreyas and Ishan. Hoping they bounce back and come back stronger,” he said.

The exclusion of Iyer and Kishan is being seen as a stern message to young players unwilling to put in the hard yards in first-class cricket, while chasing white-ball glory and lucrative IPL contracts.

On Wednesday, former India coach Ravi Shastri also backed the embattled duo.

“In the game of cricket, comebacks define the spirit. Chin-up, @ShreyasIyer15 and @ishankishan51! Dig deep, face challenges, and come back even stronger. Your past achievements speak volumes, and I have no doubt you’ll conquer once again,” Shastri had posted on X.

Australia 279-9 on Day 1 of 1st Test against New Zealand

AP ■ WELLINGTON (NEW ZEALAND)

The sun came out around lunchtime at the Basin Reserve on Thursday. Its appearance at first breathed life into New Zealand’s bowling performance on the first day of the first cricket Test against Australia.

Then the tall West Australian Cameron Green took the upper hand for Australia with an unbeaten 103, reaching his second test century in the last over of the day. At stumps Australia was 279-9 and Green appeared to have wrested control of the match from New Zealand at the last minute.

Green was reluctant to say so. “The match is pretty close,” Green said.

“They’re probably just on top. They’ve got a quality batting lineup and we’ve got to bowl

well tomorrow. It’s a lot about the overhead conditions and we’ve got to wake up tomorrow and see how the overheads are.”

New Zealand had bowled unproductively on a cool, overcast morning and Steve Smith and Usman Khawaja had looked like carrying Australia to lunch without loss after it had sent in on a green pitch.

As the sun broke through the clouds and began to warm a capacity crowd at the inner-city oval, New Zealand’s luck changed. After going 24 overs without a breakthrough in the morning, Matt Henry dismissed Smith (31) 10 minutes before lunch.

Marnus Labuschagne (1) fell just after the resumption, then Khawaja (33) and Travis Head (1) were out as Australia slipped from 61-0 to 89-4. Mitch Marsh and Green



counter-attacked with a partnership of 67 for the fifth wicket before and directly after tea. Marsh made 40 from 39 balls with six fours and a six but he also fell to Henry. Green went on to turn the tide of the first day with his century from 154 balls. He lashed three late boundaries to do so, reaching his century

from the penultimate ball of the day.

When the covers came off at the Basin Reserve about 8 am Thursday after light rain overnight and in the early morning, the pitch looked bright green and moist. With the two teams captained by faster bowlers in a rarity for Test cricket it was inevitable

the team that won the toss would bowl.

Pat Cummins called tails, it was a head and Tim Southee said New Zealand would field, saving his batters from the need to face Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc and what looked like a green seamer.

As it turned out, the pitch was not as lively as it appeared, at least at first. There was a bit of grass to aid seam, a little swing in overcast conditions but not as much pace at it might have seemed.

Smith and Khawaja were bent on surviving the morning, not too concerned with runs and they came within minutes of doing before Henry struck just at the sun began to shine.

Henry had Smith caught by wicketkeeper Tom Blundell with a good length ball that just left the batter, sending

Blundell diving across first slip. Australia went to lunch at 62-1 and New Zealand may have felt the morning was less productive than it should have been.

The bowlers settled into more productive lengths after lunch and used variations more effectively which resulted in the quick wickets of Labuschagne, Khawaja and Head.

O’Rourke dismissed Head, first setting him up with a series of fuller balls then catching him out with a shorter one going across him which he followed and guided to Blundell.

Starc (9) and Cummins (16) fell before the second new ball which was taken in the last half hour. Hazlewood (0) will join Green on Friday morning as Australia attempts to add late runs to its total.

Kiran opens new avenue for UP Warriorz

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Kiran Navgire would not have opened but for a freak shoulder injury to Vrinda Dinesh and now her bruising fifty against the Mumbai Indians might just prompt UP Warriorz to rework their combination at the top in the ongoing Women’s Premier League.

Navgire struck a 31-ball 57 and combined with Alyssa Healy (33) to help UPW overhaul a 162-run target in just 16.4 overs against the defending champions last night.

It could shake things up in the line-up, which has till now

worked around the far more traditional opening pair of Healy and Vrinda.

“When the innings ended the head coach (Jon Lewis) came up to me and said I had to open. I was happy, because I opened the batting in domestic cricket, and I had the chance to do that here,” Navgire said in the post-match press meet.

Range hitters are a rare breed in women’s cricket and Navgire has opened that option for the UP outfit. The Warriorz have been notoriously slow starters in the WPL with their middle-order batters creaking under massive run-rate pressure.

In their first match against Royal Challengers Bangalore, UP made 36 for 1 and they were 21 for three against the Delhi Capitals in the second game. But with Navgire coming in as opener, UP made 61 for no loss in the Power Play segment. It was their fastest start, for that matter any team’s, in this edition of the WPL.

Navgire, a big fan of former Indian captain MS Dhoni, is not new to opening the innings. She garnered instant attraction during the 2021-22 domestic season as a guest player for Nagaland. She hammered 35 sixes in the Senior Women’s T20 league that



season, the most ever in the history of that tournament. The 29-year-old, who hails from Maharashtra, also became the first Indian woman to score a 150-plus score in T20 when she blasted a 76-ball 162 against

Arunachal Pradesh. Her approach is as simple as the big shots she executes. “I just played the ball on merit (against MI), played my natural game. If the ball is in my arc, it should go into the stands - that

is my natural thought,” said Navgire.

Her assault on MI pacer Issy Wong in the third over of UPW’s chase underlined Navgire’s growth into an all-round batter.

When Wong pitched short, Navgire stood tall and sent the ball to the mid-wicket boundary with a strong pull.

In the next ball, the England pacer pitched the ball further up but Navgire muscled it through mid-off for a four. MI coach Charlotte Edwards admitted that they were not prepared for Navgire’s aggression. “Kiran Navgire played brilliant-

ly and took the game away from us in the period that she

batted and we never quite recovered.

बैंक ऑफ इंडिया

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