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## BATTLEGROUND UTTAR PRADESH



**RAEBARELI**  
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who has been canvassing continuously every day in Amethi and Rae Bareilly simultaneously, is highlighting the strong bond the Gandhi family has with both constituencies since the days of former Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. This effort comes as her sibling Rahul Gandhi contests in Amethi, having taken over from his mother, Sonia Gandhi. Priyanka said the grand old party follows the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi who uttered "Hey Ram" before dying and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is wrong in accusing it of being anti-religion. She alleged that while the saffron party claims to be a "champion of Hindu religion," the condition of the State-run cowsheds in Uttar Pradesh remains pitiable. She accused the Modi Government of trying to take credit for the free ration scheme by putting his photograph on the papers related to the scheme, saying it was the Congress-led UPA Government that brought the Right to Food Act. The Congress leader also lambasted the BJP over frequent question papers leak in UP and promised stringent laws to stop such leaks. She promised to do away with GST on education and scrap the Agni-Veer scheme for recruitment in the armed forces if her party comes to power at the Centre.



**JAUNPUR/AZAMGARH**  
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday that the Samajwadi Party and the Congress want to adopt the 'Trinamool politics,' terming it a strategy of appeasement and harassment of Dalits and women. While addressing an election rally in Bhadohi, where the Opposition has fielded a TMC candidate, Modi attacked the INDIA Bloc partners, accusing them of attempting to replicate West Bengal's 'TMC politics' in Uttar Pradesh. Modi said the TMC's politics includes calling Ram temple "impure," banning Ramnavami celebrations, sheltering Bangladeshi intruders, promising "poisonous arrow of appeasement" and calling for "vote jihad". Referring to the alliance between the SP and the BSP in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Modi said, "The previous

bua (hinting at Mayawati) identified the SP people and left them. They have now brought a bua (aunt) from Bengal (hinting at Mamata Banerjee)." In another rally in Jaunpur, Modi said this Lok Sabha election is an opportunity for the country to choose a leader who can run a strong Government which "makes the world aware of India's strength". Amid slogans of 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Har Har Modi', the Prime Minister said, "Your enthusiasm shows that you have made it difficult for the INDI alliance to win even a single seat in Uttar Pradesh." Attacking SP chief Akhilesh Yadav, Modi said, "SP's shehzade also makes fun of Kashi. They are crossing every limit to please their vote bank. I am surprised that it is the 21st century and they are roaming around with the flag of triple talaq."



**LUCKNOW**  
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

On a day when AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal made his presence known in the INDIA Bloc alliance, partnering with the Samajwadi Party (SP), which is contesting the Lok Sabha polls in Uttar Pradesh alongside the Congress coalition, he faced criticism from the grand old party's former Chief Minister of Punjab, Charanjit Singh Channi, who termed Kejriwal as untrustworthy. Released on bail to campaign for the Lok Sabha polls, Kejriwal embarked on a whirlwind tour, reaching Lucknow on Thursday to express solidarity with SP chief and former Uttar Pradesh CM Akhilesh Yadav, before moving on to campaign in Punjab. Congress candidate from Jalandhar Parliamentary seat, Charanjit Singh Channi, said Kejriwal can't be trusted and that he should be opposed. Congress and AAP are alliance partners under INDIA Bloc elsewhere, including Delhi except for Punjab where the current Government is of AAP. "Kejriwal, who is involved in a liquor scam and is out of jail for only 15 days, can't be trusted. A big liquor scam happened in Delhi and the same happened in Punjab as well. We demand an inquiry into it. He should be opposed," Channi said. At a joint Press conference with Yadav, Kejriwal reiterated his claim that Home Minister Amit Shah will be made the next Prime Minister and Yogi Adityanath will be removed as Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister if the BJP returns to power.

## Mercury rising: Delhi, north plains may hit 45°C

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

If you're residing in northwest India, brace yourself for intense heatwaves ahead. Days after predicting thunderstorms and rain spells in the region, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Thursday issued warnings of impending heatwave conditions, notably in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Delhi. By Saturday, in fact, temperatures in the national Capital could soar to 45 degrees Celsius, exacerbating the already intense heat conditions. For the next five days, the Northwest region is expected to bear the brunt of heatwaves, owing to westerly and northwesterly winds, said the IMD, flagging heightened health concerns, particularly for vulnerable populations such as infants, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions. The IMD has also cautioned about the increased risk of heat-related illnesses for individuals exposed to prolonged sunlight or engaging in heavy work. In contrast, a wet spell with isolated heavy to very heavy rainfall is expected to persist over south Peninsular India until May 22, 2024, according to the IMD, with Tamil Nadu and Kerala likely to experience the maximum impact at isolated places. The forecast for the Northwest region indicates a fresh heatwave spell extending to east and central India from May 18. These alerts coincide with broader concerns about escalating heatwaves attributed to climate change, underlining the urgent need for mitigation measures and global efforts to combat greenhouse gas emissions.



People use scarves to shield themselves from the hot summer. Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

"Severe heatwave conditions are very likely in some parts of west Rajasthan during May 17-20 and in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi during May 18-20," the IMD said. A yellow alert has been issued for east Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Gangetic West Bengal and Odisha. The Met office had earlier predicted a higher-than-normal number of heatwave days in the northern plains and central India in May. Normally, the northern plains, central India and adjoining areas of peninsular India experience around three days of heat waves in May. High temperatures pose grave risks, including heat stroke, skin rashes, cramps, and dehydration," said Dr Naval K Vikram, from Department of Internal Medicine, AIIMS Delhi. Dr Neha Rastogi, infectious diseases expert added that for those with pre-existing conditions, these issues can quickly turn fatal if not promptly addressed. She also expressed concern that warmer weather is also an invitation for vector-borne diseases such as dengue and malaria. More than 1.53 lakh deaths a year were associated with heat waves around the world, with over a fifth of these deaths - the

greatest share - coming from India, according to new research looking at data over 30 years since 1990. India is already reporting high intensity summers. For instance, in India April saw record-smashing maximum temperatures in east, northeast and southern peninsular India, prompting health warnings from government agencies and some states to suspend in-person classes in schools. Several pockets recorded their highest-ever April day temperatures, with the mercury soaring to 47 degrees Celsius. According to IMD data, heatwave days in April were the highest in 15 years in Gangetic West Bengal and nine years in Odisha. The World Weather Attribution (WWA) group emphasised that heatwaves intensified by climate change are making life much tougher for people living in poverty across Asia. In response to these challenges, there is a pressing need for mitigation measures at various levels, including urban planning strategies, healthcare preparedness, and community outreach programs. Additionally, efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions and combat climate change are crucial in addressing the root causes of extreme weather events like heat waves.

Heat wave likely to return from May 19

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

After respite due to nor'wester-triggered rainfall, several places in the State would experience a gradual rise in day temperature by 2 to 4 degree Celsius starting from Thursday. However, as per the Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here, the State would not experience severe heat wave conditions for the next five days. Heat wave conditions may return to the State on May 19, said the IMD issuing a Yellow warning for the districts of Nuapada, Balangir, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Angul. But thunderstorm with lightning may also occur in the districts of Koraput, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, Kalahandi, Kandhamal, Ganjam, Gajapati, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj and Dhenkanal, said the weather office. Heat wave would continue to prevail in Nuapada, Balangir, Bargarh, Subarnapur, Boudh and Sundargarh on May 20. There is also a warning for thunderstorm with lightning in Koraput, Malkangiri and Nabarangpur on the day, said the IMD.

Modi road show in Puri on May 20

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi would visit Puri on May 20. He is scheduled to hold a road show in the pilgrim city. BJP's Puri Lok Sabha nominee Sambit Patra on Thursday informed about the Prime Minister's Puri visit. According to sources, after reaching Puri at 7 am, Modi would go to the Shreemandir to have a darshan of Lord Jagannath and His siblings before embarking on his road show.

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# Naveen holds mega road show in BBSR

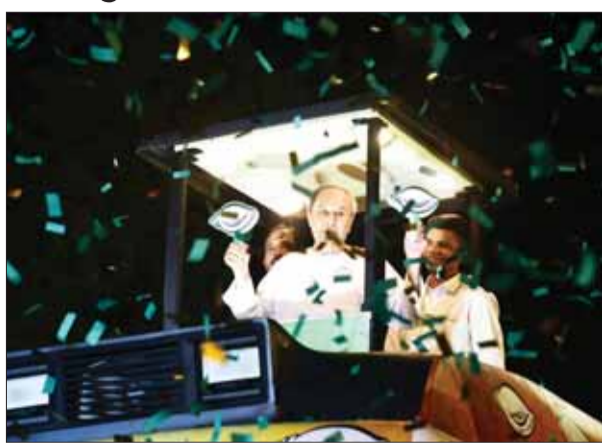
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

BJD president and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik held a massive road show in Bhubaneswar on Thursday evening and sought people's support for party candidates.

A large number of people lined up on both sides of the road to witness the event after it began from Ganganagar Chhak.

Patnaik, who moved in a customised vehicle, highlighted the free electricity promise made in the BJD election manifesto. He stated that people would not get electricity bill from July this year.

Naveen was waving at people and greeting them as the road show passed through



the LIC Office, Gopabandhu Chhak, DAV School Unit-8 and HDFC Bank Square.

The CM stopped at a few places and addressed the people holding the BJD's conch symbol in both hands. Thanking the people for their over-

whelming response, he urged them to vote for conch symbol and support the BJD's local MP as well as MLA candidates.

There were restrictions on vehicular movement along the stretch during the road show.

## Nadda's road show in BBSR

# 'Officials working for BJD in elections to be taken to task'

### After first-phase voting, situation now in BJP favour, claims he

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

People of Odisha have already made up their minds to ensure victories for the BJP both in Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in the State, said BJP national president JP Nadda while holding a massive road show in Bhubaneswar on Thursday.

"This huge gathering and excitement amid the scorching heat and humid conditions show that the people of Odisha have decided to vote for BJP to form government both in

the State and at the Centre. People of the State want an active and healthy Chief Minister, who can communicate with them," said Nadda.

"People of Odisha are happy with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's work. The way officers took over the administration and Naveenbaba became inactive for the last 20 years, people now want to give rest to Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik and entrust work to BJP," he said.

On the question as to who would be the Chief Minister of BJP in Odisha, Nadda said, "BJP decided its CM candidates for Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan within three days. Similarly,



the CM candidate for Odisha will also be decided."

Reflecting on trends after the first phase of voting in Odisha, he said, "BJD has missed the bus and now the situation is in the favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party."

Nadda condemned the poll violence incident in Ganjam

in which a BJP worker lost his life and three others were injured.

"These kinds of incidents should not happen and elections should be conducted in democratic ways," said he.

When asked about the alleged involvement of government officials in the election

process in Odisha, Nadda said, "It's a matter of a few days and all those (officials) will be taken to task."

During the road show, the two-km-long stretch from Mausima Square to the Lingaraj Temple was chock-a-block with the participation of thousands of BJP workers and common people who braved the scorching heat and humid conditions.

BJP Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha candidate Aparajita Sarangi, Bhubaneswar Ekamra nominee Babu Singh and other party leaders were present during the road show. Nadda had a darshan of Lord Lingaraj and sought His blessings after the road show.

# 'Vote for double-engine govt in Odisha'

Nadda, Himant address meet in Bargarh

RAKESH JOSHI ■ BARGARH

Addressing a meeting in Bargarh district on Thursday, BJP national president JP Nadda gave a call for forming a "double engine Government" for all-round development of Odisha.

He talked about how the political scene has changed a lot under Prime Minister Modi's direction, from caste-based politics to development politics. Nadda talked about a few important things that the Modi Government has done,



like giving 5 kg rice every month to millions of poor people, which has helped 25 crore people get out of poverty. He also talked about big plans for the Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana (Saubhagya), which aims to create 3 crore jobs and make sure that people who get help from the programme don't have to pay for energy.

Nadda strongly disagreed with the BJD Government's choice to skip the Ayushman Bharat plan, for which as many as 68 lakh people are deprived of the health scheme benefits. He said it was important to choose a Chief Minister who understands the daily difficulties of the people in Odisha.

At the Vajpayee Vijay Sankalp event in Atabira, leaders like Assam Chief Minister Himant Biswa Sarma, party MLA candidates Nihar Mahanand and Sujatha Pradhan among others spoke.

# Ex-MLA Ramaranjan quits BJP

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In a jolt to the BJP amid the ongoing polls, former Satyabadi MLA Ramaranjan Baliarsingh resigned from the primary membership of the party on Thursday.

In his resignation letter to BJP State president Manmohan Samal, Baliarsingh mentioned that the party betrayed him and the people of Satyabadi during elections over the last few years.

Baliarsingh had won the 2014 elections from the Satyabadi Assembly constituency as an Independent candidate.



He later joined the BJD but switched sides to the BJP in 2018.

He also served as a spokesperson of the BJP. He was a ticket aspirant, but the party decided to repeat its 2019 candidate Om Prakash Mishra from Satyabadi.

# 'BJP won't be forgiven for insulting Naveen'

Says Pandian during poll campaign in Balangir

PNS ■ BALANGIR

Biju Janata Dal (BJD) star campaigner VK Pandian on Thursday mounted a scathing attack on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accusing its leaders of consistently denigrating and disrespecting Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik during election campaign.

He was addressing poll rallies at Titilagarh and other places in Balangir district. He reminded that eggs had



been hurled at the CM in Puri and the saffron party lost all 30 Zilla Parishad elections.

Pandian said BJP Ministers from Chhattisgarh are visiting Odisha for poll campaign and using insulting words against Naveen.

Pandian urged the people to respond decisively in the on-

going elections to counter such behaviour. Stating that the people of Odisha would give a befitting reply to the verbal assaults on Naveen, he asserted that the BJD would come back to power with a resounding success and it would be a testament to the people's support for the CM.

# Ex-MLA Das quits BJP as ticket withdrawn

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Former MLA Rajendra Kumar Das resigned from the BJP on Thursday, two days after the party replaced him with Parshuram Dhada as its candidate from the Soro Assembly seat in Baleswar district.

Das sent his resignation letter to BJP State president Manmohan Samal.

Notably, the BJP had initially allotted ticket for the Soro seat to Das, a former MLA from Dhamnagar. However, the party withdrew the ticket at the eleventh hour and allotted it to Dhada.

Dhada, a two-time MLA



from Soro, had joined the BJP after resigning from the BJD recently.

Das, a former BJD legislator, had revolted against the ruling party during the by-election in Dhamnagar in 2022, for which he was expelled from the party.

# BJP shall not cross 200 LS seats: Kharge

Cites how Modi has failed to keep his promises

SUGYAN CHOUDHURY ■ BHUBANESWAR

Addressing a Press conference here on Thursday, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge came heavily down upon Prime Minister Modi and the Naveen Patnaik regime in Odisha.

Although in Odisha, the BJP and the BJD are now engaged in bickering, yet they had together ruled Odisha for ten years without giving any tangible results for the development of the State, he said. Kharge said there is no gen-

eration of employment in Odisha over the last 24 years. Due to reckless exploitation and loot of mines, the image of Odisha has already become synonymous with corruption. The BJP and the BJD have ignored to solve the acute unemployment problem in the State. People should now reject an idea of any BJP and BJD government in the State once again.

Modi is issuing guarantees but to no avail, he said. He reminded how Modi had in 2019 promised to provide employment to two crore of youths of the country and bring back the black money and asked where have these guarantees gone?



On the other hand, Kharge said, Modi during his regime has increased the prices of diesel, petrol, cooking gas, medicines and levied GST on all essential commodities. This has worsened the plight of farmers and common men miserably.

Kharge asserted that this time Modi's tall claim for ob-

taining more than 400 Lok Sabha seats for the BJP would end in fiasco. When the BJP's presence in the southern States of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Kerala is at the lowest level, wherefrom Modi is going to get the 400-plus magic number? he asked.

And in his characteristic bit-

ing sarcasm, he claimed that like the hammer strokes of finality, the BJP would never cross the 200 number.

He said the Congress has given 25 guarantees like justice for youths, justice for women, justice for farmers and so on which would be a reality if the party wins along with its allies in the forthcoming elec-

tion.

Kharge said the INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) has been formed to uphold democracy, the Constitution and unity of the country against the fissiparous and divisive trends of the BJP and its allies.

Replying to a query, he said there is no leadership crisis in the Congress in Odisha.

Prominent among those present in the Press meet were Telangana Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka, OPCC vice-president Sivananda Ray and other party leaders Yaseer Nawaz, Ranjit Patra, Biswa Ranjan Mohanty, Prakash Jena and Manoranjan Dash.

## SOCIAL CANVAS

# MSP apart, resolve other host of issues affecting farmers

The demand for a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) may not serve the interests of a majority of small producers, sharecroppers, small and marginal farmers in the farm sector of Odisha. Agriculture is a State subject and the issues of the agriculture sector of Punjab and Haryana are different from Odisha; so also, the issues of farmers of various agricultural-climatic zones within the State are different.

Farmers are, as such, not a socially and economically homogeneous group in an unequal society; there are dissimilarities based on their social identity, extent of irrigated land holding, caste privilege, access to power and many other social and economic factors. Odisha's farm sector is linked to forest and animal husbandry having majority of self-employed rural and tribal farmers with multiple activities engaging family members.

The MSP for wheat, started in the late seventies, mostly benefited a few agriculturally advanced States and the land-owning rich farmers.



MANAS JENA

Later, it expanded to other products. The current MSP demand in Odisha is primarily limited to paddy farmers, only those who have a surplus to sell. Currently, the paddy procurement by Mandies, farmers cooperatives and WSHGs are almost non-functional and does not meet the needs of farmers and a very insignificant portion of farmers get the benefit. Virtually, rice mill owners and private traders are

purchasing paddy from the farmers and selling it to the Government at MSP rate.

The animal-husbandry and forest sector are not in the focus of agriculture development, which are important for States such as Odisha. There are traditional milk farmers, livestock farmers, tribal farmers, forest-based agriculturists, fisher folk, sharecroppers and farmers of small holdings in large numbers. Many of them produce for their family consumption, store it for their own future and sell the surplus to local traders, but the issues and prospects of these sections of farmers are very occasionally discussed and MSP is not the sole solution to their distress. Though there are about 24 items covered by MSP, there is no arrangement to directly purchase from farmers. The rural milk farmers are unable to sell their milk. The minor forest produce collectors are facing problems in marketing their collection as the tribal cooperative society is largely defunct. The ongoing practice helps middlemen and traders more, not the producers.

The fact is, Odisha's agriculture is largely dominated by small holdings and only a few farmers have large holdings but, a major chunk of these large holders are absentee farmers who do not really cultivate but engage sharecroppers in an informal understanding. Sharecropping is one of the most labour-exploitative systems in the feudal agrarian economy that still continues in Odisha and the MSP is in no way going to solve these core issues. Many of these sharecroppers also have small and marginal holdings in a dispersed way due to lack of consolidation of holdings.

The agricultural issues are inter-linked and many of the structural issues such as land reform and consolidation of holding, irrigation, crop diversification, cold storage, marketing, credit, insurance and social security such as old age pension, have not been discussed much by farmers' movements. It has been suggested for a long time that the State Government must make a special drive for consolidation of holdings so that someone can invest in land development and pri-

ivate irrigation. In spite of promises, only 30 to 40 per cent of agricultural lands are irrigated in the State and most farmers depend on rain water for cultivation. The irrigation systems such as canals and lift points are almost defunct now; the farmers, in the end point, are not getting water. The electricity consumption in the agriculture sector has not improved for the last twenty years, as it is still only 3 to 4 percent only. Most of the Pani Panchayats have become a failure in the absence of water supply. Lack of irrigation has also been one of the major reasons for lower cropping intensity. About six months a year, there are no agricultural activities as both cereals and pulses are monsoon driven.

Along with MSP, the Swaminathan Committee also recommended irrigation enhancement, and land reform, equitable distribution of land, protection of agricultural land from non-agricultural use, which is vital for Odisha because of increasing mining activities that take away agricultural and forest land in a big way. The

river water and groundwater are mostly used for non-agricultural purposes. It is also recommended to provide insurance coverage to all farmers and recognise traditional rights of indigenous farmers over land, water, forest and other resources.

The agriculture sector has also been continuously facing natural disasters, floods, cyclones and droughts every year. With climate change impact, the scenario has worsened. It is found that a majority of the distressed farmers are sharecroppers and borrowers of private lending and also belong to the socially marginalized sections who are otherwise resource-less in terms of land, education and finance capital and have been living on a meagre income without social security. The institutional credit facilities and a host of input subsidies, tax rebates, including MSP given out from public money which are made available by banks, RRBs and cooperatives, are selectively accessible to the land-owning farmers. It has been difficult for them to sell their paddy in Government Mandis where the

farmers have to identify themselves as land owners. In spite of demand from many quarters for a long time, the sharecroppers have not yet been recognized as farmers to avail a host of benefits, including the compensation for natural calamities provided by the Government. The sharecroppers and agricultural labourers are major losers in this respect.

