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INDIA NEEDS SUBSTANTIAL DEFENCE INVESTMENT

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STOCK MARKETS FALL FOR THIRD DAY, SENSEX DROPS 220 POINTS

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RONALDO SHINES AT SAUDI PRO LEAGUE 11 SPORTS

Modi vows war to uplift women, economy



BJP supporters during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's public meeting for Lok Sabha elections, in Dumka district, on Tuesday

was decreasing in the Santhal Parganas because of infiltration and accused the JMM-led ruling alliance in Jharkhand of "patronising" infiltrators, who he said were grabbing land and putting women at risk.

INDIA Bloc's theme song: 'Goodbye Modi, tata'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI/SHIMLA/PATNA

With the last phase of Lok Sabha polls scheduled on Saturday, the Opposition leaders on Tuesday exuded confidence that they would be successful in preventing Narendra Modi's juggernaut this time.

Gandhi termed Modi as "anti-people" while TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee, RJD supremo Lalu Prasad took a jibe at Modi's reported "God sent" remark and claimed that INDIA Bloc will form Government at the Centre after June 4.



While RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav predicted yet another volte-face by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, claiming that the JD (U) president would take a "big decision" once Lok Sabha poll results were out.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE RANCHI/KOLKATA

Meditation in Kanyakumari

New Delhi : Prime Minister Narendra Modi will meditate at Rock Memorial, a monument built in tribute to Swami Vivekananda, in Kanyakumari following the culmination of the Lok Sabha polls campaign on May 30.

Remal triggers Aizawl quarry cave-in, 17 die

PTI AIZAWL

At least 17 people, including two minors, were killed and six-seven others were missing as a stone quarry collapsed in Mizoram's Aizawl district on Tuesday morning amid incessant rain in the aftermath of cyclone Remal, officials said.



PTI He said heavy rain was affecting rescue operations at the disaster site. The rain triggered landslides at several other places in the state and at least two persons have been "swept away", Shukla said.

India's \$1mn help for Papua landslide victims

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday expressed grief over the loss of lives and damage wreaked by a devastating landslide in Papua New Guinea, and said India is ready to offer all possible support and assistance.



for speedy recovery of the injured. India is ready to offer all possible support and assistance," the Prime Minister posted on X. According to the Papua New Guinea Government, more than 2,000 people are believed to have been buried alive in a landslide in the South Pacific island nation.

ECI suspends DS Kutey



DS Kutey Ashish Singh

Ashish Singh's health to be examined

PNS BHUBANESWAR

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has suspended DS Kutey, Special Secretary in the office of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, for allegedly exercising undue influence on the election machinery in the State.

In an order to the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of Odisha on Tuesday, the ECI said IPS officer Kutey be placed under suspension for interfering in conduct of the elections.

The Election Commission also directed IG (CM Security) Ashish Kumar Singh, who is on medical leave since May 4, to appear for a detailed medical examination by a special medical board constituted by the Director, AIIMS, Bhubaneswar.

High drama after bomb hoax on Varanasi flight

STAFF REPORTER NEW DELHI

Dramatic scenes unfolded at the Indira Gandhi International Airport as the 176 passengers onboard the IndiGo flight were evacuated via the emergency exits following the bomb threat. Panic gripped after a bomb threat received from Delhi to Varanasi bound IndiGo flight (6E2211) at the IGI airport here on Tuesday morning prompting authorities to move the aircraft to an isolation bay for a thorough investigation.



A pilot slides down from the Varanasi-bound IndiGo flight that received a bomb threat at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, in New Delhi on Tuesday

This is not an isolated case. There has been a growing concern over the escalation of such bomb threats, which not only disrupt daily life but also instil fear and uncertainty among citizens. Forget this year; the month of May alone witnessed a rise in bomb threats right from airports and schools to hotels.