Land ownership is very central to production relations in agriculture as it is an important means of production and many of the Government programmes for agriculture development are directly conditioned on land ownership. The non-implementation of land reform has badly affected the landless small producers in coastal and tribal areas. The majority of farmers have no record of rights to the land they have been cultivating for generations, but their entitlement has not been recorded, which has been a long pending unfinished task. The ongoing practice in the agriculture sector is encouraging distress migration among small producers to leave agriculture.

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# Tension in Khallikote after BJP worker killed

8 accused arrested  
PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

Tension prevailed in Khallikote block in Ganjam district on Thursday after a BJP worker was killed in an alleged clash with BJD supporters at Srikrushnasanpur village on Wednesday night.

The deceased was identified as Dilip Pahan. Police have arrested eight persons in connection with the incident.

However, on Thursday when the accused were being taken by police to be produced in court, the van carrying them was gheraoed by some persons who pelted bottles and stones at the vehicle.

Police forces resorted to a lathi-charge to disperse the crowd.

According to sources, the clash between BJP and BJD supporters took place over putting up party banners as part



of electioneering in the village and left eight men from both sides critically injured.

The injured were rushed to the Khallikote Community Health Centre (CHC) and later shifted to the MKCG Medical College Hospital here as their conditions deteriorated. However, one of them succumbed while undergoing treatment.

The BJP supporters said they earlier worked for the BJD but joined the BJP following the death of the Khallikote queen. They alleged that the supporters of the ruling party have been hounding them and around 25 bike-borne miscreants attacked them with sharp-edged weapons while they were putting up saffron party banners

in their area.

Expressing concern over the incident, Chief Electoral Officer Nikunja Bihari Dhal has directed the Ganjam Collector and SP to take immediate measures to stop any kind of violence and bring peace in the region.

"There is zero tolerance towards violence during elections," he added.

# In Sambalpur People confront Prasanna, allege lack of dev



PNS ■ SAMBALPUR

BJD's Raikhol Assembly candidate Prasanna Acharya faced an unpleasant situation while he was campaigning in the constituency as he was questioned about the development activities undertaken in the area during his tenure.

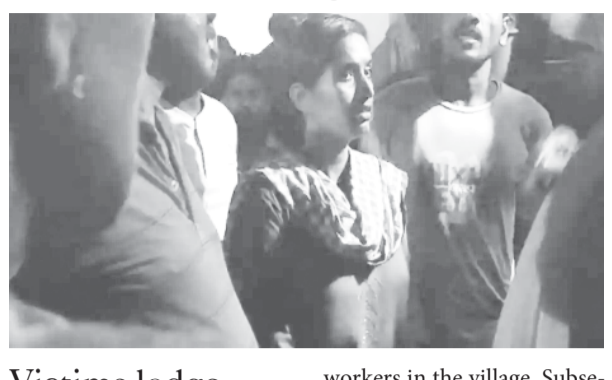
As per reports, residents of Sana Nuapada and Banhajal villages surrounded Acharya during his campaign and asked

him about the lack of development activities in their areas.

They also alleged that the BJD government has done nothing during its 25 years of governance and people in the region are still deprived of many basic facilities like healthcare, education and drinking water.

The video of the incident has gone viral over various social media platforms.

# In Ganjam Woman, her kin thrashed, fined for voting for BJP



## Victims lodge police complaint against BJD workers

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

A woman and her family members were beaten up and fined allegedly by some BJD workers at Pannapoli village under Rangelunda block in Ganjam district for exercising their franchises in favour of elections in the State.

The victims were identified as T Jamuna and her family members. Jamuna and her family members have lodged a complaint in this regard at the Golanthara police station.

As per reports, Jamuna and her family members had participated in BJP campaigns and exercised their franchises in favour of the saffron party.

However, it didn't go down well with some of the BJD

workers in the village. Subsequently, they allegedly thrashed Jamuna and her family members brutally on road. They also called them to a 'kangaroo court' and imposed fine on them.

"I am a supporter of BJP and I have been working for the party for many years. Some BJD supporters in our village thrashed me and my family members brutally and imposed fine on us by calling a meeting. We have lodged a complaint in this regard at the police station. If we are not given proper justice, I will approach the Human Rights Commission," said P Swadhin, a victim.

"I am a Ward Member of the village. The BJD supporters thrashed all the members of my family and abused me for voting in favour of BJP. They also abused me in a meeting and imposed fine on us. We want justice," said Jamuna, the woman victim.

# 6 die as car hits stationary truck in Keonjhar

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Six persons were killed in a road accident on National Highway-520 at Champua in Keonjhar district on Wednesday when a car rammed into a stationary truck. All the deceased belonged to two families.

"Their car lost its balance due to the sudden application of brake and rammed into a stationary truck near Rimuli under Champua police station. Another speeding truck following the car hit it from behind. All the family members, including three women and a six-year-old girl, died on the spot. The accident happened due to over-speeding by the drivers of both the vehicles," said a police official.

The deceased were identified as Phulanti Palai, Sanjay Mahakud, Lucy Palai, Sandhya Mahakud, Pihu Mahakud,



Pramod Palai of Barbil area of Keonjhar district.

The deceased, who originally hailed from Taramakanta village in the Banspal block area, were residing at the Bhadra Sahi area under the Barbil police station. The family was going to their native village in Bansapal block in the car when the mishap occurred.

The bodies were recovered from the badly mangled car by using the gas cutter and were sent to a nearby hospital for postmortem.

# Wave of excitement in community Tibetan refugees cast vote after 61 yrs in Gajapati

TARINI PRASAD PANDA ■ PARALAKHEMUNDI

The Tibetan refugees living in Gajapati district cast their vote for the first time after 61 years of their settlement in the area. They were in confusion as to whether to remain as refugees or Indians and on May 13, the confusion ended after they exercised their franchise. This has created a wave of excitement among the community.

Sources said the Tibetan refugees of Mahendragarh camp participated in the election process. 33 of them were enlisted in the voter list and 8 of them went to a nearby poll-



ing booth to cast their votes. Many of them who had turned up for voting had to return empty-handed as their names were not in the voter list.

Notably, this year, the Gov-

ernment of India provided them the opportunity to cast their vote as citizens of India and they were offered voter identity cards. Many of them however did not accept the

offer as they feared that once they become the citizens of India the facilities they are enjoying as refugees would be withdrawn. Of the five camps, about 100 had agreed to get enlisted in the voter list.

Meanwhile, in the 59 booths in 17 panchayats of RUDayagiri Block, the voting was peaceful. About 74.3% voting was recorded in the Block. Only in a booth at Bastriguda the voting was disrupted for some time after EVM did not work. Soon, it was replaced with a new machine. Similarly, the EVM malfunctioning issue was reported in Anuguru under Nuagada Block.

# In Sambalpur School bus driver held for sexually exploiting girl

NIMAIN CHARAN SAHU ■ SAMBALPUR

A private school bus driver was arrested by the Sambalpur police for sexually exploiting and blackmailing a 9th standard girl of Ainthapali area of the city for two years. The 14-year-old victim was allegedly threatened by him not to disclose the affairs to anybody.

According to the police, the accused is the owner of the bus, and he used to drive as well as attend the students in boarding and dropping. One day, he approached the girl and collected her phone number. He started talking with her after school hours, and he also did video calls where he made her undress herself. The driver saved the screen record of

those videos, as well as their physical relations videos and photos, which he later used to blackmail her to be physical with him again and again.

The 22-year-old bus driver sexually assaulted her continuously for the last two years. The girl didn't disclose the incident to her family in the fear of the videos going viral. Somehow, her family members took cognisance of the matter and lodged a written complaint at the Ainthapali police station.

Ainthapali IIC, Sanaya Kumar Nayak, said, "We registered a case under Section 376 of the IPC and POCSO Act. The accused driver has no such criminal antecedents. He has been arrested and forwarded to court."

# In Jajpur Three workers killed as land caves in

1 dies, 3 injured in mine mishap

PNS ■ JAJPUR

At least four persons were killed and more than 15 others were injured in three separate mishaps in Jajpur district on Thursday.

In the first incident, three labourers were killed as land caved at Rahas village under the Binjharpu police station. They were working for a private company.

While two of the deceased were identified as Akhtar Ansari and Firoz Ansari, the identity of the other deceased was yet to be ascertained. As per reports, labourers from Bihar and Tamil Nadu were engaged in a pipeline installation work in the area. How-



ever, land caved in during the work and three among the workers got buried.

Later, they were rescued and rushed to the District Headquarters Hospital. However, they succumbed to their injuries while undergoing treatment.

In another incident, one labourer was killed while three others were trapped in an accident in the Dankari mines under Dharmashala block in the district. A rescue operation was underway to rescue the other three labourers from the mine.

Besides, in a road accident, as many as 14 persons sustained injuries in a bus-truck collision near Kabirpur under the Sadar police station in the district. The conditions of four of the injured were stated to be critical.

## 3 more fear trapped

PNS ■ JAJPUR

A worker was killed and three others were feared trapped on Thursday in a cave-in incident in an illegal black stone quarry at Dankari hillock under the Jenapur police station of Jajpur district.

A portion of the hillock caved in while they were carrying out quarry works in a stone crusher machine illegally. "We retrieved a mutilated body of a worker and sent it to the government hospital at Dharmashala for postmortem. We are trying to rescue other trapped workers, said

Jenapur police station IIC Suwendu Kumar Sahoo.

Following the incident, Himanshu Sekhar Sahoo, an Independent candidate from the Dharmashala Assembly seat, along with others rushed to the spot.

Sahoo alleged that some BJD leaders have been carrying out illegally quarrying in the hill for long.

"It is unfortunate that the authorities have not taken action against the quarry mafia though each day many poor workers dig stones by risking their lives. Stone quarries have now become virtual deathtraps for labourers with many casualties being reported on a regular basis," added Sahoo.

# Nat'l championship 'India Skills '23-'24' begins

64 from Odisha take part to demonstrate skills

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

64 skilled individuals from Odisha are gearing up to demonstrate their talents on the national skills championship of India named "India Skills 2023-24". This 3-day event will feature over 1,500 enthusiastic participants from across the country vying for recognition and promising career opportunities.

The competition commenced on May 15 with the opening ceremony and orientation session. Skill competitions will take place from May 16 to 18, concluding with the felicitation ceremony on May 19. The championship will be held across prominent locations of India like Delhi, Bhubaneswar, Manipal and Gandhinagar,



Representing a diverse array of skill areas, participants from Odisha are all set to seize the national platform to exhibit their expertise and enhance their competitiveness in the skills landscape. Facilitated by the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), India

Skills serves as a launchpad for the youth across the country to showcase their capabilities across traditional and emerging sectors. Victorious competitors will proudly represent India at World Skills 2024 which will be held at Lyon, France.

To maintain a superior level

of competition, esteemed panels of judges and experts from World Skills will assess the live performances of participants at multiple centers. The NSDC has carefully coordinated intricate logistics at all venues to ensure seamless execution of the competition.

# Union Min Yadav unveils Subhadra initiative in Hinjili

Promises empowerment for women, farmers, weavers

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

In a resounding declaration of support for the empowerment of women, farmers and weavers, Union Minister Bupendra Yadav unveiled the Subhadra initiative during "Sankalp Samabesh" held in Hinjili on Thursday.

Addressing a gathering of BJP workers, Yadav outlined the key components of the Subhadra initiative, which aims to catalyse economic growth and upliftment in Hinjilicut Assembly constituency and beyond. Under the ambitious plan, women will receive a voucher worth Rs 50,000, empowering them to pursue entrepreneurial



endeavours and contribute to the local economy.

Additionally, farmers will be honoured with the prestigious Kishan Award, recognising their invaluable contribution to agriculture and ensuring their prosperity. Weavers, too, will be celebrated through the Weaver Award, acknowledging their craftsmanship and heritage.

Yadav highlighted the pressing issues facing the region, including challenges in infrastructure, healthcare, and

water management. He criticized the incumbent administration for its failure to address these critical concerns, pledging that the Subhadra Initiative would herald a new era of progress and development in Odisha.

The Samabesh also saw the participation of distinguished leaders, including Madhya Pradesh BJP MLA Rahul Singh Lodhi, who reiterated the people's trust in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for a better future.

Aska BJP MP candidate Anita Shubhadharini, Hinjilicut MLA candidate Sisir Kant Mishra, Gopalpur MLA candidate Bibhu Bhushan Jena, BJP State executive member Bishnu Das, Hinjilicut Assembly coordinator Madhab Goud, Hinjilicut Prabhari Gopalakrishna Goud, BJP leader Pitabas Panda, Mandal president Satas Panigrahi and N Keshav, Kabisurjyanagar AC Prabhaj Jayanthi Padihari and Rakesh Rath were present.

# 66.95 per cent turnout in first four LS phases: EC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The cumulative turnout in the first four phases of the Lok Sabha elections has been recorded at 66.95 per cent, the Election Commission (EC) said on Thursday, adding 45.10 crore of the nearly 97 crore electors have voted so far in the ongoing electoral exercise. In a statement, the poll panel urged electorate to come out and vote in large numbers in the coming phases.

According to the EC, the updated voter turnout in the fourth phase of polling held on May 13 was 69.16 per cent, 3.65 percentage points higher than the corresponding phase in the 2019 parliamentary polls. The updated voter turnout figures for the third phase of polling in the Lok Sabha election stood at 65.68 per cent. In the third phase of the 2019 general election, the turnout was 68.4 per cent.

In the second phase of the election held on April 26, the turnout was recorded at 66.71 per cent as against the 69.64 per cent in the second phase of the 2019 polls.

In the first phase of the ongoing general elections, a 66.14 per cent turnout was recorded. In the 2019 polls, the turnout



in the first phase was 69.43 per cent.

The EC said there is enhanced focus on to inform, motivate and facilitate voters in the remaining three phases of the parliamentary polls and state chief electoral officers have been asked to step up measures. "The Commission strongly believes that partnership and collaboration are essential pillars of voter awareness programme. It's really heartening to see that on Commission's request, different institutions, influencers and celebrities having significant reach are working enthusiastically on pro-bono basis," Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar said. A total of 379 seats across 23 states and Union Territories

have voted in the first four phases of elections. A high voter turnout, Kumar felt, would be a message from Indian voters to the world about the strength of Indian democracy.

He urged voters to cast their ballot in huge numbers, as voting day is not a holiday but a day of pride to participate in the festival of democracy. The poll panel also listed out outreach efforts undertaken by various private and public bodies to enhance voter participation in the elections. Banks, post offices, private entities and telecom platforms are using their public interface to encourage registered voters to turn up at the polling stations on various voting days.

# NCBC recommends increase in OBC quota in Punjab, West Bengal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) has recommended an increase in the reservation quota for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in public employment in Punjab and West Bengal.

The Commission's decision comes after a review of the current reservation policies, oral statements, and documentary evidence, aiming to align with the directives laid out by the Supreme Court in the Indra Sawhney case, according to an advisory.

Currently, Punjab allocates 25 per cent of public employment positions to Scheduled Castes and 12 per cent to OBCs, totalling 37 per cent reservation.

The NCBC has proposed enhancing the OBC quota by an additional 13 per cent, bringing the total OBC reservation in public employment to 25 per cent.

This adjustment will adhere to the Supreme Court's ceiling of up to 50 per cent reservation for socially and educationally backward classes.

D K Tiwari, Additional Chief Secretary of the Punjab Government, appeared before the NCBC on February 22, expressing the state's commitment to implement the



Commission's recommendations.

West Bengal's OBC categorisation involves 35 newly included castes/communities. As on date, 143 communities were included in the state List of OBCs out of which 83 castes/communities belonged to Muslim religion.

A total of 179 OBC communities are enlisted in the state list of OBCs in West Bengal. Category 'A' (more backward) contains 81 castes out of which 73 communities belong to Muslim religion and Category 'B' (Backward) contains 98 out of which 45 communities belong to Muslim religion. Reservation for Category 'A' (More Backward) is 10 per cent and Category 'B' (Backward) is seven per cent.

Reservation quota for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled

Tribes and Other Backward Classes is 22 per cent, six per cent and 17 per cent respectively in respect of services and posts under the control of West Bengal in establishments run or aided by the government. "By issuance of notifications, 17 per cent reservation for the Other Backward Classes in respect of services and posts under the government of West Bengal has been ensured. Thus the total reservation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes for public employment comes to 45 per cent," it said. The NCBC observed that remaining five per cent quota in public employment under the control of state government may be enhanced in respect of OBCs as per ceiling up to 50 per cent in compliance of Supreme Court directions.

# Modi condemns assassination bid on Slovakian PM



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday expressed shock at the assassination attempt on his Slovakian counterpart Robert Fico, and condemned it as a cowardly and dastardly act. Fico was shot multiple times and gravely wounded Wednesday after a political event in an attempted assassination that shocked the small country and reverberated across Europe. The Russian leader, 59, was reported to be fighting for his life after being hit in the stomach. In a post on 'X', Modi said, "Deeply shocked at the news of the shooting at Slovakia's Prime Minister, H.E. Mr. Robert Fico. I strongly condemn this cowardly and dastardly act and wish PM Fico a speedy recovery. India stands in solidarity with the people of the Slovak Republic."

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# Former DG of NIA given Z plus security over Khalistani threats

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Former National Investigation Agency (NIA) director general Dinkar Gupta was recently provided the top 'Z-plus' category VIP security cover by the Union government in view of potential threats to him from pro-Khalistani elements, official sources said Thursday. Gupta, a former Punjab Police DGP, retired from service in April.

A Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) VIP security wing has been entrusted with the task to secure the 1987-batch Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, the sources said.

A contingent of about 40 CRPF personnel will now be deployed in shifts to secure Gupta during his presence in Punjab and Delhi, the sources said.

A threat perception report prepared by the central intelligence and security agencies necessitated the top category cover for Gupta due to his work profile



in the NIA and in the Punjab Police against pro-Khalistani elements and supporters, they said.

The Centre extended a similar category security cover to Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar last month and former Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) chief Samant Goel in September last year due to similar threats ascertained against them. Both have been accorded the second highest 'Z' category cover of armed CRPF personnel. The VIP security cover categories begin from the highest Z+, followed by Z, Y+, Y and X.

# NHRC opens entries for annual thematic short films competition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on Thursday said it has opened entries for its annual thematic short films competition online.

The last date for entries is August 30, the NHRC said in a statement.

The aim of this competition is to encourage and acknowledge cinematic and creative efforts of the citizens, irrespective of their age, towards the promotion and protection of human rights, officials said. The short films may be in English or any Indian language with subtitles in English. The duration of the short film should be a minimum of three minutes and a maximum of 10 minutes and they can be in a documentary, animation or dramatised form.

The themes of short films should be based on various socio-economic, cultural, and political rights and may include issues specific to bonded and child labour,



women and children's rights, rights in challenges of elderly persons; rights of persons with disability; manual scavenging, right to healthcare; issues of fundamental freedoms; human trafficking; domestic violence and human rights violation due to police atrocities, it said. There is no entry fee or bar on the number of entries an

individual can send to participate in the contest. However, the participants must send each film separately with a duly filled-in entry form.

"The film, a duly filed entry form, and other requisite documents may be sent using Google drive at nhrcshortfilm@gmail.com," the statement said.

# BJP spreading lies about food rations in India, says Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Thursday claimed that the BJP is "spreading lies" about food rations in India and asserted that what Karnataka has accomplished through its 10 kg free rice guarantee scheme of 'Anna Bhagya' will now be implemented across the country by an INDIA bloc government.

The party's assertion came a day after Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge announced that if the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) is voted to power, it will double the quantity of free rations provided by the BJP government to the poor.

In a post on X, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said once again, "The PM and the BJP are spreading lies about food rations in India".

"This is the real 'chronology' of recent events: The National Food Security Act, passed in September 2013 by the



Government, provided grains for 80 crore Indians (based on 2011 Census). It was opposed in writing by only one CM: the then CM of Gujarat. As PM, Mr. Narendra Modi did nothing to implement the National Food Security Act, 2013," Ramesh claimed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the prime minister suddenly realised the importance of our social welfare systems, he said.

"He (Modi) then did what he does best: rebranded the National Food Security Act, 2013 as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), and marketed it

as a 'free ration' scheme," Ramesh said.

He argued that by not conducting the decadal census that was scheduled for 2021, the Modi government has denied benefits to at least 14 crore Indians. In fact, the Census has still not been conducted, three years after it was due, Ramesh said.

"After being decisively rejected by the people of Karnataka during the Assembly elections in May 2023, the outgoing PM took his revenge on Kannadigas by sabotaging the Congress's Anna Bhagya 10kg free rice guarantee. But the Congress state government stood up to him and is implementing Anna Bhagya robustly across the state," he said. On Wednesday, in Lucknow, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge guaranteed that what Karnataka has accomplished through 'Anna Bhagya' will now be implemented across the country by the INDIA Janbandhan government, once it gets the people's mandate on June 4, he said.

# SC: Acquisition of private property by State unconstitutional if proper procedure not followed

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Compulsory acquisition of private properties will be unconstitutional if proper procedure is not established or followed before depriving a person of their right to property, the Supreme Court said on Thursday.

In a significant verdict, the top court said even the statutory scheme of payment of compensation in return for acquisition of private properties will not be justified if the due procedure is not followed by the state and its instrumentalities.

While making the observations, a bench comprising justices PS Narasimha and Arvind Kumar dismissed the appeal of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

The civic body had approached the top court challenging the judgement of a division bench of the Kolkata High Court which had quashed acquisition of a property at Narkeldanga North Road in the city for constructing a park.

The high court had held that the civic body had no power under a specific provision to go for compulsory acquisition. "We are of the considered opinion that the High Court was fully justified in allowing the writ petition and rejecting the case of the appellant-Corporation acquiring land under Section 352 of the Act. The impugned judgment does



not brook interference on any count," the top court said in its judgement.

"Under our constitutional scheme, compliance with a fair procedure of law before depriving any person of his immovable property is well entrenched," Justice Narasimha said in the 32-page judgement.

"Again, assuming that Section 363 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation Act provides for compensation, compulsory acquisition will still be unconstitutional if proper procedure is not established or followed before depriving a person of their right to property," it said.

It said undue emphasis is laid on the provisions of compensation to justify the power of compulsory acquisition, as if compensation by itself is the complete procedure for a valid acquisition.

"While it is true that after the 44th Constitutional Amendment, the right to property drifted from Part III (fundamental rights) to Part XII of the Constitution, there continues to be a potent safety net against arbitrary acquisitions, hasty decision-making and unfair redressal mechanisms," it said.

The Article 300A (right to property) of the Constitution says that "no person shall be

deprived of his property save by authority of law" and it has been characterised both as a constitutional and a human right.

"To assume that constitutional protection gets constricted to the mandate of a fair compensation would be a disingenuous reading of the text and, shall we say, offensive to the egalitarian spirit of the Constitution," it said.

It said there are seven sub-rights which can be identified. "These are: i) duty of the State to inform the person that it intends to acquire his property – the right to notice, ii) the duty of the State to hear objections to the acquisition – the right to be heard, iii) the duty of the State to inform the person of its decision to acquire – the right to a reasoned decision, iv) the duty of the State to demonstrate that the acquisition is for public purpose – the duty to acquire only for public purpose,

v) the duty of the State to retribute and rehabilitate – the right of restitution or fair compensation, vi) the duty of the State to conduct the process of acquisition efficiently and within prescribed timelines of the proceedings – the right to an expeditious and expeditious process, and vii) final conclusion of the proceedings leading to vesting – the right of conclusion." These seven rights are foundational components of a law that is in tune with Article 300A.

# Coast Guard apprehends fishing vessel smuggling diesel



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) has apprehended a fishing vessel "Jay Malhar" along with five crew members engaged in illegal diesel smuggling off Maharashtra coast, officials said here on Thursday. Giving details, they said acting swiftly on intelligence input ICG ship intercepted the vessel discovering approximately 25 tons of unaccounted diesel (valued approx Rs 27 lakhs) concealed in fish hold along with small quantity of banned narcotic substance.

The apprehended vessel along with its crew, were escorted to Mumbai harbour for further investigation by Police, Customs and Fisheries department. The crew revealed that they had already sold 5,000 litres of fuel to fishermen at sea, officials said. This successful operation marks another significant crackdown on diesel smuggling at sea by the Indian Coast Guard, with a total of 55,000 litres of unaccounted diesel seized in the last three days alone.

# Two senior IPS officers appointed CBI additional directors



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Senior Indian Police Service (IPS) officers A Y V Krishna and N Venu Gopal have been appointed as additional directors in the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Krishna, a 1995-batch Indian Police Service (IPS) officer of Assam-Meghalaya cadre, is currently working as Inspector General in the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

He has been inducted as the additional director of CBI for a tenure up to August 6, 2028, an order issued by the Personnel Ministry said. Krishna's batch mate Venu Gopal (Himachal Pradesh cadre) is presently working as joint director in the CBI. He has been appointed as additional director, CBI for a tenure up to May 24, 2027, another order said.

# Drugs authority approves jab for treatment of GPP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) in India has approved the Boehringer Ingelheim's SPEVIGO (Spesolimab) injection, to help in the treatment of adults suffering from Generalised Pustular Psoriasis (GPP) flares.

Generalised Pustular Psoriasis (GPP) is a rare and unpredictable systemic disease with prominent skin symptoms, distinct from plaque psoriasis. Its rarity and symptom overlap with other conditions often lead to delays in diagnosis and treatment, exacerbating patient suffering. GPP manifests through painful pus-filled blisters, redness, inflammation, and scaling, often accompanied by systemic symptoms such as fever and fatigue.

As per the pharmaceutical company, this approval introduces a first-in-class treatment, which employs a novel mechanism to address a rare and challenging disease.

Spesolimab is a selective antibody designed to block the activation of the interleukin-36 receptor (IL-36R), a crucial component of the immune system implicated in the development of GPP. The effectiveness of Spesolimab was demonstrated

in the EFFISAYIL 1 Phase II global clinical trial.

In this trial, patients experiencing a GPP flare were treated with either Spesolimab or a placebo. At the start, most patients had a high density of pustules and a severely impaired quality of life.

Remarkably, after just one week, 54% of patients treated with Spesolimab showed no visible pustules, compared to only 6% in the placebo group. The approval of SPEVIGO represents a critical advancement in GPP management in India, offering new hope to patients.

The CDSCO's decision follows existing approvals in the European Union, the US, China, and Japan.

Dr Shraddha Bhure, Medical Director at Boehringer Ingelheim India, highlighted the debilitating nature of GPP and the potential of SPEVIGO to alleviate its severe symptoms.

"GPP significantly impacts patients' ability to perform daily activities, leading to substantial morbidity and impaired quality of life. SPEVIGO effectively reduces the severity of GPP flares, targeting the underlying inflammation and providing relief from distressing symptoms," said Dr Bhure.

The accurate diagnosis of GPP remains a challenge, often misidentified as other forms of psoriasis



# PoK belongs to India, we will take it back at any cost: Shah

PTI ■ SITAMARHI (BIHAR)

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday asserted that Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) belongs to India and the country will take it back "at any cost". Addressing an election rally in Sitamarhi Lok Sabha seat in Bihar, the former BJP president slammed the Congress-led opposition for "raising fear about Pakistan's atomic power". "When Article 370 was scrapped, Rahul Gandhi had said that it would lead to bloodshed. Five years have elapsed and not a pebble has been hurled. But Congress's ally Farooq Abdullah tries scaremongering by saying that we cannot take back PoK as Pakistan has atom bombs," Shah asserted. "I wish to declare from the birthplace of Goddess Sita that Bharat and its 140 crore people fear no one. Pakistan occupied Kashmir is ours and it will remain so. We will take



it back," he said. Shah said the Modi government will also ensure full security along the India-Nepal border in its third term. Attacking the INDIA bloc, he said, "Lalu Prasad-led RJD has joined hands with the Congress that opposed the Mandal Commission's recommendations but PM Modi has given respect to lakhs of people from the

backward classes. Lalu joined hands with the Congress only to make his son, Tejashwi Yadav, the chief minister of Bihar... But the state needs 'vikasraj, not 'jungelraj'." "Congress ruled the country for 60 years but did not think about welfare of 60 crore OBCs. Congress and RJD never thought of conferring Bihar Ratna on former Bihar chief minister Karpoori Thakur... It was done by the Modi government," he said. Shah said that the NDA government has decided to develop 'Punaura Dham Mandir', a temple in Sitamarhi district considered to be the birthplace of Goddess Sita, as an international pilgrimage site. "After Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, we will construct a massive temple of Sita Mata in Sitamarhi," he said. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's cabinet has approved Rs 72.47 crore for the development of the temple. Senior JD (U) leader and Bihar Legislative Council chairman Devesh Chandra Thakur is the NDA nominee from Sitamarhi Lok Sabha seat. Shah will address another election rally in Madhubani Lok Sabha seat later in the day. Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Saran and Hajipur Lok Sabha seats will go to polls in the fifth phase on May 20.

# BJP will win 32 Lok Sabha seats out of 42 in Bengal: Tripura CM

PTI ■ AGARTALA

Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Thursday said the BJP will win 32 Lok Sabha seats out of 42 in West Bengal. "I had the opportunity to join the party's campaign trail in West Bengal during which I saw great enthusiasm among voters for the BJP. I am sure the party will win 32 out of the 42 Lok Sabha constituencies," he told reporters here. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP had won 18 seats out of 42 Lok Sabha constituencies, the best show by the saffron party in Bengal so far. On BJP's prospects, Saha said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set the goal of 400-plus seats for the NDA. "We all are working to achieve the target. I have already visited West Bengal and campaigned for the party. I will go again to Bengal to canvass for the party. We are confident that



the BJP-led NDA will win more than 400 Lok Sabha seats (out of 543 seats)", he said. The Chief Minister is scheduled to leave for Kolkata later in the day to join the party's campaign for the last three phases. The Chief Minister dismissed the opposition's claim that the BJP would secure fewer than 200 seats, stating that it was merely an attempt to rally their party's supporters.

# Officials running Government in Odisha: Nadda

PTI ■ PADAMPUR/SUNDERGARH (ODISHA)



BJP president J.P. Nadda on Thursday warned the people of Odisha that their votes were not being effectively utilised, as those they elected to power were not the ones governing them. Nadda made the remark at two election rallies in Padampur under Bargarh Lok Sabha seat and Sundergarh parliamentary constituency. He highlighted that although the people voted for BJD candidates, the government was being run by someone who isn't even their elected representative. "Do you need such a government? Officials are running the government here while MLAs/MPs have been made redundant. Do MLAs wield any power in the state? There is only one person who is taking the stage here and there is no place for the MPs and the MLAs. Are you able to meet your Chief Minister? Does he speak to you in Odia?", Nadda asked the gathering in both the places. Nadda emphasised the necessity for a young, locally rooted chief minister who actively manages daily administration, stressing the importance of preserving Odisha's cultural identity and pride. While seeking votes for BJP candidates, Nadda accused the BJD government of being corrupt. "Will you allow corrupt people to return power? It is the time to bless the BJP and help it form the government in the state," he said. Nadda also addressed the issue of Lord Jagannath's Ratna Bhandar (treasury), echoing concerns previously expressed by PM Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah. He criticised the BJD government over the missing Ratna Bhandar keys, suggesting that pressing the lotus button at the polling station would lead to the BJP government opening the temple's treasury, a task the BJD has failed to accomplish. Referring to BJD government's alleged misuse, Nadda said, "People of Odisha will not tolerate anymore. They will vote for the lotus symbol twice, one

# INDIA Bloc will disintegrate khata khat after June 4: Modi

PTI ■ PRATAPGARH (UP)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi Thursday said the INDIA bloc wants to make five prime ministers in five years and claimed that it will disintegrate after June 4. The counting of votes for all the seven phases of polling for the Lok Sabha elections will be undertaken on June 4. Addressing an election rally in support of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Sangam Lal Gupta at the Government Inter College Pratapgarh grounds here,

Modi said the INDIA bloc wants to replace the stable NDA government and make five prime ministers in five years. "Many things will happen after June 4. The INDI alliance will disintegrate and they will look for a scapegoat after the defeat." Modi took a jibe on Rahul Gandhi's statement of sending money 'khata khat, khata khat' (quickly) in the account of women after coming to power. "The Modi government will definitely be formed after

June 4 but the INDI alliance will disintegrate 'khata khat, khata khat', said the prime minister. "These people will run away 'khata khat, khata khat' after the elections. Only we will remain. I guarantee that I will work day and night to serve you," he said. In an apparent attack on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav, he said, "The shehzada (princes) of Lucknow and Delhi will leave for abroad on summer vacations," said Modi.

Commenting that running a country is not a play for those born with a golden spoon, Modi said, "They have gone from Amethi and will go even from Rae Bareilly." The prime minister said, "The entire country is saying that the third term of this government will be more powerful." Modi said his every moment and every bit of his body will be in the name of the people. He attacked the INDIA bloc leaders by saying they had questioned the bravery of the Army.

"What is their agenda? They are saying they will reinstate Article 370 in Kashmir. They will repeal the CAA law made by Modi... These people are appealing for 'vote jihad' against Modi," he said, referring to an SP leader's remarks. Without taking names, Modi said a companion of the Congress' prince remarked that if their government is formed they will send Ram Lalla back to the tent again and will lock him. But these people are forgetting that it is impossible to happen under

him and the country will force the people of this mentality to live in tents, he added. Modi said the SP and Congress leaders will again go to Pakistan with bouquets of flowers and fly pigeons with them and asked the people to be cautious with them. He said the Congress and INDIA bloc have been out of power for 10 years and their coffers of "black money" have become empty. Their eyes are now, he added,

# Country faced identity crisis during Congress led Government: Yogi

PTI ■ AZAMGARH (UP)

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday claimed that the country faced an identity crisis while every citizen's security was under threat during the previous Congress-led government at the Centre. "Earlier, whenever a terrorist incident took place in the country and the world, its links were invariably established with Azamgarh, defaming the district for no fault of its own," he said, adding that those who defamed Azamgarh stand completely exposed today. The chief minister was addressing a rally in the Lalganj Lok Sabha constituency in Azamgarh in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to seek votes for BJP's Azamgarh candidate Dinesh Lal Yadav Nirahua and Lalganj nominee Neelam Sonkar. Continuing his attack on the opposition, Adityanath said,



"The country faced an identity crisis while every individual's security was under threat in the previous Congress governments. Development activities had come to a grinding halt because the Congress-led government was mired in corruption. The poor starved to death while farmers committed suicide as well as daughters and traders were unsafe."

He said that the country has witnessed a "changing India" in the last 10 years, with increased global respect, secure borders, and terrorism and Naxalism having been effectively eradicated. Highlighting the 'Modi ki Guarantee', Adityanath said that a university has been built in Azamgarh in the name of Maharaja Suheldev. Besides, Azamgarh boasts of an airport today and is now connected via the Purvanchal Expressway, he added. "Azamgarh has transformed into a new symbol of progress within Uttar Pradesh, boasting exceptional four-lane connections to key destinations such as Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Ayodhya, Prayagraj, and various other districts. "Previously, the mention of Azamgarh would elicit shock both nationally and internationally. Back then, residents encountered challenges when travelling domestically or abroad, as even lodging in dharamshalas

proved difficult to secure for those hailing from Azamgarh," he said. "However, under the leadership of PM Modi, Azamgarh residents have experienced a notable elevation in respect and have embraced a renewed sense of identity. This transformation is evidenced by the resounding chant of 'Ab ki Baar, 400 Paar' echoing across the nation," he said. Adityanath highlighted the significance of Lord Ram's presence in Ayodhya temple after a 500-year anticipation, which has deeply moved citizens nationwide. At the rally, UP ministers Surya Pratap Shahi, Dara Singh Chauhan, Om Prakash Rajbhar, MP Sangeeta Azad, and BJP state general secretary Govind Narayan Shukla, among others, were present. Polling in Lalganj and Azamgarh will be held in the sixth phase of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections on May 25.

# Government appeals to eastern Naga body not to abstain from ULB elections

PTI ■ KOHIMA

The Nagaland government on Thursday appealed to ENPO to reconsider its decision not to participate in the urban local body (ULB) elections. The Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation, the apex body of seven Naga tribes of the region, has been demanding a separate state since 2010, claiming that six districts in the eastern part of Nagaland have been neglected for years. The appeal from the government comes after the ENPO sent a letter to the State Election Commission (SEC), apprising the poll panel of its decision to abstain from participating in the ULB elections on June 26. "During the state cabinet meeting today, the government has once again appealed to the ENPO and its constituent bodies to participate in the ULB elections, which are being

conducted on the directions of the Supreme Court after the prolonged legal battle on women's reservation in ULBs in the state for the larger interest of the public and their welfare," state minister K G Kenye told reporters here. The people of Eastern Nagaland had on March 19 reaffirmed their commitment to the "Chenmoho Resolution", wherein it was resolved "not to participate in any central and state election due to the delay to create the Frontier Nagaland Territory (FNT) as assured by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on December 7, 2023". The ENPO had abstained from the April 19 Lok Sabha elections with no voter turning out in the six districts of the eastern part of the northeastern state. Despite numerous reminders through letters and public rallies, the MHA did not pay heed to the ENPO demand, the organisation alleged.

# Election campaign in Himachal sees bitter name calling, personal attacks

PTI ■ SHIMLA

"Kale naag", "bigda shehzada", "husn pari" - the election campaign in Himachal Pradesh has been marked by name-calling and personal attacks. The bitter discourse that followed the cross-voting by six Congress rebels in the Rajya Sabha polls in February seems to have continued into the Lok Sabha election campaign, with some senior political leaders calling it a new low. The level of politics is deteriorating every day, senior BJP leader and former chief minister Shanta Kumar said here. Even leaders who are in the news for their harsh speeches and name-calling say such behaviour is uncalled for when they find themselves at the receiving end of such language. Himachal Pradesh Chief

Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu has also spoken out against the nature of campaign rhetoric for the ongoing elections. Speaking to PTI, Sukhu said that Himachal Pradesh had never witnessed such remarks during elections and this behaviour is against the culture of the state. But Sukhu's language against Congress leaders who crossed voted in the Rajya Sabha polls has also been termed by the BJP as "offensive". Sukhu, upset over what he said were attempts to topple his government, dubbed the Congress rebels as "kale naag" (black snakes) and "bikau" (on sale) and stuck to his "bikau versus tikau" tirade against them during his campaign trail. Nine legislators - the six Congress rebels and three independent MLAs - voted in favour of the BJP nominee Harsh Mahajan in the Rajya



Sabha polls held on February 27. They later joined the BJP and the six former Congress MLAs are now contesting the assembly bypolls on BJP tickets from their respective constituencies. At a rally in Kulehar, the assembly constituency

represented by Congress rebel Devinder Kumar Bhutto who was disqualified from the House for defying a party whip, Sukhu allegedly remarked "Bhutto ko Kooto (beat Bhutto)". The BJP filed a complaint with the state's chief electoral officer, accusing Sukhu of inciting violence. Another candidate who has been in the thick of controversies since her nomination for the Lok Sabha election is BJP's candidate from Mandi, Kangana Ranaut. Soon after her nomination, Congress spokesperson Priyanka Shrinete posted a picture of Ranaut and captioned it "Mandi main bhav kya chal raha hai". The post, considered derogatory, faced massive backlash, prompting Shrinete to remove the remarks from all of her social accounts. She claimed that they had been posted not by her but by

someone else who had access to her accounts. Ranaut has also indulged in a fair share of name-calling and has referred to Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Vikramaditya Singh - also her rival for the Mandi seat - as "bada pappu" and "chhota pappu". She has also targeted Congress leaders of the Gandhi-Nehru family, from former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his father Motilal Nehru to Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi during her campaign, calling the Congress "a disease" and "termite" left by Britishers, which was "eating the country" till 2014. The actor has also referred to Vikramaditya as "bigda shehzada" (spoilt prince), asserting that she was not in politics due to her father or husband's influence. Vikramaditya's father Virbhadra Singh is a 4-time

chief minister of the state and his mother Pratibha Singh is the sitting MP from Mandi. Pratibha, the state Congress president, has called Ranaut a "pari" and that people only come to see her. Reacting to the remark, the actor's mother Asha Ranaut said senior Congress leaders are making comments like "yeh husn pari hai", and "yeh kya cheez hai", forgetting that they also have daughters at their home. "Being a mother, I am pained and feel that other mothers are also feeling sad due to such remarks." Several senior citizens too flagged indecent language used in the campaign. Om Prakash Sood, an 88-year-old businessman, said, "Lines of civility have been crossed, we have never witnessed such a low-level political campaign in Himachal Pradesh, which is known as 'Dev Bhoomi', where people are respectful and decent."



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Unifying Paradise

Pointing to people's anger and civil unrest in PoK, Amit Shah says it will be reclaimed as part of India

As peace and tranquility envelop the sylvan slopes of Kashmir Valley in perfect harmony but civil unrest recoils with its squirming populace across the LoC in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK), India's Home Minister Amit Shah has iterated that the region "belongs to India and we will reclaim it". Nothing new there, but the comment has reignited discussions on the disputed region and its intricate history, fraught as it is with serious ramifications. Following Partition, the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, like other such States, had the option to accede to either India or Pakistan. Maharaja Hari Singh, then ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, initially sought to remain independent but, amid invasion by tribal militias supported by Pakistan, opted to accede to India in October 1947. It led to the first India-Pakistan War, which saw a United Nations-brokered ceasefire and establishment of the LoC, which divided the region into the Indian J&K and PoK. While India gained control over most of the territory, Pakistan retained approximately its one-third, which it named Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan. Therefore, from an Indian perspective, PoK is an integral part of J&K and its inclusion in India's territorial claims is based on historical, legal and moral grounds. However, the timing and practicality of the Home Minister's claim are debatable: Bringing up such critical matters in public sphere, especially during elections and when they involve a neighbouring nuclear power, is not the best of ideas.