Upon landing, security personnel, firefighters, and ambulances arrived at the runway. Passengers were evacuated through the emergency gate and moved to a safe zone. Subsequently, the bomb squad and dog squad conducted a thorough search of the plane. According to police, nothing suspicious has been found so far and a search of the aircraft found it to be a hoax.

with the airhostess helping the passenger walk on the wing by holding her hand as she takes her to another emergency slide.

Delhi Airport Authorities confirmed that all passengers were safe. "All passengers are safe and the flight is undergoing a detailed inspection", it said. A statement by IndiGo read, "IndiGo flight 6E2211 operating from Delhi to Varanasi had received a specific bomb threat at Delhi airport at 5.35 am. All necessary protocols were followed and aircraft was taken to a remote bay as per guidelines by airport security agencies. All passengers were safely evacuated via the emergency exits. The flight is currently undergoing

inspection. Post completion of all security checks, the aircraft will be positioned back in the terminal area." "An alternate aircraft was arranged to operate flight 6E2211 from Delhi to Varanasi, which was delayed due to a specific bomb threat at Delhi airport. The passengers were provided with refreshments and were boarded. The flight departed for Varanasi at 11:10am. We regret the inconvenience caused to the passengers," the airline said in a statement, it said. According to the Delhi fire service, "There was news of a bomb on the flight going from Delhi to Varanasi at 5:35 AM today. Quick Response Teams (QRT) arrived at the spot".

Can run but can't hide, UK scientist's pandemic warning

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Just as the world begins to emerge from the tough four-year period of the Covid-19 pandemic, marked by lockdowns, economic downturns, and significant loss of life and livelihood, a prominent British scientist and former chief scientific adviser to the British Government, Sir Patrick Vallance has issued a stark warning that another pandemic is "absolutely inevitable".



The Covid-19 had claimed over seven million lives while leaving many still suffering from its long-term health impact. The top UK scientist's assertion highlights the persistent vulnerability of global health systems to emerging infectious diseases. Vallance has urged the UK Government to prioritise preparations for the pandemic and emphasised that the country is "not ready" for it yet, according to The Guardian. The report quoted Vallance, who was speaking at a panel event at the Hay Festival in Powys, also stressing upon the UK Government to implement "better surveillance" to detect the threats of the virus. The

caution comes amidst significant cases such in Covid-19 cases in Singapore. The number of infections has nearly doubled, rising from 13,700 cases in one week to 25,900 cases the following week. The US scientist Vallance also recommended some measures to prevent drastic steps during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as diagnostic tests, vaccines, and treatments. The top scientist believes that such measures could be implemented, however, it would require some coordination. "We know we have to have an army, not because there's going to be a war this year, but we know it's an

important part of what we need as a nation. We need to treat this preparedness in the same way and not view it as an easy thing to keep cutting back when there's no sign of a pandemic - because there won't be a sign of a pandemic," he said, as quoted by The Guardian. The scientist's warning is grounded in the understanding that pandemics are a recurring natural phenomenon, driven by factors such as increased human-animal interactions, global travel, urbanization, and environmental changes. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the profound impact such outbreaks can have on health systems, economies, and daily life worldwide. The British scientist, during the panel event, mentioned the World Health Organization's (WHO) pandemic accord, calling it a "positive step". However, he also criticised its "lack of focus and urgency". Vallance' critical observation against WHO functioning comes days after a significant impasse in international efforts to establish a global pandemic treaty, an initiative spearheaded by the global health agency.

ASI moves to restore 1400-yr-old Shiva temple in Puri

ARCHANA JYOTI NEW DELHI

Amidst the looming threat of imminent collapse due to neglect and decay, the recently discovered 1300-1400 years old historical Swarneswar Mahadev temple in Odisha's Puri district now stands poised for a remarkable restoration. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) under the Union Culture Ministry has recently issued a draft notification inviting suggestions and objections to its plans to bring the monument dating back to the 6th-7th century CE and adorned with the unique Kalingan architectural style under its protection. Once the process is completed, the temple will be designated as a "monument of national importance". Once the designation is finalised, the temple will receive the

necessary resources and attention for its preservation, ensuring that the temple and its precinct spread over 2,470 acres is preserved for future generations. Discovered three years ago by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) in Birapurussottampur village in Puri, the temple had caught the attention of the then Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, who urged Union Minister of Culture G Kishan Reddy to take action for its preservation on an urgent basis. In response to the temple's discovery, Odisha's Tourism and Culture Minister Jyoti Prakash Panigrahi too had promised funds for its restoration. It stands as a historical marvel showcasing the unique Kalingan architectural style. The temple was



discovered by a four-member team led by Anil Dhir, Deepak Kumar Nayak, Subhashish Dash and Suman Swain of INTACH at Biropurusottampur village in Pipili tehsil of Puri district during the survey of Ratnachira Valley and its monuments. They were shocked to find the temple, which is crafted from unique square Khandolite stone blocks, embodying the architectural grandeur of the post-Gupta era, was covered in thick vegetation and was a site of negligence. Talking about its historical value, Dhir said, as per reports, the stone blocks were placed one over other in symmetry to make the temple wall and roof. "No evidence of iron clamps has been seen. The neatly chiselled blocks denote an era when Kalingan traditional temple architectural style was in its

infancy. The temple is devoid of any external embellishments on both the inner and outer walls; even the parshadavata niches are empty," Dhir said. The temple's intricate carvings and graceful proportions are a testament to the craftsmanship and ingenuity of its creators. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the temple holds a special place in the hearts of locals and historians alike for its early Kalingan architectural style, added an ASI official. The notification signed by ASI Director General YS Rawat states, "Whereas, the Central Government is of the opinion that the ancient monument, as specified in the site plan and schedule annexed hereto, is an ancient monument of national importance; now, therefore, in exercise of the powers conferred

by sub-section (1) of section 4 of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 (24 of 1958), the Central Government hereby gives notice of its intention to declare the said ancient monument to be of national importance." Any objections or suggestions to the declaration of the temple as an ancient monument of national importance may be made within a period of two months from the date of issue of this notification by any interested person, adds the notification which was issued in May 9. The proposed national protection aims to mobilise comprehensive conservation efforts to ensure the preservation of this invaluable historical and spiritual monument for future generations, the official explained.

'Fate of Odisha is going to change'

Modi says why he sacrificed relations with Naveen

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
With Odisha all set to enter the last phase of the 2024 elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday claimed that the fate of the State is about to change.

In an interview to ANI, Modi also revealed the reason behind his risking the 'bonhomie' with Chief Minister and BJD supremo Naveen Patnaik. "In a democracy, we



have good terms with all leaders of political parties. In a democracy, we do not have enmity. Now, the question was whether I should maintain my

relations or worry about the fate of Odisha. Hence, I chose to devote myself to the bright future of Odisha even if I have to sacrifice my relations for

that; I will do it and after the elections, I will convince everyone that I have no enmity with anyone," he said.

There is lack of development in the State due to the BJD's "25 years of misrule. There is a group that has taken over the entire system of Odisha," he alleged. "I have said that the expiry date of the current Odisha government is June 4; and on June 10, a BJP CM will take oath in Odisha," said Modi.

"It is a question of Odisha's Asmita. Odisha has abundance of natural resources; it is sad to see poor people in such a prosperous State," he added.

'Himanta's campaign will harm BJP itself'

Says BJD

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The BJD on Tuesday said the campaigning by Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in Odisha would only harm the BJP's poll prospects.

BJD MP and party national spokesperson Sasmit Patra claimed that the more Biswa Sarma campaigns in Odisha, the higher would be the margins of defeat for the saffron outfit's candidates in the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls in the State.

"We thank the Odisha BJP for accepting our yesterday's

request to them, through a Press meet, to retain Biswa Sarma in Odisha for campaigning for the BJP candidates," Patra said in a post on X.

"The more he campaigns, the Odisha BJP candidates will end up with a bigger defeat, higher margins of defeat and many losing their deposits. We, therefore, further request Odisha BJP to retain him till end of campaigning on May 30 so that his hilarious and rubbish statements will lower Odisha BJP more in the eyes of the people of Odisha, reduce more votes of the BJP candidates," he added.