For its part, Pakistan considers PoK as a "liberated territory" pending a plebiscite promised by the UN.

In this given situation, the status quo maintained for over seven decades keeps the two countries from going to war. The larger question is, do we want to go to war with Pakistan and can we afford it when we have so much to sort out domestically? Should not the Home Minister be more cautious in raking up such contentious issues during elections? It is true that despite Pakistan's hollow assertions, PoK has witnessed internal dissent and unrest over the years. The region has been marred by allegations of human rights abuses, lack of democratic freedoms and marginalisation of local voices by the Pakistani establishment. Civil society movements, such as the Gilgit-Baltistan Movement, have been advocating for the recognition of their rights and the restoration of genuine autonomy. If Amit Shah's recent declaration reaffirming India's claim over PoK is not a standalone Statement but reflects a broader strategic shift in India's approach, it must be well articulated and a clear roadmap must be laid to approach the matter diplomatically or otherwise. If that is not the case, then it would pass off as another poll rhetoric or 'jumla'. Indeed, diplomatic endeavours are most effectively conducted behind closed doors rather than at public rallies.

### PICTALK



Devotees at the Kedarnath temple during the 'Char Dham Yatra,' in Rudrapur

# The rising significance of skills in learning



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

The new educational landscape must integrate skill-based learning into formal education systems, fostering a holistic approach to learning and livelihood

Each generation does make its contribution to the vocabulary of the language it uses. The vocabulary represents its understanding of the current emotions and fancied expressions of sentiments, which are at times as old as the human race. This may be of joy, glee, or sheer 'inaction'.

At times serious sentiments are involved and led by a prominent person of the time; they acquire fancied importance. Many will recall the time when the Department of Education in the Government of India was declared the 'Department of HRD' during the time of the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi and overnight many departments of personnel of corporate enterprises declared themselves to be the departments of human resource development. Nothing in the content had changed nor had even the approach, but still the fashion had got its new draping.

Each time somebody important in a current scenario projects a concept, there are a lot of people who follow the trail. Nothing wrong with that. The important thing is to understand how human nature moves and what the significance of words is in the larger context of those particular times. It is best to do an analysis without making a value judgement. Having said that, one can come to the present times and notice how the emphasis of the present dispensation in the national arena on 'skill' has brought the word skill to the center of the focus in learning.

There are attempts to offer degrees for certain types of skill formation. Some decades ago, skill was not such a happy word. No vice chancellor of a university would have talked of a degree in 'skills'. Education was supposed to be a 'grand concept', which indeed it is. The confusion with skill was, albeit, reducing its significance of the grandeur of the process of education. To enter that debate may not be helpful at this stage. The fact of the matter is that times have now changed and skills have acquired the level of an elevated pursuit. As mentioned earlier, there are attempts to offer



degrees in skill formation. Perhaps this is a recognition of the emphasis on doable learning. Anything which can be performed in action is now getting more valued.

By itself, it may or may not be a good thing, but it does show a tendency to reducing action largely to an operational front. The neglect, therefore, of concepts and ideas is proportional. By itself, the subject matter may be debated, but that remains, as the expression goes, 'another matter'. This is inevitable and leads to some reflections. Skill by itself is important and perhaps far more important than the value attached to it in everyday parleys.

Skill is the foundation of all relationships. If one is attracted towards anyone else, it is only on the basis of that person's skills. That skill may be in singing, cooking, speaking or dancing and the list can be endless. The truth is, nobody was drawn to anybody else, if that other person had no skills. Even a parent is drawn to a child, only at some action of the child, even if it was just a smile. That is how important a skill is. Without a smile, the child would draw no attention. Any adult sees a child seeks to establish some communication with that child and that child's response is the core of the attention it gets from anyone



LIKE ANY OTHER DEGREE, A DEGREE IN SKILLS CAN LEAD TO EARNINGS AND A LIVELIHOOD. THIS IS NEW TO THE LANDSCAPE. THERE IS MORE TO EARN AND MORE WAYS TO EARN WITH IT THAN BEFORE. THIS HAS WIDENED AND DEEPENED THE NATURE OF LEARNING, WHICH BY POPULAR PARLEYS HAS BEEN ADDRESSED AS 'EDUCATION'

around him. Later, that kind of interaction becomes the root of learning communication and more.

This seminal position of skill in human relationships has not often been noticed, either with analytical fervor or poetic exuberance. If that had been done, there would have been greater recognition that nothing, not even emotional bonding, takes place without some skill being the foundation of it. Be that as it may, it is an additional dimension of playfulness, friendship and relationships and from there it goes on to earning and livelihood.

What is happening today is the induction of this skill formation into a standardised format like education leading to a degree. Today even skill in laying bricks in construction can get the status of a degree. A degree is indeed nothing but the benchmarking of standards. Similarly, there is even a proposition on degree in acting and more.

In other words, like any other degree, a degree in skills can lead to earnings and a livelihood. This is new on the landscape. There is more to earn and more ways to earn with it than before. This has widened and deepened the nature of learning, which by popular parleys has been addressed as 'education'. The industry, if one might say so,

of education has its own components, which are widely understood but not equally commonly categorised in our operational terms. Such being the case, a time may have come to categorise different types of learning and different types of skills. It is this component of education which needs greater thought and analysis than has been done so far for 'education' leading to a degree.

It may, therefore, be a fit proposition to submit that to understand 'skills' as a part of learning, one needs to begin the overhaul of the learning process with an overhaul of the learning process of degree in 'education' itself. Operationally this could mean, to begin with, the review of the curriculum of the B.Ed. and M.Ed degree. It is generally agreed that conceptual reflection to be converted into operational reality requires a fulcrum point of intervention. In the text above, the philosophical reflection on skill has been sought to be combined with the world of action and research. This could be a point to be seriously taken on board for further discussion and action.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### AAP'S CANDID ADMISSION

Madam — This relates to the news story "AAP admits to assault," which was published on May 15. While the action of the CM's PS Bibhav Kumar is condemnable, to say the least, the very admission of the act by the AAP's leader Sanjay Singh is a rare instance of admission of guilt. It is reassuring to note that the party has promised to take strict action against its own. Contrast this with how a well-entrenched party (the BJP), which hopes for a "chaar so paar" score in the LS polls, stood by Brij Bhushan Saran Singh, despite a barrage of sexual allegations against him, only to give the LS sabbha ticket to his son, as some kind of saving grace.

Though AAP has not yet acted on its promise, the admission of wrongdoing has, by itself, lessons for all other parties that choose to look the other way when such incidents involve their party folk. For now, at least, it is the AAP and not the BJP, which is walking the talk on "Beti bachao".

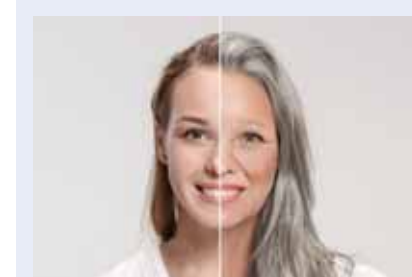
Avinash Godbole | Dewas

#### DIGNIFIED CAMPAIGNING

Madam — Apropos the editorial "Bitter ballot battle," published on May 15, the ongoing Lok Sabha elections may go down as the most bitterly fought yet, in the history of independent India. Senior citizens like this writer cannot help but recall a time when politicians were dignified in fighting opponents during election campaigning. For instance, during the 1969, assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, when the Congress stalwart Kamaraj thundered that he would win from Virudhunagar constituency 'lying down', Rajaji retorted, "His lying down is a certainty, but winning is difficult!" Rajaji's Swatantra party and the DMK fought that election in alliance, resulting in the Congress defeat and the DMK forming Government.

Differences cropped up between Rajaji and Anna. Said a disillusioned Rajaji in a press meet — "The honeymoon between the Swatantra party and the DMK is over!" When Annadurai heard this, he quipped — "Yes, the honeymoon is over and fam-

#### Ageing gracefully



Apropos the news article "Embracing the joys and wisdom of age," published on 16 May, this is my response. Reflecting on the passage of time and the shifting perspectives it brings, one can't help but marvel at the journey of life. The writer's experience in the mountains, juxtaposed with encounters that touch upon age, paints a poignant picture of acceptance and

growth. The narrative resonates with the universal theme of ageing, gracefully navigating the transition from youth to seniority. Initially resistant to notions of age, the writer's attitude evolves, finding solace and even pride in the title of 'old'. The seismic impact of the pandemic serves as a sobering reminder of life's fragility, prompting a deeper appreciation for each passing year.

Amidst reflections on personal experiences, there's a poignant call to action - a reminder of the responsibilities that accompany ageing. It's a testament to the profound impact one can have on others, echoing Frank Lloyd Wright's sentiment that life's beauty amplifies with age. In a world often fixated on youth, this narrative serves as a gentle reminder of the richness that comes with embracing the journey of ageing, with all its complexities and rewards.

Khirabdi | Noida

television channels during a major earthquake. The Madhesi agitation had further strained bilateral relations resulting in Nepal's outreach to China. Overall, New Delhi's inability to keep up the tempo of goodwill has irked Kathmandu. The recent decision of the Pushpa Kamal Dahal Government to depict the controversial India-Nepal-China tri-junction on its currency notes has raised eyebrows in Indian diplomatic circles. It is widely felt that apart from traditional issues, Kathmandu's unhappiness with New Delhi over a few crucial projects not taking off, or not being maintained after being inked, could be among the few triggers for its currency notes step. Both countries should display maturity to ensure that the negative influence of Beijing does not cast a shadow on mutual friendship. The currency note issue should be resolved soon after the elections for peace and stability in the region.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

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## Modi filing nomination boosts BJP morale

Varanasi electrified as Narendra Modi filed papers, underscoring UP's centrality and Modi-Yogi alliance's lasting impact on national politics



VIVEK SHUKLA

Varanasi recently witnessed a surge of excitement as Prime Minister Modi filed his nomination papers for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. This event not only underscored the significance of Uttar Pradesh in shaping national politics but also highlighted the enduring influence of the Modi-Yogi partnership in the State's political landscape. The ancient city of Varanasi buzzed with excitement as Prime Minister Narendra Modi submitted his nomination papers for the Lok Sabha polls once again last Tuesday. Accompanied by his trusted ally, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and a host of supporters, Modi's presence electrified the streets during a massive roadshow prior to filing his papers. The atmosphere in the holy city exuded confidence among leaders and workers of the saffron party, indicating a strong belief in their impending triumph in the Lok Sabha polls. The significance of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in determining the fate of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the BJP, cannot be overstated, especially as they



strive for a third consecutive term in power. With 80 Lok Sabha seats at stake, UP holds considerable sway over Indian politics, both present and future. The adage that the road to Delhi's throne runs through UP rings true, emphasising the pivotal role the State plays in shaping the country's political landscape. Consequently, political parties are sparing no effort in vying for victory in UP in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Despite political manoeuvres, analysts predict a familiar outcome in UP this time around, with the BJP poised to replicate its 2019 electoral success. The formidable duo of Modi and Yogi is expected to deliver another commanding performance, cementing their status as unbeatable political forces. The Modi-Yogi partnership has become synonymous with victory, casting a shadow of doubt

over the opposition's prospects. The BJP's ambitious goal of securing all 80 Lok Sabha seats in UP is buoyed by the confidence placed in this dynamic duo. Modi has lauded Yogi's development initiatives on numerous occasions, underscoring their collective vision for UP's progress. This sentiment was echoed during Modi's recent rally in Amroha, where he expressed optimism about surpassing previous electoral records under Yogi's leadership, thereby making history in UP.

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections marked a turning point in UP's political landscape, ending the BJP's electoral drought in the State. Securing a staggering 71 out of 80 seats, the BJP emerged victorious without any significant opposition alliance.

The subsequent 2019 elections saw the BJP leverage the Modi wave and Yogi's governance to further consolidate its position, despite facing a united opposition front. Yogi's proactive stance on law and order issues resonated with voters, contributing to the BJP's resounding victory. Yogi's tenure as Chief Minister

has been characterised by a crackdown on criminal elements, instilling a sense of security among the populace. Under his leadership, UP has witnessed a significant decline in crime rates, marking a departure from the lawlessness of the past. Central Government support for development initiatives has further bolstered UP's economy, with the Gross State Domestic Product witnessing substantial growth.

As the 2024 elections unfold, the BJP finds itself in a favourable position in UP, owing to the combined successes of the Modi Government at the centre and Yogi's governance model. The tangible improvements in governance and economic indicators serve as testaments to their administration's efficacy, instilling confidence among voters. While the outcome of the elections remains uncertain, one thing is clear: the Modi-Yogi alliance continues to enjoy unwavering support from the people of UP.

(The writer is a senior journalist and author of two books; his views are personal)



## FIRST COLUMN

### INDIA AND IRAN SIGN CHABAHAR PORT PACT

A significant step for connecting the Indian Ocean to Europe and beyond



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

India and Iran finally managed to put a long-term contract closure for one of the most stretched flagship projects in the bilateral relationship between the countries. India managed to sign a ten-year Long-term Contract for the development of Shahid Beheshti Port Terminal, Chabahar. It was no surprise that, despite being in the middle of elections, Union Minister of Ports Shipping and Waterways Sarabandona Sonowal visited Chabahar port to witness the signing of this crucial bilateral agreement.

Chabahar is a deep water port, located nearest to India, which is crucial for India's access to central Asia and vice versa for the States in the region into the Indian Ocean. The Chabahar project first came up as a crucial bilateral platform for Iran and India in 2003 when PM Vajpayee and Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani, unveiled a transformational strategic cooperation blueprint between the two nations. Iran and India while getting closer on the bilateral, were focussed on securing Afghanistan and making it an important transit destination further into Central Asia. The Delhi Declaration of 2003, signed between Iran and India reiterates "The recent trilateral agreement between the Governments of India, Iran and Afghanistan to develop the Chabahar route through Melak, Zaranj and Delaram would facilitate regional trade and transit, including to Afghanistan and Central Asia, contributing thus to enhanced regional economic prosperity."



However, post the Vajpayee Government, India's focus on the crucial infrastructure project shifted, partially impacted by domestic politics and a new world order. It wasn't until Prime Minister Modi became the prime minister that this integrated multi-modal Chabahar project found prominence. Hectic backroom negotiations, including the visit of the Afghan President to India in 2015, followed by PM Modi's visit to Iran in 2016, the signing of the trilateral agreement provided the much-needed impetus to the project. It also involved close coordination with the US (which wasn't too keen on India's enthusiasm, with Chabahar), but the independent access to Afghanistan served as the crucial lynchpin to unblock the hesitancy.

In 2017 India, Iran and Afghanistan held the second ministerial-level trilateral meeting to get an update on the establishment of a transport and transit corridor in Chabahar. The Statement released after the trilateral Stated "Reiterating the importance of Chabahar as a hub for regional economic connectivity and their commitment to work towards this objective, the Ministers commended the joint efforts of the three countries in the recent successful transit of wheat from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar."

It was nearly seven years later that India got complete access to the Chabahar port for handling the crucial operations. It is important to be reminded that China has made significant progress in Central Asia by aggressively pursuing its Belt and Road initiative. Iranian President led a high-level economic delegation to China in February this year, while reiterating that China continues to be its largest trading partner. India's relations with Central Asian countries and further into Russia have been stable for decades. China has been a new entrant in the region which has first managed to acquire critical infrastructure projects in India's immediate neighbourhoods like Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc and is now in weather with Russia.

Iran has traditionally been a key influencer in the West Asian and Central Asian regions, however, the ongoing war in Gaza has revived old fault lines in the region. The US which withdrew from Afghanistan used to be a key decision-maker in the region and is keen to.

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

# RBI fortifies the nation's economy with gold



SHIVAJI SARKAR

Taking a cue from prudent household savers, the Reserve Bank of India has significantly increased its gold reserves to 817 metric tonnes to hedge the economy



In a strategic move reminiscent of Indian households safeguarding their wealth, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is fortifying the nation's economic resilience by actively acquiring gold reserves. This bold initiative mirrors the prudence of household savers, as the central bank positions itself to shield itself against potential economic turmoil and bolster the country's financial stability.

The RBI now has accumulated gold reserves of 817 tonnes. This surge can be attributed to a combination of factors including escalating tensions in West Asia, Israel's assault on Palestine, the Russia-Ukraine war and persistent inflation, all of which have heightened the appeal of gold. Central banks worldwide are actively accumulating gold to diversify reserves and reduce dependency on the US dollar. China, in particular, has been on a gold-buying spree for the 17th consecutive month, aiming to hedge against currency depreciation and geopolitical risks. The world is unofficially going back to the gold standards it abandoned in 1971. India is also hit by a continuous six-day fall in the stock market. It wipes out a significant investment. The loss is estimated at Rs 7 lakh crore.

The household savers, of course, got their savings dipped as unemployment and rising prices hit them. The RBI in a clarificatory note on May 9, mentions that "they are putting their savings into real estate and the central bank is not worried of the phenomenon".

The bank itself has stepped up gold purchases to "help diversify its foreign exchange reserves base amid US dollar volatility". The US inflation rate in February hit 3.2 per cent year over year. Since the Federal Reserve began raising rates in 2022, it has raised rates from 5.25 per cent to 5.5 per cent in July 2023. It's

holding further raises given the US elections.

The price of gold has surged over 10 per cent since the start of the year, cementing its status as a preferred hedge against inflation and a sanctuary amid political and economic uncertainty. This significant uptick is largely due to considerable purchases by central banks and a rising demand for safe-haven assets.

Gold prices, in India, have been experiencing a significant surge in 2024, with a remarkable rally that has propelled them to an unprecedented all-time high of over Rs 73,000 per 10 gm two days before Akshay Tritiya, when customary gold purchases reach a peak. This surge represents an impressive increase of approximately 21.1 per cent within just one year. On the day of Akshaya Tritiya on May 10, it has slightly dipped to Rs 72,788. Over six months, domestic gold prices surged from Rs 54000 per 10 grams to a record high of Rs 73,958.

One can realise that nothing can appreciate faster than gold and can't question the RBI's sagacity. One dollar is at Rs 83.88. Rupee is expected to rise to Rs 82.50 in six months, a gain of about 1.1 per cent and in a year it could rise to Rs 82 - a gain of 1.7 per cent. It means the RBI dollar reserves would lose about 2 per cent value in a year. So, the RBI has decided to buy more gold than dollars. Its investment would be less at even Rs 73000 for 10 gm and gains over 20 per cent. That's an intelligent economy.

The RBI has increased gold purchases to diversify reserves, with

gold value contributing to a \$3 billion rise in forex reserves to \$648.5 billion. RBI acquiring more gold in early 2024, aiming for diversification and inflation hedging.

The World Gold Council (WGC) says that RBI gold purchases touched 19 tonnes during January-March. This dwarfs the 16 tonnes of gold it bought in the whole of 2023.

In terms of countries with the highest gold reserves, the USA leads with 8,133 tonnes, followed by Germany, Italy, France and the Russian Federation with 3,366.49, 2,451.84, 2,436.01 and 2,271.16 tonnes of gold, respectively, according to WGC.

The surge in central banks' gold acquisitions stemmed from the aftermath of the US imposition of sanctions on Russia. These sanctions, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, included freezing Russian reserve dollars and imposing restrictions on crucial commodity trades such as crude oil. The global repercussions of these measures were profound, exposing vulnerabilities within Western financial institutions.

The option of investments in the stocks has become riskier. In February, China divested an additional \$22.7 billion in U.S. Treasury securities, as per the latest Federal Reserve data, reducing its total holdings to \$775 billion. Despite this decrease, China retains its position as the second-largest foreign holder of U.S. debt. China is reducing its dependence on the dollar, as per US Federal Reserve data.

According to ICICIdirect study,

The RBI wants to diversify its foreign exchange reserves and reduce dependence on the US dollar. Gold offers stability and isn't directly tied to the performance of any one currency. It can be especially valuable during times of economic uncertainty or fluctuations in the dollar's value.

Gold is considered as a hedge against inflation. When the value of currencies weakens due to inflation, gold tends to hold its value or even increase. It protects the purchasing power of India's foreign reserves.

The diversification of the portfolio to gold reserve, RBI says, can inspire confidence in the Indian economy from foreign investors. It signals a strong financial position and stability, potentially attracting more foreign investment.

While less common today, gold can still be used for international transactions. Holding a gold reserve allows India to settle debts with other countries if needed, or if those countries aren't willing to accept rupee.

The next few years can be times of turmoil and gold can be a stabilising factor in the international economy. It is particularly so as the IT sector, industry, markets are in a destabilised condition and would take time to calm. At such volatile times gold is likely to be more in demand than paper currencies. The RBI has resorted to the right move and lead the India economy, which has been striving to become one of the major world economies.

*(The author is a senior journalist; views are personal)*



THE WORLD GOLD COUNCIL SAYS THAT RBI GOLD PURCHASES TOUCHED 19 METRIC TONNES DURING JANUARY-MARCH. THIS DWARFS THE 16 TONNES OF GOLD IT BOUGHT IN THE WHOLE OF 2023

# Reflections of an oncologist navigating imperfections in cancer care

Doctors aren't infallible gods but compassionate humans dedicated to easing human suffering, even in the face of formidable medical challenges

As an Oncologist, my days are filled with the most dreaded and life-threatening cancers head-on, armed with an arsenal of anti-cancer treatments that range from mild to equally dreadful. But amidst the battle against this relentless disease, I've come to understand that medical science is far from perfect.

Every time I sit down with a patient and their family to discuss treatment options, I embark on a delicate balancing act. Yes, I outline the potential benefits of the treatment, but I also dedicate ample time to explaining its imperfections and the associated risks - risks that can sometimes be massive, impacting not only the



PRASHANT MEHTA

patient's life but also their quality of life.

These discussions are rarely brief; on average, I find myself engaging with 2 to 8 family members, ensuring that everyone understands the complexities involved. And in these conversations, I make it a point to acknowledge that success is not guaranteed. I've had my fair share of failures and I recognise that my clinical judg-

ments aren't infallible. In the realm of oncology, the weight of responsibility is immense. The human toll of the disease, coupled with the emotional turmoil experienced by families, weighs heavily on me every single day. There are moments when the sheer gravity of it all threatens to overwhelm me, but I gather my strength, reminding myself of the dignity, composure and compassion required to navigate through these turbulent waters.

Recently, I stumbled upon an opinion piece penned by Mr. CY Gopinath, recounting the journey of a patient grappling with suspected pancreatic cancer. The patient felt as though his oncologist was pushing a

cancer diagnosis onto him. Such situations are not uncommon, especially when dealing with cancers that are notoriously difficult to biopsy. Misdiagnoses and the fear of missing a fatal diagnosis loom large in the minds of oncologists.

The widening trust gap between patients and healthcare providers is a cause for concern. Patients and their families may perceive our actions and recommendations in various ways, sometimes attributing them to ulterior motives. But the reality is often far more nuanced than it appears. Having worked extensively in both private and Government healthcare settings, I've witnessed my fair share of diagnostic and ther-



apeutic errors. These errors stem from the inherent imperfections of medicine and the challenges of navigating a complex healthcare landscape. In the modern era, doctors are acutely aware of the trust

deficit that exists between us and our patients. The notion of a 'God complex' is a myth; instead, we recognise our limitations and strive to bridge the gap through open communication and transparency.

While drugs and surgeries aren't panaceas, alternative treatments aren't always the answer either. It's imperative to base our decisions on evidence-backed practices rather than succumbing to anecdotal allure. In the realm of healthcare, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Each patient's journey is unique, shaped by their individual preferences and circumstances. As doctors, we must personalise our approach, empowering patients to be active participants in their healing process.

It's crucial to foster an environment where patients feel empowered to question, learn and seek second opinions. After all, informed decision-making is the cor-

nerstone of effective healthcare delivery. In conclusion, amidst the cacophony of controversy and misinformation, the voice of expertise must prevail. Medicine is a science guided by evidence, not conjecture. Despite the challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead, I remain steadfast in my commitment to serve, echoing the words of my mentor: "Someone has to do this work and you've been chosen. Do it well."

*-The writer is a Senior Consultant and Program Director (Lymphoid Neoplasms and Cellular therapy) Department of Medical Oncology Amrita Institute of Medical sciences, Faridabad. Views are personal.*

# UN's top court opens hearings on military incursion into Rafah

AP ■ THE HAGUE



Vusumuzi Madonsela, South Africa's ambassador to the Netherlands.

The United Nations' top court on Thursday opened two days of hearings into a request from South Africa to press Israel to halt its military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's population has sought shelter. It is the fourth time South Africa has asked the International Court of Justice for emergency measures since the nation launched proceedings alleging that Israel's military action in its war with Hamas in Gaza amounts to genocide. According to the latest request, the previous preliminary orders by The Hague-based court were not sufficient to address "a brutal military attack on the sole remaining refuge for the people of Gaza."

South Africa said the situation was getting worse in the war-ravaged area. "Israel's genocide has continued at pace and has reached a new and horrific stage," said Vusumuzi Madonsela, South Africa's ambassador to the Netherlands. Israel has portrayed Rafah as the last stronghold of the militant group, brushing off warnings from the United States and other allies that any major operation there would be catastrophic for civilians. South Africa has asked the court to order Israel to withdraw from Rafah; to take measures to ensure unimpeded access for UN officials, humanitarian organisations and journalists to the Gaza Strip; and to report back within one week on how it is meeting these demands. During hearings earlier this year, Israel strongly denied committing genocide in

Gaza and said it does all it can to spare civilians and is only targeting Hamas militants. It says Hamas' tactic of embedding in civilian areas makes it difficult to avoid civilian casualties. In January, judges ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in Gaza, but the panel stopped short of ordering an end to the military offensive that has laid waste to the Palestinian enclave. In a second order in March, the court said Israel must take measures to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza, including opening more land crossings to allow food, water, fuel and other supplies to enter. Most of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people have been displaced since fighting began. The war began with a Hamas attack on southern Israel on Oct 7 in which Palestinian militants killed around 1,200 people and took about 250 hostages. Gaza's Health Ministry says over 35,000

Palestinians have been killed in the war, without distinguishing between civilians and combatants in its count. South Africa initiated proceedings in December 2023 and sees the legal campaign as rooted in issues central to its identity. Its governing party, the African National Congress, has long compared Israel's policies in Gaza and the occupied West Bank to its own history under the apartheid regime of white minority rule, which restricted most Blacks to "homelands". Apartheid ended in 1994. On Sunday, Egypt announced it plans to join the case. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Israeli military actions "constitute a flagrant violation of international law, humanitarian law, and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 regarding the protection of civilians during wartime". Several countries have also indicated they plan to intervene, but so far only Libya, Nicaragua and Colombia have filed formal requests to do so.

# Violence rages in New Caledonia France rushes emergency reinforcements to its Pacific territory

AP ■ PARIS



Burnt cars are lined up after unrest in Noumea, New Caledonia, Wednesday. France has imposed a state of emergency in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia

Violence raged across New Caledonia for the third consecutive day on Thursday, hours after France imposed a state of emergency in the French Pacific territory, boosting security forces' powers to quell deadly unrest in the archipelago that has long sought independence. French authorities in New Caledonia and the interior ministry in Paris reported that five people, including two police officers, have been killed in the violence after protests earlier this week over voting reforms pushed by President Emmanuel Macron's government turned deadly. At least 60 members of the security forces were injured and 214 people were arrested in the Thursday's clashes with police, arson and looting, according to the territory's top French official, High Commissioner Louis Le Franc. "Everything is being done to restore order and calm that Caledonians deserve," French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal said

after Thursday's security meeting at the Elysee presidential palace in Paris. Attal said France will provide the island with essential goods after three days of unrest. In addition to the 1,700 security forces troops that have already been deployed to help police curb the

violence, 1,000 more are on the way, he added. The situation "remains very tense, with looting, riots, arson and attacks which are unbearable and unspeakable," Attal said. Two members of the island's Indigenous Kanak community were among the five dead,

French Interior and Overseas Territories Minister Gerald Darmanin said Thursday. "The (French) state will regain total control," Darmanin declared in a series of interviews with French media. Darmanin said 10 people, all alleged members of the pro-independence movement known as The Field Acton Coordination Unit, have been placed under house arrest. In April, the group had backed several protests against French authorities on the island. However, Darmanin, the interior minister, alleged on Thursday that the movement is a "small group which calls itself pro-independence, but instead commits looting, murder and violence." "We will not back down," Darmanin said. The National Council of Chiefs of the Indigenous Kanak people condemned "all acts of vandalism and gun violence" as "unjustifiable," but rejected the allegations that members of The Field Action Coordination Unit have been involved in the deadly violence.

# 'Gaza Strip pier project completed, aid to flow soon'

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The US military finished installing a floating pier for the Gaza Strip on Thursday, with officials poised to begin ferrying badly needed humanitarian aid into the enclave besieged over seven months of intense fighting in the Israel-Hamas war. The final, overnight construction sets up a complicated delivery process more than two months after US President Joe Biden ordered it to help Palestinians facing starvation as food and other supplies fail to make it in as Israel recently seized the key Rafah border crossing in its push on that southern city on the Egyptian border. Fraught with logistical, weather and security challenges, the maritime route is designed to bolster the amount of aid getting into the Gaza Strip, but it is not considered a substitute for far cheaper land-based deliveries that aid agencies say are much more sustainable. The boatloads of aid will be deposited at a port facility built by the Israelis just southwest of Gaza City and then distributed by aid groups. US troops will not set foot in Gaza, American officials insist, though they acknowledge the danger of operating near the war zone. Heavy fighting between Israeli troops and Palestinian militants on the outskirts of Rafah has displaced some 600,000 people, a quarter of Gaza's population, UN officials say. Another 100,000 civilians have fled parts of northern Gaza now that the Israeli military has restarted combat operations there. Pentagon officials said the fighting in Gaza wasn't threatening the new shoreline aid distribution area, but they have made it clear that security conditions will be monitored closely and could prompt a shutdown of the maritime route, even just temporarily. Already, the site has been targeted by mortar fire during its construction and Hamas has threatened to target any foreign forces who "occupy" the Gaza Strip. The "protection of US forces participating is a top priority. And as such, in the last

several weeks, the United States and Israel have developed an integrated security plan to protect all the personnel who are working," said Navy Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, a deputy commander at the US military's Central Command. "We are confident in the ability of this security arrangement to protect those involved." Israeli forces will be in charge of security on the shore, but there are also two US Navy warships near the area in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the USS Arleigh Burke and the USS Paul Ignatius. Both ships are destroyers equipped with a wide range of weapons and capabilities to protect American troops off shore and allies on the beach. Aid agencies say they are running out of food in southern Gaza and fuel is dwindling, which will force hospitals to shut down critical operations and halt truck deliveries of aid. The United Nations and other agencies have warned for weeks that an Israel assault on Rafah, which is on the border with Egypt near the main aid entry points, would cripple humanitarian operations and cause a disastrous surge in civilian casualties. More than 1.4 million Palestinians — half of Gaza's population — have been sheltering in Rafah, most after fleeing Israel's offensives elsewhere. The first cargo ship loaded with 475 pallets of food left Cyprus last week to rendezvous with a US military ship, the Roy P. Benavidez, which is off the coast of Gaza. The pallets of aid on the MV Sagamore were moved onto the Benavidez. The Pentagon said moving the aid between ships was an effort to be ready so it could flow quickly once the pier and the causeway were installed. The installation of the pier several miles (kilometers) off the coast and of the causeway, which is now anchored to the beach, was delayed for nearly two weeks because of bad weather and high seas. The sea conditions made it too dangerous for US and Israeli troops to secure the causeway to the shore and do other final assembly work, US officials said.

# Slovak lone wolf charged with PM assassination attempt

AP ■ BANSKA BYSTRICA



Slovakia's incumbent President Zuzana Caputova speaks during joint press statements with President elect Peter Pellegrini at the presidential palace in Bratislava, Slovakia, on Thursday. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico was in serious but stable condition Thursday, a hospital official said, after the populist leader was shot multiple times in an assassination attempt.

Slovak authorities charged a man Thursday with attempting to assassinate populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, saying the suspect acted alone in a politically motivated attack that laid bare the extreme polarization that has gripped the small central European country. Fico, 59, was in serious but stable condition a day after being shot multiple times in the stomach, a hospital official said. President-elect Peter Pellegrini said he spoke to Fico at the hospital but confirmed his condition "remains very serious." The attempted assassination has shocked the nation and reverberated across the continent weeks ahead of European elections. While President Zuzana Caputova called on everyone to take the opportunity to dial back the vitriol that has characterized the political debate, some government ministers took aim at Slovakia's media for contributing to the fractious atmosphere. Interior Minister Matus Sutaj Estok asked jour-

nalists to "reflect" on how they had covered Fico's policies. He referred to the suspect — who was charged with premeditated murder — as a "lone wolf" who did not belong to any political groups, though he said the attack itself was politically motivated. Fico has long been a divisive figure in Slovakia and beyond, and his return to power last year on a pro-Russian, anti-American message led to even greater worries among fellow

European Union and NATO members that he would abandon his country's pro-Western course — particularly on Ukraine. At the start of Russia's invasion, Slovakia was one of Ukraine's staunchest supporters, but Fico halted arms deliveries to the neighbor when he came to power. Fico's government has also made efforts to overhaul public broadcasting — a move critics said would result in the

government's full control of public television and radio. That coupled with his plans to amend the penal code to eliminate a special anti-graft prosecutor have led opponents to worry that Fico will lead Slovakia down a more autocratic path. Thousands of demonstrators have repeatedly rallied in the capital and around the country of 5.4 million to protest his policies. Slovak police have provided little information on the identity of the suspect. But unconfirmed media reports suggested he was a 71-year-old retiree who was known as an amateur poet, and may have previously worked as a security guard at a mall in the country's southwest. At a news conference on Thursday following a meeting of Slovakia's Security Council, government ministers gave more details about the man, while still not naming him. Estok said that the man himself cited his dissatisfaction with several of Fico's policies as motivation for the attack. The minister said presidential elections in the spring prompted the assault, and that the suspect

# Shooting of Slovak PM sends shockwaves across Europe

Bratislava (AP): The shooting Wednesday of Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico in the town of Handlova following a political event sent shockwaves across Europe three weeks before EU parliament elections are scheduled to be held. Leaders from across the political divide denounced the apparent assassination attempt against the populist, pro-Russian leader, calling it an attack on democracy. Here's what European leaders and others are saying: "What has happened is something that we cannot seem to realize because we cannot comprehend it. A physical attack on the prime minister is, first of all, an attack on a person, but it is also an attack on democracy. Any violence is unacceptable. Hateful rhetoric we've been witnessing in society leads to hateful actions. Please let's stop it." — Slovak President Zuzana Caputova, Fico's political rival, in a televised statement. — "An assassination attempt on one of the highest constitutional officials is an unprecedented threat to Slovak democracy. If we express different political opinions with guns in the squares, and not in polling stations, we endanger everything we have built together in 31 years of Slovak sovereignty." — Slovak President-elect Peter Pellegrini. had attended a recent anti-government protest. "I can confirm to you that the reason it was a politically motivated, attempted premeditated murder is as the suspect himself said: the media information that he had

# WH blocks release of Biden's special counsel interview audio, says GOP is being political

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden has asserted executive privilege over audio of his interview with special counsel Robert Hur that's at the center of a Republican effort to hold Attorney General Merrick Garland in contempt of Congress, the Justice Department told lawmakers on Thursday. It comes as the the House Oversight and Accountability Committee and the Judiciary Committee are each expected to hold a hearing to recommend that the full House refer Garland to the Justice Department for the contempt

charges over the department's refusal to hand over the audio. Garland advised Biden in a letter on Thursday that the audio falls within the scope of executive privilege. Garland told the Democratic president that the "committee's needs are plainly insufficient to outweigh the deleterious effects that the production of the recordings would have on the integrity and effectiveness of similar law enforcement investigations in the future." Assistant Attorney General Carlos Felipe Uriarte urged lawmakers not to proceed with the contempt effort to avoid "unnecessary and

unwarranted conflict." "It is the longstanding position of the executive branch held by administrations of both parties that an official who asserts the president's claim of executive privilege cannot be held in contempt of Congress," Uriarte wrote. White House Counsel Ed Siskel wrote in a separate, scathing letter to Congress on Thursday that lawmakers' effort to obtain the recording was absent any legitimate purpose and lays bare their likely goal — "to chop them up, distort them, and use them for partisan political purposes." The White House letter is a tacit admission that there are

moments from the interview it fears portray Biden in a negative light in an election year — and that could be exacerbated by the release, or selective release, of the audio. The transcript of the Hur interview showed Biden struggling to recall some dates and occasionally confusing some details — something long-time aides says he's done for years in both public and private — but otherwise showing deep recall in other areas. Biden and his aides are particularly sensitive to questions about his age. At 81, he's the oldest ever president, and he's seeking another four year term.

# S Korean court denies bid to halt medical school admissions boost

AP ■ JERUSALEM

A South Korean court ruled in favour of the government's contentious plan to drastically boost medical school admissions on Thursday. A standoff between the government and doctors opposed to the plan has shaken the country's medical system for months. More than 10,000 junior doctors have been on strike since February in protest. The Seoul High Court rejected a request from striking doctors and other opponents for an injunction to block the plan, which would raise the

medical school enrollment quota by 2,000 next year, from the current cap of 3,058. Lee Byung-chul, a lawyer for the doctors, said he will prepare to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court, the country's top court. He said he will issue an official statement on Thursday's ruling after reviewing details of the verdict. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo welcomed the ruling, saying the government appreciates "the wise ruling by the judicial branch." He said the government will take steps to finalise medical school admission plans for the 2025 academic year. The striking doctors represent

a fraction of all doctors in South Korea, estimated to number between 115,000 and 140,000. But in some major hospitals, they account for about 30 per cent to 40 per cent of doctors, assisting fully qualified doctors and department chiefs during surgeries and other treatments while training. Their walkouts have caused cancellations to numerous surgeries and other treatments at their hospitals. Officials say the plan is aimed at adding more doctors, because South Korea has one of the world's fastest-aging populations and its doctor-to-population ratio is among the lowest in the developed

world. Doctors say schools aren't ready to handle an abrupt increase in students and that it would ultimately undermine the country's medical services. They say the government plan would also result in doctors performing unnecessary treatments because of greater competition. But critics argue that many doctors are mainly worried that more competition would lower their incomes. Government officials earlier threatened to suspend the licenses of the striking doctors but later halted related administrative steps to facilitate dialogue with the strikers.



# Xi, Putin hint at political settlement to end war

## US warned against hindering close China-Russia ties

PTI ■ BEIJING

Chinese President Xi Jinping on Thursday hinted at a political settlement to end the Ukraine war, saying he expects peace and stability will return to the European continent, shortly after his talks with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin as the two leaders vowed to counter any attempt by the US to hinder their strategic ties.

Xi said at a joint press conference with Putin after their talks. A joint statement issued after Putin-Xi talks said that both sides believe that for "a sustainable settlement of the Ukrainian crisis, it is necessary to eliminate its root causes."

In a veiled criticism of the US, which is pressuring Beijing to end its strategic ties with Russia, the joint statement said relations between China and Russia do not target any third countries, therefore they will counter any attempts to hinder such cooperation. "The two sides note that the relationship between Russia and China has progressed to a more advanced interstate cooperation compared to the mili-



Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, and Russian President Vladimir Putin attend a signing ceremony in Beijing, China, on Thursday AP/PTI

tary-political unions of the Cold War era as it is not bloc or confrontational in nature, nor does it target any third countries," Russia's new agency Tass quoted the document as saying. According to the statement, Russia and China reaffirmed their resolve to defend their legitimate rights and interests and block any attempts to impede a normal development of bilateral ties, and any interference in the internal affairs of the two nations or to impose restrictions on their economic, technological and foreign policy potential.

Putni's visit to China, the second since last October, follows Xi's just concluded European Union tour to France, Serbia and

Hungary where the Chinese leader came under pressure from EU leaders not to sell arms to Russia. The US too is mounting pressure on China not to sell arms to Russia. While Xi, 70, regards his ties with Putin, 71, as counter to the US' increasing hostility towards China, which Beijing says is aimed at countering its rise, there is unease here over the Russian leader's continuation of the Ukraine war. Though Beijing has not publicly supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the "no-limits" China-Russia strategic partnership has come under intense scrutiny from the US and its allies, who have imposed sanctions on Moscow and repeatedly called Beijing to use its lever-

age to bring the war to an end. Xi, who has met Putin more than 40 times, welcomed his "old friend", saying the relations between the two countries have withstood an international "storm and changes" and set a model for mutual respect and cooperation. The two leaders held wide-ranging talks on a host of issues, the significant among them is the way out to end the Ukraine war. Xi said the two sides believe that a political settlement is the right way forward for the Ukraine crisis. China's position on this issue is consistent and clear, including observing the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, respecting the legitimate security concerns of all parties, and building a new security architecture that is balanced, effective and sustainable. For his part, Putin said he is open to a negotiated settlement. "We have never refused to negotiate," Putin said. "We are seeking a comprehensive, sustainable and just settlement of this conflict through peaceful means," he told China's state-run Xinhua news agency. "We are open to a dialogue on Ukraine, but such negotiations must take into account the interests of all countries involved in the conflict, including ours," he said. Putin emphasised that the four principles for the peaceful resolution of the Ukraine crisis recently proposed by Xi seamlessly fit in the above-mentioned document.