INBRIEF

FUNKWAL NEW GENERAL MANAGER OF ECOR

Bhubaneswar: Parmeshwar Funkwal has assumed the position of General Manager at the East Coast Railway (ECoR). He is an alumnus of IIT Kanpur and an officer of the 1988 batch of the Indian Railway Service of Engineers (IRSE). With a remarkable career spanning decades, he has held several important portfolios.



SAND ARTIST SUDARSHAN HOSPITALISED WITH BREATHING PROBLEM

Bhubaneswar: Internationally-acclaimed sand artist Sudarshan Pattnaik was admitted to a private hospital here after he complained of difficulty in breathing. Sharing the information on his X handle, he wrote that it could be a post-COVID-19 condition.



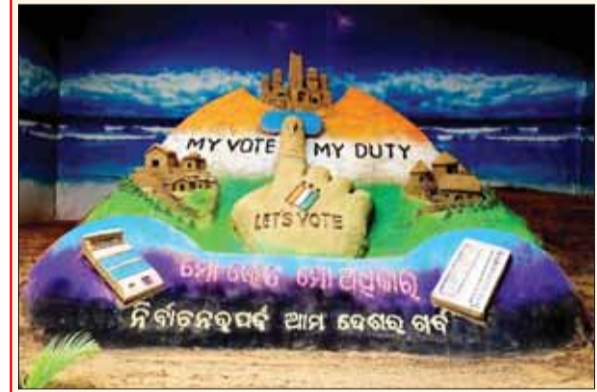
LOHANI EMPANELLED IN ADDITIONAL SECY RANK BY CENTRE

Bhubaneswar: Sushil Kumar Lohani, a 1995-batch Odisha-cadre IAS officer, has been empanelled to the grade of Additional Secretary or equivalent at the Centre. His name featured among 26 IAS officers approved by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet on May 27 for empanelment for holding posts at the Centre at different levels. Lohani is currently serving as Principal Secretary, Panchayati Raj Department, with the additional charge of Principal Secretary of the Excise Department. On February 20, Ashok Kumar Kaluram Meena and Nikunj Bihari Dhal had been empanelled for holding Secretary and equivalent posts in Central ministries. They both are 1993-batch IAS officers of Odisha cadre.



SBI'S VOTER AWARENESS THROUGH SAND ART

Bhubaneswar: The State Bank of India, Local Head Office, Bhubaneswar, has undertaken various programmes for voter awareness in all its administrative offices and branches. A



special sand art sculpture has been unveiled in front of the Local Head Office by Dinesh Pruthi, Chief General Manager Bhubaneswar Circle, in the presence of other senior officials. Pruthi advised all employees and their families to ensure voting during this great festival of democracy. This sand art work was created by Subal Maharana, an employee of State Bank of India.

Temperature to rise in State again

Thunderstorms also predicted

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here on Tuesday predicted a rise in the maximum or day temperature in the State.

IMD Regional Director Manorama Mohanty said the maximum temperature is likely to rise by 3 to 5 degree Celsius in the next two to three days. This would lead to hot and humid conditions. Heat wave conditions are likely in Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Sambalpur, Balangir and Nuapada districts on May 29

and May 30.

However, on May 30 and June 1, there would be rains with thunderstorm activities in some parts of the State.

"In the next five days, several isolated places in Odisha will experience thunderstorm activities with lightning. Apart from this, a heat wave is also likely in the next 24 hours due to high moisture content," said Mohanty.

Hot and humid weather condition is likely to prevail in the districts of Baleswar, Bhadrak, Jajpur, Kendrapada, Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Puri, Khordha, Nayagarh, Ganjam and Gajapati, said the IMD issuing a Yellow warning.

'Look for your future, vote for your family's benefit'



Congress urges voters

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

After two days, voting for the fourth phase of elections would be held in Odisha. The people of the State should not believe the false promises of BJP and BJD and think about their future. Whatever the BJD has not done in its 24 years'

rule and nine years of BJD-BJP rule, the Congress would do that for the people, said Odisha Congress in-charge Ajoy Kumar here on Tuesday.