### UK's Labour Party unveils pledges in hopes of winning next election

London (AP): Britain's still undeclared election campaign stepped up a gear on Thursday when opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer announced the key pledges that he hopes will make him the UK's next prime minister later this year. The centre-left party is focusing on economic stability, security, health and education as it tries to win over disillusioned voters and regain power after 14 years in opposition.

Among Starmer's six promises are restoring economic stability after years of soaring inflation and high mortgage rates, establishing a publicly owned green-energy company and toughening border controls. Labour also says it will cut waiting times for treatment in the state-funded National Health Service, recruit more police officers to curb low-level crime that blights neighbourhoods and hire thousands of new teachers. Money for the pledges will come from modest revenue-raising measures including a windfall tax on oil and gas companies and an end to tax breaks for private schools. At a launch event in Essex, an electoral bellwether county east of London, Starmer said the promises were "our down-payment on change" that would take a decade to implement. Starmer, 61, has dragged Labour toward the political centre ground since taking over in 2020 from veteran socialist Jeremy Corbyn, who led Labour to election defeats in 2017 and 2019. He has dropped Corbyn's opposition to Britain's nuclear weapons, backed military aid to Ukraine, apologised for antisemitism within the party under Corbyn and stressed the party's commitment to balancing the books.

Labour is strongly favoured to defeat Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservatives, who have ejected two leaders — Boris Johnson and Liz Truss — since 2022 amid a stuttering economy and a drumbeat of ethics scandals. An election must be held by January 2025, and the date will be decided by Sunak, who has said he expects it to be in the second half of this year. Starmer said that after turmoil under the Tories, "stability is change, and that's why it has to be our first step."

Labour's pledge card — and an accompanying advertising campaign featuring Starmer looking resolute — evoked memories of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who also dragged a fractious party toward the centre and won three successive election victories in 1997, 2001 and 2005.

# Imran appears before Pak top court via video link

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Incarcerated former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan on Thursday appeared before the Supreme Court via a video link in a case about changes in the anti-corruption laws but did not get to speak as a petitioner in the matter.

However, a leaked image of the 71-year-old founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's image showing him attending the court hearing has prompted the Supreme Court administration to initiate a probe to find out the source for the leak, The News International reported citing sources.

Khan appearing via the video link was possible after Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa on Tuesday while hearing an appeal by the government against annulment of certain changes in the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) laws by the previous government had ordered the authorities to present Khan virtually for his statement.

Khan had challenged the tweaks in the NAB laws and the top court in September last year had accepted his plea which reopened dozens of cases of alleged corruption against some leading politicians, including Khan's arch rival Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) supreme Nawaz Sharif. A five-member Supreme Court larger bench, headed by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa and comprising Justice Amin-ud-Din Khan, Justice Jamal Khan Mandokhail, Justice Athar Minallah and Justice Hasan Azhar Rizvi

heard the case. During the hearing, senior counsel Khawaja Haris, who earlier represented Imran Khan in the first round of litigation, appeared before the court for legal assistance while Makhdoom Ali Khan was present on behalf of the federal government. Dawn.com reported. The SC, noting that the bench was unavailable next week, adjourned the hearing indefinitely, it said.

Khan appeared as a petitioner through video link in the case, but the hearing was not live streamed unlike the current practice, which had been in vogue since the top judge started it last year after becoming the chief justice. Even the previous proceedings of the case were broadcast live by the SC but not Thursday's hearing.

Consequently, Khan's followers could not see him live for the first time since he was arrested in August last year.

According to Dawn.com, speaking with media persons outside the Supreme Court, PTI's senator Ali Zafar said, the case is in its "very early stages" and added, it was the Bench's jurisdiction whether or not Khan's statement is broadcast live. However, his party shared the image of the purported video call on a laptop screen showing Khan seated in the e-court room wearing a light-blue shirt. The News International quoted sources to report that the SC authorities have started the investigations to ascertain how the image was leaked and added that the police will take action against whoever is found involved in this "as this was done in viola-

tion of the courtroom rules."

"Directions have been issued to review the CCTV footage and identify the person who captured the image. After this, the frame size of the video link was minimised," it said.

Khan's party said in a statement that there was no live streaming from the apex court as the registrar maintained that it was the prerogative of the bench to decide.

"Judicial process demands fairness and openness, (and) transparency can only be ensured through public view of proceedings. Refusal to stream proceedings advances unfairness and non-transparency and must be condemned. CJ has changed the process unilaterally and has discredited his own decision that brought him fame soon after he took over," it said.

Khan has been charged in several cases, including cyber and unlawful marriage, and has remained imprisoned even though he had obtained bail in some other cases. He was arrested in August last year and since then has been incarcerated, first in the Attock Jail and now in Adiala Jail and out of sight. His appearance in court comes a day after two courts granted him relief in separate cases, including the Al-Qadir Trust matter. A division of the high court led by Chief Justice Aamer Farooq and Justice Tariq Mahmood Jahangiri granted him bail in the RS 60 billion case, while Judicial Magistrate Suhaib Bilal Ranjha also acquitted him in a case registered against him at the Khanna police station in connection with the Azadi March in 2022.

# Ukraine checks Russia offensive in key town

AP ■ KYIV

Ukrainian units locked in street battles with the Kremlin's forces in a key north-eastern Ukraine town have halted the Russian advance, military officials in Kyiv claimed Thursday, though a senior Moscow official said the frontline push had enough resources to keep going.

Russian attempts to establish a foothold in the town of Vovchansk, which is among the largest towns in Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region with a prewar population of 17,000, "have been foiled", Ukraine's general staff said in a midday report.

It was not possible to indepen-

dently verify the claim. Vovchansk, located just 5 km (3 miles) from the Russian border, has been a hotspot in the fighting in recent days. Russia launched an offensive in the Kharkiv area late last week, significantly adding to the pressure on Ukraine's outnumbered and outgunned forces which are waiting for delayed deliveries of crucial weapons and ammunition from Western partners.

Russia has also been testing defences at other points along the roughly 1,000-km (620-mile) front line snaking from north to south through eastern Ukraine. That line has barely changed over the past 18 months in what became a war

of attrition. Recent Russian attacks have come in the eastern Donetsk region, as well as the Chernihiv and Sumy regions in the north and in the southern Zaporizhzhia region. The apparent aim is to stretch depleted Ukrainian resources and exploit weaknesses.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with his top military commanders in Kharkiv on Thursday and said the region "is generally under control". However, he acknowledged on social media that the situation is "extremely difficult" and said Ukraine was again strengthening its units in Kharkiv.

"We clearly see how the occupier is trying to distract our

forces and make our combat work less concentrated," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address Wednesday. Ukrainian authorities have evacuated some 8,000 civilians from Vovchansk. The Russian army's only tactic is to reduce towns and villages to ruins with aerial strikes before its units move in. Former Russian defence minister and now the head of the presidential Security Council Sergei Shoigu insisted Russian troops are pushing the offensive in many directions and that "it's going quite well".

"I hope we will keep advancing. We have certain reserves for the purpose, in personnel, equipment and munitions," he said.

# Mosque attack in northern Nigeria leaves 8 dead

AP ■ ABUJA

Abuja, May 16 (AP) At least eight worshippers were killed and 16 others injured early Wednesday morning after a man attacked a mosque with a locally made explosive in northern Nigeria's Kano state, resulting in a fire outbreak, the police said.

The suspect, a 38-year-old local resident, confessed that he attacked the mosque in Kano's remote Gadan village "purely in hostility following (a) prolonged family disagreement," police spokesman Abdullahi Haruna said in a statement on Wednesday.

Eight of those injured died later in a hospital, Haruna

later told local Channels Television on Thursday. Four children were among the injured worshippers, although it was not clear if any of the children died.

The incident caused panic in Kano, northern Nigeria's largest state, where periodic religion-related unrest has occurred over the years, sometimes resulting in violence. The suspect invaded the mosque with "a locally prepared bomb and exploded it," local police chief Umar Sanda told reporters. "It has nothing to do with terrorism."

Footage broadcast by the local TVC station showed charred walls and burned furniture in the mosque, the main place of

worship for Gadan village in Muslim-dominated Kano state. Local media also reported the worshippers were locked inside the mosque, making it difficult for them to escape. "Some children ran for their lives with fire all over them. We had to put water to quench it," Hussaini Adamu, a resident, told TVC. The police cordoned off the scene while the injured were rushed to a hospital in the state capital.

"The disagreement (was) over sharing of inheritance of which those that (the attacker) alleged to have cheated on him were in the mosque at that moment and he did that for his voice to be heard," the police statement said.

# The Netherlands veers to right

AP ■ THE HAGUE

Anti-Islam firebrand Geert Wilders and three other party leaders agreed on a coalition deal early Thursday that veers the Netherlands toward the hard right, capping a half year of tumultuous negotiations that still left it unclear who would become prime minister.

The "Hope, courage and pride" agreement introduces strict measures on asylum seekers, scraps family reunification for refugees and seeks to reduce the number of international students studying in the country. "Deport people without a valid residence permit as much as possible, even forcibly," the 26-page document says.

"We are writing history today," Wilders proclaimed, saying he had made sure the three other coalition parties, including the one of outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte, had accepted the core of his programme.

"The sun will shine again in the Netherlands," Wilders said. "It is the strongest asylum policy ever."

With hard-right and populist parties now part of or leading a half dozen governments in the 27-nation European Union, they appear positioned to make gains in the bloc's June 6-9 election. Wilders has been a political ally of radical right and populist leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni and French opposition leader Marine Le Pen.

"My party will be at the centre of power. It makes us enormously proud," Wilders said. He had to make person-

al compromises, though. Wilders has already reluctantly acknowledged that he will not succeed Rutte at the country's helm. The parties still have to agree on a prime minister, who is expected to be a technocrat from outside the party structures.

Speculation has centred on Ronald Plasterk from the Labor Party, who shot back to prominence this year when he became the first "scout" to hold talks with political leaders about possible coalitions.

The deal said the next government will continue with existing plans to combat climate change, including continuing to pay for a climate change fund established last year. But the Farmers Citizens Movement is part of the coalition, and the deal includes soothing language and concessions to farmers who have blocked cities with tractors during disruptive protests.

Other points in the agreement include increasing social housing, stricter sentences for serious crimes and capping property taxes.

The group intends to continue supporting Ukraine and wants to enshrine the NATO standard of spending 2% of gross domestic product on defence into law. EU headquarters may not welcome a line in the coalition deal that says "the Netherlands is very critical against further enlargement of the European Union," at a time when many other member nations want to add Ukraine and some other eastern nations.

The EU needs unanimity among its current nations before it can add more.

# Indonesia seeds clouds to block rainfall after floods killed at least 67 people

AP ■ TANAH DATAR

Indonesian authorities seeded clouds on Wednesday, trying to prevent further rain and flash floods after deluges that hit Sumatra Island over the weekend left at least 67 people dead and another 20 missing.

Monsoon rains triggered a landslide of mud and cold lava from Mount Marapi, eventually causing rivers to breach their banks. The deluge tore through mountainside villages in four districts in West Sumatra province just before midnight on Saturday.

The floods swept away people and dozens of homes and submerged hundreds of houses and buildings, forcing more than 1,500 families to flee to temporary government shelters, according to National Disaster Management Agency spokesman Abdul Muhari. He said 67 bodies had been pulled from mud and rivers by Wednesday, mostly in the worst-hit Agam and Tanah Datar districts, while rescuers are searching for 20 people reported missing. About 44 villagers were injured. Cloud seeding involves dispersing particles into clouds to create precipitation, thereby modifying the weather.

National Disaster Management Agency chief Suharyanto said the aim of Wednesday's action was to redirect the rain elsewhere and keep the search operation free of downpours, which could hamper the rescuers' progress. Suharyanto, who goes by a single name like many Indonesians, said the

emergency response will last until May 25. Authorities are evaluating which areas are no longer inhabitable and which residents need to be relocated "from the danger zone".

Suharyanto spoke during a visit to the devastated villages in hard-hit Tanah Datar district on Wednesday. Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency head Dwikorita Karnawati has said that more rain was forecast for West Sumatra in the coming days, and that extreme rainfall could continue until next week. Karnawati said an air force plane was sent up to shoot salt flares into the clouds on Wednesday to get the clouds to release water and break up before they reach the devastated areas in West Sumatra

province. About 15 tons of salt have been prepared for the seeding operation, she said.

Muhari, the disaster agency spokesperson, said Indonesia's air force teamed up with the country's technology agency to carry out two rounds of cloud seeding Wednesday each using a ton of sodium chloride, or salt. Rescue workers meanwhile combed through rivers and the rubble of devastated villages where roads were transformed into murky brown rivers and villages were left covered by thick mud, rocks, and uprooted trees. Heavy rains cause frequent landslides and flash floods in Indonesia, an archipelago nation of more than 17,000 islands where millions of people live in mountainous areas or near floodplains.

# Georgia's leader says divisive media bill unacceptable

Tbilisi (Georgia): A controversial media bill passed this week by Georgia's parliament is "unacceptable" and will be vetoed, President Salome Zourabichvili said Thursday, reaffirming her opposition to a measure that critics say is a threat to free speech.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Zourabichvili harshly criticised the ruling Georgian Dream party for pushing the bill that also is widely seen as a threat to Georgia's aspirations to join the European Union.

The bill, passed on Tuesday, requires media and non-governmental organisations and other nonprofit groups to register as "pursuing the interests of a foreign power" if they receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad. The government says the bill is needed to stem what it deems to be harmful foreign actors trying to destabilise politics in the South Caucasus nation of 3.7 million people. "It's unacceptable because it reflects a turn of the Georgian attitudes towards the civil society, towards the media and towards the recommendations of the European Commission that are not consistent with what our declared policy of going towards a European integration," Zourabichvili told the AP. She reaffirmed her intention to veto it because it "goes directly against the spirit or the letter of EU recommendations". Zourabichvili is increasingly at odds with the Georgian Dream party, which has a majority sufficient to override her veto. She has until May 28 — 14 days after its passage — to act. AP

# '9 Egyptians accused of causing deadly shipwreck were misidentified'

AP ■ ATHENS

The legal defense team for nine Egyptian men due to go on trial in southern Greece next week accused of causing one of the Mediterranean's deadliest shipwrecks said Thursday they will argue that Greece has no jurisdiction in the case, and insisted their clients were innocent survivors who have been unjustly prosecuted.

The nine, whose ages range from early 20s to early 40s, are due to go on trial in the southern city of Kalamata on May 21 on a series of charges, including migrant smuggling, participation in a criminal organization and causing a deadly shipwreck. They face multiple

charges if convicted. The Adriana, an overcrowded fishing trawler, had been sailing from Libya to Italy with hundreds of asylum-seekers on board when it sank on June 14 in international waters off the southwestern coast of Greece. The exact number of people on board has never been established, but estimates range from around 500 to more than 700. Only 104 people survived — all men and boys from Syria, Egypt, Pakistan and two Palestinians — and about 80 bodies were recovered. The vessel sank in one of the Mediterranean's deepest areas, making recovery efforts all but impossible.

The Greek lawyers who make up the defense team spoke

during a news conference in Athens on Thursday. They maintained their clients' innocence, saying all nine defendants had been paying passengers who had been misidentified as crew members by other survivors who gave testimonies under duress just hours after having been rescued. The nine "are random people, smuggled people who paid the same amounts as all the others to take this trip to Italy aiming for a better life, and they are accused of being part of the smuggling team," lawyer and defense team member Vicky Aggelidou said. Dimitris Choulis, another lawyer and member of the legal team, said that Greek authorities named the defendants as crew members following testi-

mony by nine other survivors who identified them for having done things as simple as handing bottles of water or pieces of fruit to other passengers. "For nearly a year now, nine people have been in prison without knowing what they are in prison for," Choulis said. "For me, it is very sad to visit and see people in prison who do not understand why they are there," he added.

While the Adriana was sailing in international waters, the area was within Greece's search and rescue zone of responsibility. Greece's coast guard had been shadowing the vessel for a full day without attempting a rescue of those on board. A patrol boat and at least two merchant ships were in the vicinity when the

trawler capsized and sank. In the aftermath of the sinking, some survivors said the coast guard had been attempting to tow the boat when it sank, and rights activists have accused Greek authorities of triggering the shipwreck while attempting to tow the boat out of Greece's zone of responsibility.

Greek authorities have rejected accusations of triggering the shipwreck and have insisted the trawler's crew members had refused to accept help from the nearby merchant ships and from the Greek coast guard. A separate investigation being carried out by Greece's naval court hasn't yet reached any conclusion, and the defense team hasn't been given any access to any part of it. The

Egyptians' defense team also argues that because the shipwreck occurred in international waters, Greece courts don't have jurisdiction to try the case, and the defense will move to have the case dismissed on those grounds when the trial opens in Kalamata next week. Greece lies along one of the most popular routes into the European Union for people fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. While most of those cross into the country's eastern Aegean Sea islands from the nearby Turkish coast, others try to skirt Greece altogether and head from north Africa to Italy across the longer and more dangerous Mediterranean route.

# Sensex jumps 676 points, Nifty closes above 22,400 on global stocks rally

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty shot up nearly 1 per cent on Thursday, driven by buying in HDFC Bank and Infosys and a rally in the US and Asian markets.

In a highly volatile trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 676.69 points or 0.93 per cent to settle at 73,663.72. During the day, it hit a high of 73,749.47 and a low of 72,529.97. The NSE Nifty surged 203.30 points or 0.92 per cent to 22,403.85.

“The domestic market experienced a late surge, driven by strong global trends that pointed to lower-than-expected US consumer inflation figures, which suggests at least two interest rate cuts in 2024,” Geojit Financial Services Head of Research Vinod Nair said.

Among the Sensex components, Mahindra & Mahindra, Bharti Airtel, Tech Mahindra, Titan, Infosys, JSW Steel, Bajaj Finserv, HDFC Bank, Larsen & Toubro and Kotak Mahindra Bank were the major gainers.

Maruti, State Bank of India, Power Grid, Tata Motors and IndusInd Bank were the laggard.

“The market exhibited volatility during trading hours but managed to gain nearly one per cent, indicating a continuation of its recovery trend. Positive global cues led to a gap-up



opening in the Nifty; however, the initial gains diminished quickly as the session progressed. Subsequently, it witnessed sharp fluctuations on both sides before settling near the day's peak,” said Ajit Mishra — SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 1.07 per cent and smallcap index rallied 0.85 per cent. Among the indices, capital goods jumped 2.05 per cent, followed by industrials (1.99 per cent), teck (1.66 per cent), realty (1.59 per cent), IT (1.55 per cent), telecommunication (0.99 per cent) and healthcare (0.70 per cent). Utilities index emerged as the only

laggard.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled with gains. European markets were trading lower. Wall Street ended higher on Wednesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.33 per cent to USD 82.45 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,832.83 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

Halting its three-day rally, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined 117.58 points or 0.16 per cent to settle at 72,987.03 on Wednesday. The NSE Nifty dipped 17.30 points or 0.08 per cent to 22,200.55.

# Silver surges ₹1,800 to hit all time high; gold jumps ₹650

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Silver soared by Rs 1,800 to hit a fresh record high of Rs 88,000 per kg on Thursday, while gold prices jumped Rs 650 to Rs 74,050 per 10 grams in line with strong global trends.

According to HDFC Securities, rising for the second straight session, silver prices surged Rs 1,800 to hit its lifetime high of Rs 88,700 per kg in Delhi. It had closed at Rs 86,900 per kg in the previous session.

Meanwhile, the precious metal price jumped from Rs 650 to Rs 74,050 per 10 grams. In the previous session, it had closed at Rs 73,400 per 10 grams.

Bullion rose on Thursday as yesterday's lower US inflation figures raised the prospect of interest rate cuts as early as September. In April, the underlying US inflation rate fell for the first time in six months.

“Following the data release, the US dollar index slipped to a fifth-week low, and US Treasury yields declined,

which is also positive for the precious metal,” Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst, Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,386 per ounce, up by USD 21 from the previous close.

“Gold prices maintain a positive stance overall, some minor profit booking may occur from higher levels, especially as buying driven by the anticipated consumer price index (CPI) event appears to have been priced in,” Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said.

Silver was also quoted higher at USD 29.55 per ounce. In the previous session, it had settled at USD 28.80 per ounce.

“The swift rise in silver prices is primarily due to its unique industrial properties, which set it apart from gold. Key industrial metals like copper, aluminium, zinc, and lead prices have risen sharply since April on worries over supply threat.