The Narendra Modi and Naveen Patnaik governments are only christening the Congress' schemes in their name and hoodwinking people. So, instead of being carried away in their words, people should vote or the Congress, urged Dr

Kumar.

Congress national president Mallikarjun Kharge would come to Odisha on Wednesday and hold huge rallies in Bhadrak and Baleswar. Rahul Gandhi would also come to Odisha on May 30 and campaign in Bhadrak, he informed.

If the Congress comes to power, it would give bonus to farmers and an MSP of Rs

3,000 per quintal of paddy. The Naveen Patnaik government is only giving MSP of Rs 1,700. Besides, free electricity would be provided to farmers and they would also be given a monthly allowance of Rs 2,000. The domestic consumers would be given 200 units of free power. The degree and diploma holders would be given unemployment allowance of Rs 3,000, said Kumar.

'Naveen imposing Tamil CM on Odisha'



Alleges Shah

PNS ■ BHADRAK

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday, addressing a public meeting at Chandbali in Bhadrak district, lashed out at the BJD government for having not ensured any development of Odisha in the last 25 years.

Shah said "The people of Odisha sacrificed their lives and fought gallantly against Samrat Ashoka. But today, Naveenbabu is trying to impose a Tamil CM on the people. People tolerated Naveenbabu but will not tolerate this Tamilbabu in your name," said Shah.

erate this Tamilbabu in your name," said Shah.

"We have to win 17 Lok Sabha seats as well as form a BJP government in Odisha by winning 75-plus Assembly seats. When poll results are declared on June 4, Naveen Patnaik will become a 'former Chief Minister'. Do you want a youth CM? A devotee of Lord Jagannath will be the CM of Odisha. It will be after a gap of 25 years that Odisha will get an Odia-speaking CM," said Shah.

"Vote BJP to power here and we will ensure that no youth will have to leave the State in search of work," said he.

'BJP scored 9 self-goals, to be rejected by people'

BJD to sweep polls with a 90-95% strike rate: Pandian

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Asserting that the BJD would sweep the polls with a 90-95% strike rate, party leader VK Pandian on Tuesday lashed out at the BJP accusing it of trying to mislead people with nine 'self-goals', which are detrimental to Odisha's interests.

Claiming that the people of Odisha would reject the BJP for its self-goals, the BJD star campaigner told reporters that the saffron party's self-goals include dragging Lord Jagannath and the Puri temple into political debates.

Stating that the people of Odisha do not appreciate this approach, Pandian said that making Lord Jagannath an electoral issue would cost the BJP dearly in the polls.



Moreover, people do not like the way leaders of BJP are using abusive language against Naveen Patnaik, considered the most popular Chief Minister of the country, he said.

On Odisha visits of top leaders of BJP and Congress for election campaign, Pandian said these leaders are crossing all limits and abusing Naveen. The people of Odisha take it to their heart. "It is going to help the BJD," he claimed.

Pandian said the saffron party is hatching a conspiracy

to close Mission Shakti and Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana (BSKY) and introduce Ayushman Bharat Yohana in Odisha. While 90 per cent of the people are being benefited by BSKY, Ayushman Bharat is meant only for BPL families.

The BJD government has introduced 5T schools and colleges with a focus on the young generation and Nua O scholarship has also been launched. The BJP would scrap these benefits for students, Pandian claimed.

While a Special Development Council (SDC) has been formed by the BJD regime for the development of tribals, no such system exists in the States having the BJP's double-engine government, he pointed out.

He said the BJP has inducted several leaders who were thrown out from the BJD for alleged involvement in criminal activities.

Claiming that the BJP has been rattled by the BJD's promise to provide free electricity, he said the saffron party is talking about solar power, which is bound to become a big fiasco like its earlier promise for free cooking gas.