# India PC market grew 2.6 per cent in January, March to 3.07 million units

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The traditional PC market in India, comprising desktops, notebooks, and workstations, grew 2.6 per cent to 30.7 lakh units in the March quarter, market research firm International Data Corporation said on Thursday.

HP led the personal computer (PC) market with a 30.1 per cent share despite an 8.8 per cent decline in shipments. The company's PC shipment dropped to 9.23 lakh units during the quarter from 10.12 lakh a year ago.

Dell Technologies and Acer Group's PC volume shipments market share grew 28.8 per cent each to 17.5 and 15.4 per cent, respectively.

The market shares of Lenovo and Asus declined to 15.1 and 5.9 per cent, respectively, during the reported quarter. The share of Lenovo declined 1.3 per cent to 4.64 lakh units from 4.7 lakh while that of Asus declined 8.3 per cent to 1.82 lakh from 1.98 lakh on a year-on-year basis.

“The PC market in India is facing challenges in the commercial segment due to reduced PC procurement from the IT and IITES sector and global accounts which traditionally drive significant volumes,” IDC India Associate Vice President, Client Devices and IPDS, Navkendar Singh, said.

The market is expected to start recovering by the end of 2024 with refresh buying from the enterprise segment, Singh said.

According to the International Data Corporation (IDC) Worldwide Quarterly Personal Computing Device Tracker report, the desktop and workstation categories grew 10.1 per cent and 2.7 per cent year-on-year, respectively, and notebooks declined 1.7 per cent. Even with reduced demand for notebooks, premium notebooks (priced above USD 1,000) grew a healthy 21 per cent.

“The vendors have also fast-tracked the local assembly of commercial notebooks, which will help reduce the imports in the next few quarters,” Singh said.

# Oberoi Realty shares hit 52 weeks high; rally nearly nine per cent

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Shares of Oberoi Realty on Thursday jumped nearly 9 per cent after the company posted a 64 per cent increase in consolidated net profit for the March quarter of 2024 and announced plans to raise up to Rs 4,000 crore through issuance of equity shares and non-convertible debentures.

The stock climbed 8.70 per cent to Rs 1,712.30 -- its 52-week high, on the BSE. At the NSE, it rallied 8.81 per cent to the one-year high of Rs 1,712.85 apiece.

The stock climbed 3.52 per cent on the BSE on Wednesday. Oberoi Realty has posted 64



per cent increase in consolidated net profit at Rs 788.03 crore for the March quarter of 2023-24. Its net profit stood at Rs 480.29 crore in the year-ago period.

Total income rose to Rs 1,558.56 crore in the quarter, from Rs 995.11 crore in the year-ago period, according to a regulatory filing on Tuesday. During 2023-24, the

company's net profit increased to Rs 1,926.60 crore, from Rs 1,904.54 crore in the preceding year. Total income rose to Rs 4,818.77 crore in the last fiscal, from Rs 4,293.20 crore in 2022-23.

The board has passed a resolution for issuance of non-convertible debentures up to an aggregate amount of Rs 2,000 crore by way of private placement, in one or more tranches.

It also passed a resolution for issuance of equity shares or securities for an aggregate amount of up to Rs 2,000 crore by way of one or more qualified institutions placement, public and/or private offerings.

# Air passenger traffic in India to touch 407-418 million this fiscal, says Icra

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Air passenger traffic in the country is projected to touch record levels in the range of 407-418 million in the current financial year and the revenues of select airport operators together are estimated to rise 15-17 per cent during the same period, rating agency Icra said on Thursday.

Surpassing the pre-Covid level by 10 per cent, the traffic reached 376.4 million in the fiscal ended March 2024.

In a report, Icra said the overall traffic is expected to see a healthy growth of around 8-11 per cent year-on-



year to around 407-418 million in FY2025, supported by strong pick-up in both leisure and business travel, improving connectivity to newer destinations in the domestic segment and the

continued uptick in international travel. Indian airport operators' revenue is anticipated to grow 15-17 per cent on an annual basis in the current fiscal ending March 2025, it added.

Icra's sample set of airport operators include Airports Authority of India (AAI) as well as operators of Delhi, Hyderabad and Cochin international airports.

“The recovery in the Indian airport passenger traffic is one of the best compared to other major global counterparts. India accounted for 4.2 per cent of the global passenger traffic in CY2023, and its share in passenger traffic has improved from 3.8 per cent in CY2019.

“While the global passenger traffic recovered to just 96 per cent of global passenger traffic in CY2023, the Indian airport passenger traffic

# Rupee settles 4 paise lower at 83.50 against US dollar

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
The rupee stayed range-bound and settled 4 paise lower at 83.50 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, weighed down by unabated foreign fund outflows amid investors' weak appetite for riskier assets.

However, a firm trend in domestic equities supported the local unit and restricted its losses, forex traders said.

The rupee remains under pressure due to ongoing elections and foreign fund outflows, and the same shall subside once the results are out, they added.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit traded in a narrow range. It opened at 83.45 and touched an intraday high of 83.44 and a low of 83.50.

The domestic unit finally settled for the day at 83.50

(provisional), down 4 paise from its previous close.

On Wednesday, the rupee had settled at 83.46 against the US dollar.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading at 104.40, higher by 0.06 per cent.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.33 per cent to USD 82.48 per barrel.

Oil price has corrected substantially following a surge to USD 93 per barrel and is currently hovering around USD 82 per barrel. This decline in oil prices is set to have a beneficial effect on India's trade balance, especially considering that petroleum products make up 25 per cent of its total import spending, according to experts.

# Odisha FPOs tap global markets with first export of mangoes, vegetables

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
In a significant boost to farm exports from Odisha, Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) in the state have marked their foray into the global markets with the first commercial shipment of fresh mangoes and vegetables.

This feat was made possible through a strategic collaboration between the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), the state Directorate of Horticulture and Palladium which is the technical support unit for the ‘Promotion and Stabilisation of Farmer Producer Organisations (PSFPO)’ project.

On May 15, as much as 0.75



tonne of fresh vegetables were exported to Dubai from the Biju Patnaik International Airport, Bhubaneswar. This included 0.5 MT supplied by the Madanamohana Farmers Producer Cooperative Society Ltd, an FPO from Dhenkanal district, a statement said.

Besides, 1.22 tonne of premium Amrapali and Dussehri variety mangoes from the same FPO were shipped to Italy over the last

couple of days, it said. Farmers associated with these FPOs realised 20-30 per cent higher prices for their produce in the export markets as compared to domestic sales, it added.

Lauding the efforts, Sitakananda Mandal, APEDA's Regional Head, said, “We wanted to facilitate exports of fresh produce this season. Our partnership with Palladium made this possible

as they identified and connected the FPOs with exporters.”

“The work done by Palladium in linking Odisha's FPOs with global markets is praiseworthy,” Mandal added. Biswajit Behera, Associate Director of Palladium, said with over 800 FPOs, Odisha has immense potential to export fresh farm produce worldwide.

The market linkages created with export supply chains will boost farmer incomes and create sustainable business opportunities for the state's FPOs, he stated.

“We aim to provide more such global markets connected to FPOs in remote areas and help them adopt efficient quality control systems to scale up their operations,” Behera said.

# Reliance completes sale of REC Solar Norway



**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Reliance Industries Ltd on Thursday said it has completed the sale of REC Solar Norway AS to Oslo-listed Elkem ASA for around USD 22 million.

REC Norway is a wholly-owned unit of REC Solar Holdings and is involved in the manufacturing of kerf-based polysilicon in the Scandinavian country.

In October 2021, a unit of Reliance acquired Norway's solar panel manufacturer at an enterprise value of USD 771 million as the Indian oil-to-retail conglomerate sought to extend its dominance into alternative energy.

In January this year, Reliance stated that REC Solar Holdings AS, a step-own wholly-owned subsidiary, on January 14, 2024, entered into a share purchase agreement with Elkem ASA for the sale of its 100 per cent equity stake in REC Solar Norway AS for an aggregate cash consideration of USD 22 million.

The sale has been completed, the firm said in a stock exchange filing.

“Consequently, REC Norway has ceased to be a subsidiary of the company,” it added.

Founded in 1904, Elkem ASA is a silicon-based material provider, and listed on the Oslo Stock Exchange. Reliance will continue to

retain the technology and intellectual property rights pertaining to kerf-based polysilicon, the firm had stated in January.

REC Norway had a turnover of Norwegian kroner 1.1 billion in the calendar year 2022 and a net worth of Norwegian kroner 0.3 billion as of December 31, 2022, contributing about 0.08 per cent and 0.03 per cent, respectively, of Reliance's annual consolidated turnover and net worth for the financial year 2022-23, it had said.

In October 2021, RIL bought REC Solar Holdings from China National Bluestar Group Co to expand in green energy markets globally, including the US, Europe, Australia and elsewhere in Asia.

The acquisition was part of company chairman Mukesh Ambani's pledge to spend USD 10 billion on green energy over three years.

REC makes solar-grade polysilicon and solar panels and modules at facilities in Norway and Singapore. Reliance was to use REC's technology to manufacture metallic silicon and solar panels at its gigafactory at Jamnagar in Gujarat.

REC Solar Holdings AS and its subsidiaries, engaged in the business of manufacturing and sale of solar PV HJT cells and modules, continue to be Reliance's subsidiaries.

# Samco Asset Management eyes ₹500 crore from special opportunities fund

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
A top company official said on Thursday.

The new fund offering (NFO) would open on May 17 and conclude on May 31.

In an interaction with PTI, Umeshkumar Mehta, Chief Investment Officer of Samco

Mutual Fund, said the objective of the fund is to achieve long-term capital appreciation by investing in a portfolio of securities “that are involved in 10 special situations”.

These “situations” include digitisation, spin-offs & corporate actions, reform-based strategy, undervalued holding companies strategy, trends sustainable over time, innovation & technological disruption, and new & emerging sectors.

These 10 sub-strategies define the “disruption” model and are weaved around different corporate actions. These situations often create mispricing and undervalued opportunities that the fund aims to exploit for potential capital appreciation, Mehta said.

“This strategy allows the fund to explore and capitalise on

special situations across the entire market spectrum, from large-cap to micro-cap companies.

“By not confining itself to a particular segment, the fund is able to pursue a wide range of investment opportunities wherever they may arise, enhancing its potential for capital appreciation by tapping into diverse and sometimes under-explored areas of the market,” he added.

According to him, the fund has set an internal target of garnering Rs 500 crore during the NFO.

In addition, tax efficiency is another key feature of the Samco Special Opportunities Fund. “By managing thematic investments internally, we aim to prevent the tax implications associated with the frequent buying and selling of different thematic funds by investors.

# GAIL Q4 net profit triples on gas transmission business turnaround

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
State-owned gas utility GAIL (India) Ltd on Thursday reported more than tripling of its fourth quarter net profit after natural gas transmission and petrochemical business saw a turnaround.

Its standalone net profit of Rs 2,176.97 crore in January-March — the fourth quarter of 2023-24 — was 261 per cent more than Rs 603.52 crore net profit in the same period last year, according to stock exchange filing by the company.

The net profit was, however, 26 per cent lower than Rs 2,842.62 crore earning in the preceding quarter of October-December.

The year-on-year rise in profit was aided by a turnaround in natural gas transmission and petrochemicals business and an uptick in gas marketing.

Against a loss of Rs 16.41 crore in gas transmission business in January-March 2023, India's largest gas transportation and marketing firm booked a pre-tax profit of almost Rs 980 crore. Also, the petrochemical business had a pre-tax profit of Rs 262.34 crore compared to a loss of Rs 401 crore in the previous year.

Earnings from natural gas marketing jumped to Rs 1,390 crore in January-March 2024 from Rs 487.40 crore a year back.

Its revenue from operation was almost flat at Rs 32,334.50 crore.

For the full 2023-24 fiscal (April 2023 to March 2024), GAIL reported a net profit of Rs 8,836.48 crore on a revenue of Rs 1.3 lakh crore. This was higher than Rs 5,301.51 crore profit on a revenue of Rs 1.44 lakh in the previous 2022-23 fiscal year.

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Notice Inviting Tender

tender is hereby invited for the purchase and supply of following item :-

Name of Work/Item	Period/Tentative Qty
For Verka Head Office, Sector- 34 A, Chandigarh	
Specialized treatments/retrofitting Jobs for the repair/restoring of the factory building at Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy.	Four Month

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

Dy. General Manager (Purchase)

# STALWART CHHETRI ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The iconic Sunil Chhetri on Thursday announced his decision to retire from international football after the FIFA World Cup qualifying match against Kuwait on June 6, bringing the curtains down on a glorious career that is unparalleled in Indian football for its longevity and consistency.

The long-serving national team captain announced his decision via a video he posted on his social media accounts.

Chhetri, who made his debut in 2005, has scored 94 goals for the country. He will leave the scene as India's all-time top scorer and most-capped player.

He is also third in the list of goal scorers among active players behind Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi and currently sits at the fourth in the all-time list of international goal-scorers as well.

Chhetri, 39, will walk into international sunset after rendering yeoman service for nearly two decades, 19 years to be precise, to a team that was heavily reliant on the 57-year-old forward to deliver the goods every time he wore the blue jersey.

"The match Against Kuwait is the last," Chhetri said while announcing his decision. Chhetri's final match will be played at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata, and it is appropriate that he will end his journey in a city, where he has played a lot of his football while evolving into a potent striker.

India are currently second in Group A with four points, behind leaders Qatar. Chhetri had made his 150th national



appearance in March and scored on the occasion against Afghanistan in Guwahati. India, though, stunningly lost that game 1-2. On his international debut against Pakistan way back in 2005, Chhetri, who would go on to become one of the game's most lethal strikers, scored, and he rated it as his best moment.

"There is one day that I never forget and remember it quite often is the first time I played for my country man, it was unbelievable. "But the day before, morning of the day, Sukhi sir (Sukhwinder Singh),

my first national team coach, in the morning he came to me and he's like, you're going to start? I can't tell you how I was feeling man," Chhetri recalled.

He added, "I took my jersey, I sprayed some perfume on it, I have no idea why. So that day, everything that happened, once he told me, from breakfast to lunch and to the game and to my first goal in my debut, to conceding late in the 80th minute, that day is probably that I will never forget and is one of the best days of my national team

journey." Speaking on the future of Indian football, Chhetri said that it was time for the country to find the next 9. He felt the team is currently handicapped as none of the current lot of players play as the main striker for their respective clubs and sees the massive hole in the current national team. In recent times, Chhetri said he could sense that he was heading towards the end of his glorious journey.

"You know the feeling that I recollect in the last 19 years is a very nice

combination between duty, pressure and immense joy. I never thought individually, these are the many games that I've played for the country, this is what I've done, good or bad, but now I did it.

"This last one and a half, two months, I did it and it was very strange. I did it because probably I was going towards the decision that this game, this next game is going to be my last." The moment he had arrived at the decision, memories came flooding back to his mind.

"And the moment I told myself first, that yes, this is the game that is going to be my last, is when I started recollecting everything.

"It was so strange, I started thinking about this game, that game, this coach, that coach, that team, that member, that ground, that away match, this good game, that bad game, all my individual performances, everything came, all the flashes came. So when I did decide that this is it, this is going to be my last game."

His family members reacted differently to his big decision. "I told my mom, my dad and my wife, my family first, my dad was...He was normal, he was relieved, happy, everything, but my mom and my wife started crying," he said.

"...They couldn't express to me as to why they burst into tears. It's not that I was feeling tired, it's not that I was feeling this or that, when the instinct came that this should be my last game, then I thought about it a lot." Chhetri was felicitated ahead of his 150th outing for the Blue Tigers in the World Cup qualifier against Afghanistan in Guwahati.



## Griezmann scores hat trick as Atletico beats Getafe in Spanish league to seal Champions League spot

AP ■ MADRID

Antoine Griezmann scored a hat trick as Atletico Madrid defeated Getafe 3-0 in the Spanish league on Wednesday to secure a Champions League spot next season.

The France international scored twice in the first half and again in the second to give Atletico its 12th straight appearance in Europe's top club competition.

The victory at Getafe moved Atletico 11 points clear of fifth-place Athletic Bilbao with two rounds remaining. Athletic's hopes of making it to the Champions League ended with a 2-1 loss at Celta Vigo.

Griezmann hadn't scored since a brace in Atletico's 3-1 win against Girona five matches ago. "We've been qualifying for

the Champions League for many years now, that has to be valued," Griezmann said.

It was Atletico's fourth straight league victory. It was the third straight defeat for Getafe, which stayed in 10th place.

**RELEGATION FIGHT:** Three teams fighting against relegation won on Wednesday. In addition to Celta's win against Athletic, Rayo Vallecano beat Granada 2-1 at home and Cadiz won 1-0 at Sevilla.

Celta opened a five-point gap to Cadiz, which remains the first team inside the relegation zone. Rayo was one point ahead of Celta. Cadiz sat four points inside the demotion area.

Rayo got the win over Granada despite playing with 10 men after Oscar Trejo was sent off in the fifth minute.

AP ■ ROME

## Danielle keeps on winning even with retirement looming

Danielle Collins has been nearly unbeatable lately. Even with her announced retirement looming.

The 15th-ranked American beat former No. 1 Victoria Azarenka 6-4, 6-3 on Wednesday to reach the Italian Open semifinals and extend her record to 19-1 since early March.

Having won back-to-back titles in Miami and Charleston, South Carolina, recently, she hasn't dropped a set on Rome's red clay.

Collins underwent surgery in 2021 to treat endometriosis and has said she wants to have a child - which is why she plans to retire at the end of the year.

"A lot of it has to do with my health," Collins said.

"Everybody has different ways of ending their professional journey. I want to go out playing my best tennis."

Collins frustrated Azarenka with her aggressive baseline

play and even took out her aggression on a TV cameraman at one point, telling him after being approached on a changeover, "Hey dude, you're going to have to back up a little bit."

Late in the second set, Azarenka slammed her racket on the Campo Centrale as her unforced errors piled up. Then Collins slammed her racket, too, after wasting a series of break points.

But Collins came up with some clutch serving to finish Azarenka off - finishing with six aces to Azarenka's none. "I feel dialed in with my shots and I've gotten better at hitting those small parts of the court," Collins said.

Collins' semifinal opponent will be Aryna Sabalenka, who showed no ill-effects from her previous marathon match as she eased past Jelena Ostapenko, the 2017 French Open champion, 6-2, 6-4.

Sabalenka's win over Collins in the fourth round of the Madrid Open marked the American's only loss since a defeat to top-ranked Iga Swiatek at Indian Wells on March 8.

All three top-ranked women have reached the final four in Rome as the other semifinal pits Swiatek against No. 3 Coco Gauff.

In men's action, 29th-seeded Alejandro Tabilo of Chile extended his surprising run by beating Zhang Zhizhen 6-3, 6-4 to follow up his upset victories over Novak Djokovic and Karen Khachanov in the previous two rounds.

Tabilo, who hasn't dropped a set during his first appearance in Rome, served an ace down the T on his first match point.

In his first Masters series semifinal, Tabilo will face 2017 champion Alexander Zverev, who beat 11th-seeded



Taylor Fritz 6-4, 6-3.

Zverev lost his footing on a service return early in the match, fell to the clay and bloodied his hands and arms. It appeared his left hand got the worst of it but after receiving medical attention he continued playing. He won the point when he got injured.

"My finger is crooked. ... It's starting to be a bit blue," Zverev said of his left pinkie, adding that he wasn't sure if it was broken or not. "I felt pain, but, probably not to the extent that we'll feel it tomorrow."

Zverev plays right-handed but uses a two-handed backhand. The other quarterfinal matches are scheduled for Thursday. Stefanos Tsitsipas faces Nicolas Jarry — another Chilean — and Hubert Hurkacz plays Tommy Paul.

Collins, who reached the Australian Open final in 2022, said she's playing the

best tennis of her career.

"It's been nice to have a stretch where I've really been kind of climbing, because, it's not always like that," Collins said. "You have to be really happy for yourself in these moments because it doesn't always work out that way."

Sabalenka, who didn't allow the ninth-seeded Ostapenko a break opportunity, showed no sign of the back problem that required treatment during Monday's three-setter against Elina Svitolina that ended well after midnight local time.

The 26-year-old Sabalenka said she didn't even practice on Tuesday and focused instead on treatment and recovery. And that clearly paid off.

"I would definitely say that it was the best performance of the tournament," Sabalenka said. "I'm super happy that I was able to play without pain today and hopefully with every day I will feel better and better, and I will recover as good as I can for the next match."

## Ten Hag addresses Man United fans after winning last home game of season

AP ■ LONDON

Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag had just seen his team win its last match at Old Trafford this season when he strode onto the field and took the microphone to address the club's fans.

There might have been a smattering of boos but there was largely a backdrop of cheers as the under-pressure Dutch coach delivered a speech that felt like an audition to continue in the job next season.

"As you know," he said after the 3-2 win over Newcastle in the Premier League, "it wasn't an easy season, but one thing remained constant - and that was the backing of you for the team. "But this season is not over yet."

Indeed, United still has to go to Brighton in Sunday's final round of Premier League games. Then, the following weekend, it's another FA Cup final against Manchester City.

Two huge games. Two opportunities to qualify for Europe. Two final chances for Ten Hag to stake his claim to stay on as manager of England's grandest club as it undergoes a shake-up.

United remained in eighth place in the league — hugely disappointing for a club of its stature — but moved level on points with Newcastle in seventh and three behind sixth-place Chelsea, which beat Brighton 2-1 away in Wednesday's other game.

With Tottenham likely to finish in fifth place, Chelsea, Newcastle and Man United look to be fighting for the final two European qualifying



positions. The teams finishing in sixth and seventh place should qualify for the Europa League and Europa Conference League, respectively.

Man United could also get in the Europa League by winning the cup final against City on May 25.

Chelsea's win at Brighton was its fourth straight in the league. That hasn't happened since October 2022.

**NKUNKU CELEBRATION:** Christopher Nkunku inflated a blue balloon and held it between his lips to celebrate his second-half goal that ultimately proved the difference for Chelsea at Amex Stadium. The France striker's 64th-minute strike added to Cole Palmer's 22nd goal of the campaign in the 34th minute.

Second-half Chelsea substitute Reece James was shown a straight red card in the 88th - following a VAR review - after he kicked out at Joao Pedro while on the ground. Danny Welbeck grabbed Brighton's consolation goal in

the seventh minute of stoppage time.

**HOJLUND STRIKES:** A strike by substitute Rasmus Hojlund in the 84th minute proved to be the clinching goal for Man United in a match between direct rivals for Europe.

Kobbie Mainoo put United ahead in the 31st after a pass was slipped through the Newcastle defense by Amad Diallo, who regained the lead for the home side with a fierce left-footed shot through a crowd of players after a 57th-minute corner wasn't fully cleared.

Anthony Gordon had scored Newcastle's equalizer in the 49th and Lewis Hall ensured a nervy finish to the game for Man United by making it 3-2 in stoppage time.

**FAREWELLS:** French players Anthony Martial and Raphael Varane waved goodbye to Man United's supporters after the game against Newcastle. They are leaving the club at the end of the season because their contracts are expiring.

## Asian soccer body scraps 12 years limit for senior officials and lets Sheikh Salman stay beyond 2027

AP ■ BANGKOK (THAILAND)

Asian soccer leaders can have unlimited years in power after their governing body voted to scrap a key pillar of reforms passed after the corruption crisis that rocked FIFA in 2015.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar were among four of the 47 Asian Football Confederation members who put the proposal to their annual congress in Bangkok on Thursday. Only Australia and Jordan voted "No."

The vote win lets AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa seek reelection in 2027 when he had been due to step down after 14 years in office. Ahead of the vote, the Bahraini royal family member told members of the AFC's wish to be "a model confederation" in world soccer aligned with FIFA.

Presidential term limits have been pushed in two waves of governance reforms at FIFA in response to bribery

and corruption scandals in 2011 and 2015 - Asian soccer was linked to both. In 2011, then AFC leader Mohamed bin Hammam of Qatar was barred from the FIFA presidential election after Caribbean voters were paid \$40,000 cash in brown envelopes after a campaign meeting in Trinidad.

In fallout from the 2015 scandal two years later, senior AFC official Richard Lai of Guam pleaded guilty in a federal court in Brooklyn to being part of a bribe-paying scheme that built influence in international soccer. Lai said it was run by a Kuwaiti faction which helped Sheikh Salman win election to succeed Bin Hammam in 2013.

Removing presidents after no more than 12 years were then seen as essential to curb networks of patronage and loyalty that can enable corruption and poor governance.

However, FIFA president Gianni Infantino has been allowed by a subsequent statutes amendment he



oversaw to stay in office for 15 years until 2031, and UEFA voted in February to ensure its president Aleksander Ceferin can seek to stay beyond his 11th year in 2027. Ceferin

later said he will not stand for reelection. Even the International Olympic Committee is still weighing a members' request last October to change legal rules to let their president, Thomas Bach, seek a third election next year.

That would go beyond the 12-year limit set after the Salt Lake City bidding corruption scandal 25 years ago.

The AFC has trumped both FIFA and UEFA in removing all barriers to its president and executive committee members staying in place.

It was, the AFC said in a later statement, "another clear signal of our intent to ensure that we remain a model confederation that continues to uphold the highest ethical standards and best governance practices for the future generations of our great game."

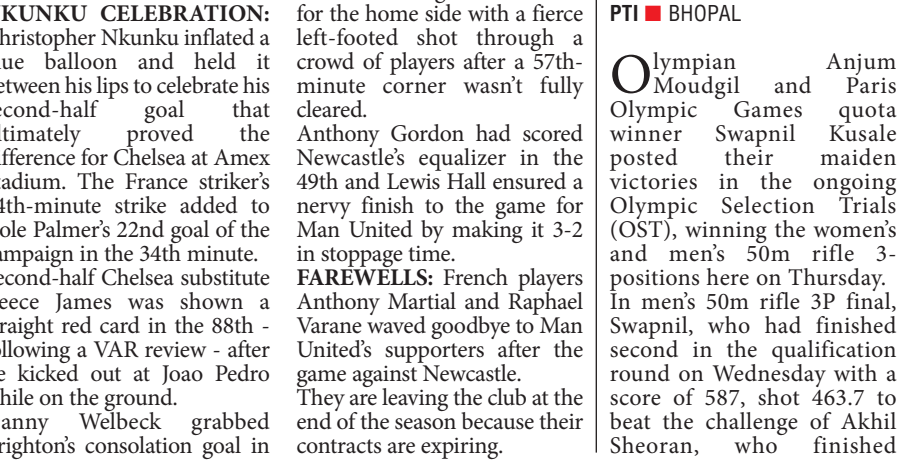
One legal barrier still remains for Sheikh Salman at FIFA. Its statutes currently block him from continuing beyond 2031 as a FIFA vice president and member of its ruling council.

## Anjum, Swapnil post first wins in Olympic Selection Trials

PTI ■ BHOPAL

Olympian Anjum Moudgil and Paris Olympic Games quota winner Swapnil Kusale posted their maiden victories in the ongoing Olympic Selection Trials (OST), winning the women's and men's 50m rifle 3-positions here on Thursday.

In men's 50m rifle 3P final, Swapnil, who had finished second in the qualification round on Wednesday with a score of 587, shot 463.7 to beat the challenge of Akhil Sheoran, who finished



second with 461.6. Local lad and qualifications topper Aishwary Tomar shot 451.9 to finish third, being eliminated after the 44th shot of the 45-shot final. In women's 3P final, Anjum shot 463.9 to leave India No. 1 Sift Kaur Samra 1.9 points behind in second place. Ashi Chouksey, took the third spot with 447.3 points in OST (Olympic Selection Trials) T3.

In women's 10m air pistol OST T3 qualification, Olympian Manu Bhaker was placed on top with a score of 577, followed by Palak (576),

Esha Singh (576), Surbhi Rao (574) and Rhythm Sangwan (573).

**OTHER SCORES:**  
**Men's 10m air pistol OST T3 qualification:** 1. Arjun Singh Cheema (583), 2. Ravinder Singh (581), 3. Sarabjot Singh (581), 4. Naveen (579), 5. Varun Tomar (577).  
**Women's 10m air rifle OST T3 qualification:** 1. Elavenni Valarivan (634.4), 2. Tilottama Sen (632.4), 3. Ramita (630.8), 4. Nancy (629.4), 5. Mehuli Ghosh (628.4).  
**Men's 10m air rifle OST T3 qualification:** 1. Arjun Babuta (632.2), 2. Rudranksh Patil (632.0), 3. Sandeep Singh (631.6), 4. Divyansh Singh Panwar (631.4), 5. Sri Karthik Sabari Raj (630.5).



# Mumbai Indians, Lucknow Super Giants look to end dismal IPL campaigns with win

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
Out of reckoning from the IPL playoffs, Mumbai Indians and Lucknow Super Giants will look to end their campaign on a winning note when they clash at the Wankhede Stadium here on Friday. While Mumbai Indians were knocked out of the playoffs race long ago, Lucknow Super Giant's chances of making the last-four are extremely bleak even if they win their last IPL game here by a huge margin. Three consecutive defeats have not only denied LSG crucial points, they have also battered their net run rate. A 98-run loss to KKR was followed by a 10-wicket hammering by Sunrisers Hyderabad with a 19-run defeat to Delhi Capitals all but ending their chances of

getting into the playoffs after making the final-four in the previous edition. The seventh-placed LSG's NRR of -0.787 will not improve significantly for them to get back into contention, as Royal Challengers Bengaluru, at No. 6, are much better placed with a NRR of 0.387. Five-time IPL champions Mumbai Indians were the first team to be knocked out of the race for the playoffs this year as they endured a horror first season under new skipper Hardik Pandya. With only four wins from 13 matches so far, Mumbai Indians can at best finish with 10 points if they win on Friday, something that can possibly help them avoid a last-place finish. For Mumbai Indians, a pre-season change of leadership, with Pandya replacing Rohit



Sharma as captain, set off angry reactions from fans, which seem to have marred their campaign to a large extent. As a team, MI failed to get behind their captain. While their batting failed collectively, Jasprit Bumrah's individual brilliance with the ball (20 wickets in 13 matches), could not inspire the other bowlers to come together. The focus of the match would be on the likes of T20 World Cup-bound players such as Pandya, Rohit Sharma, Bumrah and Suryakumar Yadav given that they would be pivotal to India's hopes of bringing back the elusive trophy. Rohit is enduring a horror run with the bat with his best being 19 in the last six outings for MI, while Pandya too has not been able to inspire

confidence in his all-round role. Suryakumar, though, has regained confidence with a strong showing in the IPL following three fifties and a century. For LSG, the lack of firepower and failure to capitalise on key moments has led to their plight even though skipper KL Rahul has had a successful run with the bat, scoring three half-centuries in his 465 runs this season at an average of 136.36. His strike rate, however, remained a topic of debate throughout even as the other batters failed to pull their weight. While Nicholas Pooran (424 runs at 168.92) provided the late impetus, the collective failure of LSG's bowlers has also remained an area of concern.



## Once I am done, I will be gone; you will not see me for a while: Kohli

**PTI ■ BENGALURU**  
Well aware that he "can't keep going forever", Indian batting superstar Virat Kohli wants to give everything he has to his cricket career because he once he is done, he says he would be "gone" and won't be seen "for a while." Kohli's appetite for runs and centuries has already got him a record eighth ton in the IPL this season and he continues to lead the scoring charts with a mind-boggling 661 runs from 13 games for Royal Challengers Bengaluru. In a video posted by RCB on social media, the 35-year-old said the desire to live a regret-free life keeps him going. "So, it's just about not leaving any undone business behind and not having any regrets later, which I'm very sure of I won't. Once I'm done, I'll be gone; you won't see me for a while. "So, I want to give it everything I have till the time I play and that's the only thing that keeps

me going," said Kohli when asked what keeps him hungry. Kohli was picked by RCB soon after he led India to title triumph in the 2008 Under-19 World Cup and he has continued to be with the franchise ever since. "I think, as sportsmen, we do have an end date to our careers, so I'm just working backwards, I don't want to finish my career thinking what if I had done this on that particular day because I can't keep going on and on forever," he added. The former India captain is part of the Indian squad for the T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies beginning next month. Former India spinner Harbhajan Singh had recently opined that RCB should think about giving back the team's captaincy to Kohli, saying he has an ideal combination of intent, commitment and aggression to take the side forward from the next season. South African Faf du Plessis is currently leading RCB.

## Happy to get some reward after a challenging tournament: Nathan Ellis

**PTI ■ GUWAHATI**  
Punjab Kings pacer Nathan Ellis was relieved to see his team register a much-needed win, against second-placed Rajasthan Royals, after what has been a very difficult IPL season for them. Already out of playoffs contention, PBKS are currently placed in the ninth place with 10 points after five wins and eight losses in 13 matches, while RR, who have stuttered after an excellent start, maintain their second position despite a run of four defeats in recent times. "The wicket was a little bit slower than expected, but I still think it was a pretty good

wicket. Really happy for the guys to get some reward as it has been a bit of a challenging tournament for us," Ellis said at the post-match press conference here on Wednesday. Batting first, RR were restricted to 144 for nine in the stipulated 20 overs and then, PBKS chased down the target of 145 for the loss of five wickets, with seven balls to spare. "We were playing for pride today and trying to put in the best performance we can. Collectively, it was one of our better performances, adapted to conditions, bowled in partnerships. It was probably a complete performance," Ellis



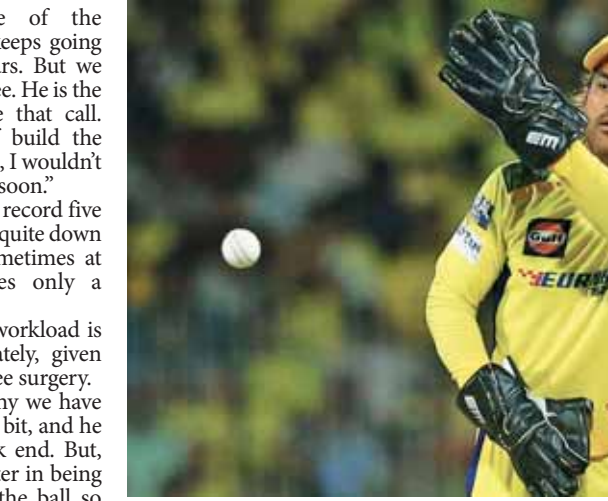
said of the win. Skipper Sam Curran's unbeaten 63 off 41 balls anchored the PBKS innings, and he received support from Jitesh Sharma, who made 22 off 20 balls, as the duo combined for a 63-run partnership for the fifth wicket to earn the team's fifth win of the season. Playing his first game in this edition of the IPL, Ellis bowled tidily to finish with miserly figures of 1/24 from his full quota of four overs. He also took the all-important wicket of Sanju Samson. "Coming to the ground, we didn't know what we wanted to do -- bat or bowl. Later, I think we also decided on batting

first. Losing the toss wasn't the desired outcome. But I was happy. We bowled first, which gave us the chance to set the tone for the day," Ellis said. On how the surface played at the ACA Stadium in Guwahati, Ellis said: "The wicket was a little bit slower than expected, but it was still a pretty good wicket. In the powerplay, was where the game could have been won or lost and we both lost wickets there. "I think batting-wise, the powerplay was the best time to score and we both probably didn't have the greatest power players. And then from there the ball got a little bit softer and both teams lost wickets."

## Hussey hopes Dhoni will carry on for two more years

**PTI ■ BENGALURU**  
Chennai Super Kings batting coach Michael Hussey is hoping that charismatic Mahendra Singh Dhoni would continue with the team for a couple of years more, saying the former skipper was still batting well. The 42-year-old Dhoni surprised everyone by stepping aside as captain of the team just a day before the start of the 2024 season. Ruturaj Gaikwad was handed the reins of the side. "We are hoping he does keep going. He is still batting so well. He does prepare well - he gets into the camp very early and hits a lot of balls. He has been in good touch all season really," Hussey said on ESPN's Around the Wicket show. "I guess we just got to try to manage him from the body side of things. He had a knee surgery after the last season. So, he has been managing that

from the initial stage of the tournament. "I hope he keeps going for another couple of years. But we will just have to wait and see. He is the only one who will make that call. And, he likes to sort of build the drama a little bit as well. So, I wouldn't expect a decision anytime soon." Dhoni, who led the side to record five IPL titles, has been batting quite down the order this season, sometimes at number eight, and faces only a handful of deliveries. Hussey said that Dhoni's workload is being managed appropriately, given that he had undergone knee surgery. "That [knee surgery] is why we have had to manage him a little bit, and he only comes in at the back end. But, there has been no one better in being able to come in and hit the ball so cleanly from ball one than MS. He has been phenomenal," he added. The Australian was Dhoni wanted to



not going to be attending the pre-tournament captains' meeting. And "MS sort of announced that he was

He said Ruturaj was going to be captain from then on. "So, it was a little bit of a shock to start with, but it has been managed really well. We have sort of known for a little while that he was the right man to take over the job when MS decided to step aside. "He wanted to still be here while the new captain took over, to try to help him along the way and sort of mentor him a little bit," said Hussey. Under Gaikwad's leadership, CSK has fared decently. The team is placed third on the points table and is likely to make the play-offs. "He has done a great job. He has been really calm and measured on the field. He will just get better and better. The more he does it and the more support we keep around him. The pleasing thing is, it has not affected his batting at all either," Hussey was effusive in his praise for Gaikwad.

## OTHER SPORTS



## AFI signs multi year deal with sports wear brand Puma

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) on Thursday announced that it has signed a multi-year deal with the sports wear brand Puma, which will now provide apparel, footwear and accessories to around 400 Indian athletes during domestic and international tournaments. Being the official kit sponsor, Puma's accessories will be used by top Indian athletes

including Olympic champion Neeraj Chopra, long jumper Murali Sreeshankar and steeplechaser Parul Chaudhary. "As an athlete training for 12 years, I know the importance of high-quality gear for high-level practice. With AFI teaming up with global sports brand, Indian athletes across all levels will now have access to training gear of international excellence, assisting us to express our best in our game now,"

Chopra was quoted as saying in a release. "This partnership signals the bright future of Indian sport," he added. This is the first time Indian athletes will get access to world-class speed suits that Puma supplies globally to other athletes. The speed suits are designed to aid freedom of movement, aerodynamics and faster speed, supporting athletes to focus solely on their performance and increase efficiency," the press

release mentioned. AFI President Adille Sumariwalla said, "Our association with Puma represents a significant milestone for India's athletes. With their high-quality gear, we are not only enhancing the performance of athletes but also creating a culture of excellence within the country's sporting community. We are confident that this partnership will propel Indian athletics to new heights on the global stage."

## Sharath, Manika to lead India in Olympic team debut

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Veteran Sharath Kamal and world no. 24 Manika Batra will lead the Indian men's and women's squads respectively at the Paris Games, where the country will make its Olympic debut in team events. The senior selection committee of the Table Tennis Federation of India on Thursday picked a six-member squad (three in each section) as per the Olympics norms, besides naming the individuals who would compete in the singles events. Sharath, Harmeet Desai, and Manav Thakkar will form the three-member men's team, while Manika, Sreeja Akula and Archana Kamath will be squad members in the women's category. The "Alternate Player" in each section would be G. Sathiyam and Ayhika Mukherjee. In the men's singles, Sharath and Harmeet will compete and it will be Manika and Sreeja in the women's event. The decision was taken based on the latest world rankings. It will be the fifth and final Olympic appearance for 41-year-old Sharath, who made his Games debut back in 2004. Since the selection of the squads and the individuals were as per the already pronounced TTFI



criteria, three players "got selected themselves" because of their consistent performances over time and world rankings. However, there was a debate over the third player for the women's squad. After Manika and Sreeja Akula walked in on the back of their higher world rankings (top 50), Archana Kamath (103) made it to the team as the third player. The Bengaluru paddler edged out Ayhika Mukherjee (133) on several counts, including her ranking. As for the men, Sharath picked himself as the top-ranked Indian at No. 40, while

Harmeet (No. 63) and Manav (No. 62) were separated by one slot in WR. Though both made it to the team composition, National champion Harmeet got the selectors' nod based on his international (better win-loss proportion to his participation) and national performances. Incidentally, Massimo Costantini's presence as a special invitee at the meeting also added teeth as the foreign expert's inputs proved handy in the selection of the squads. Costantini will take charge of the Indian team for a third time as early as next week. He arrived in India earlier this

week. Alternate players Sathiyam and Ayhika will travel with the team to Paris but will not stay in the official Games Village. Their services would be needed in case of an injury.

**THE TEAMS:**  
**Men:** A. Sharath Kamal, Harmeet Desai, and Manav Thakkar; Alternate Player: G. Sathiyam. **Women:** Manika Batra, Sreeja Akula, and Archana Kamath; Alternate Player: Ayhika Mukherjee.

**AFFIDAVIT**  
By virtue of an affidavit sworn before the Notary Public, Bhawanipatna I, Ramesh Khamari(30yrs),s/o Dukhalu Khamari, res/village of Bhainre,po Mingur,ps Jaipatna, district Kalahandi hereby affirm that my and my father's name /surname has been wrongly mentioned as Mangela Harijan, s/o Dukhalu Harjan in my board certificate SL NO- 1778908 instead of Ramesh Khamari, s/o Dukhalu Khamari which is my and my father's original name mentioned in the Aadhar card and other documents. Hence I am swearing this affidavit to produce before the concerned authority for necessary action and use.