Terming the BJP's promise to raise MSP for paddy to Rs 3,100 per quintal as misleading, Pandian said the government at the Centre has been evading the issue for the last ten years. He also called the BJP's proposed Subhadra Yojana with Rs 50,000-voucher to women another misleading promise.

Pandian claimed that the BJD has already secured a majority to again form government after three rounds of polls with an 80-85% strike rate.

After the fourth and final phase slated on June 1, the BJD's strike rate would further rise to 90-95%, he asserted.

Nagada voters to be provided transport to booth

AKSHAY ROUT ■ JAJPUR

Transport facilities will be made for voters of Nagada under Sukinda block in Jajpur district to enable them exercise their franchise in the polls scheduled on June 1.

"The district administration will facilitate the transportation of Nagada tribals to the polling station for voting on June 1," said Jajpur Collector Nikhil Pavan Kalyan. The tribals expressed their displeasure to travel nearly 13 km from the hilltop villages to reach their polling station. Following media reports, Collector Kalyan directed the revenue officials to organise transportation facilities for the tribals.

The facilities will also encourage voters in remote ar-

reas to participate in the electoral process by exercising their franchise, the Collector added. The polling station has been set up in Deogan, about 13 km from Nagada village. The voters had to trek 13 km downhill to reach the polling station, at least a six-hour to-and-fro journey. Nagada, inhabited by 420 people of the Juang community, has 272 electors. The tribals depend on forest produce and agriculture for subsistence.

Nagada is situated on the hilltop in a dense forest under the mineral-rich Sukinda block, virtually having no road. The villagers have to trek more than 15 km through a dense forest to reach a motorable road for even basic necessities.

Parents of brain-dead baby donate his organs

Say, 'He'll always be with us'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The parents of 21-month-old Pratyush Panigrahi, who was declared brain dead, donated his organs, saving two lives. His liver and heart were transplanted into children at hospitals in Chennai and Delhi.

"He was just 21 months' old and yet, he used to offer food to others before consuming the same," recalled the mother of Pratyush Panigrahi whose organs have been donated to save two precious lives.

Pratyush's parents decided



on organ donation after he was declared brain dead by the doctors in Bhubaneswar. However, the couple tried their best to provide the best treatment to their baby who also fought with the adversities strongly till the end.

save lives elsewhere, sources said.

Gaurishankar Panigrahy, Pratyush's father said, "My son was undergoing treatment for a long time. We have spent around Rs 30 to Rs 40 lakh to save him. We decided to donate organs so as to provide new life to others."

Gaurishankar's wife Sharmistha said, "He is with us and will always be with us. He used to call us mama and papa and used to play with medical staff here. He used to offer food to others first before eating it. He stayed with us for a short period and made us proud."

In Ganjam till June 4 Police curtail timings of liquor shops, tea stalls, eateries

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

In a bid to curb post-poll violence in Ganjam, police have taken various restrictive measures. Given some instances of past incidents, police have imposed restrictions on the opening of liquor shops till the poll results are out.

Ganjam SP Jagmohan Meena told reporters on Tuesday, "Ganjam Police are committed to maintaining law and order. We are now focused on preventive policing. Liquor shops will be allowed to open till 8 pm every day till June 4, the day of vote counting."

Besides, hotels, tea stalls and roadside eateries have been re-

quested to operate till 1.30 pm every day till June 4, he said.

Meanwhile, police have been cracking down on criminals in the district. "In the last week, police arrested 100 antisocial elements. Stern action is being taken against the antisocial elements violating the Arms and Explosives Act, involved in murder, attempt to murder and rioting and whose warrants are pending," he said.

All these arrests have been made in the areas under different police limits. Moreover, police and Central Armed Police Force personnel have been carrying out flag marches in all police station areas, the SP added.

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'Jagdev not involved in EVM toppling case' 2 youths escape cops' custody in Koraput

Aparajita shares CCTV footage

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Hours after a Press meet claiming Chilika BJP MLA Prashant Jagdev's innocence in the EVM toppling case, party leader Aparajita Sarangi on Tuesday posted a CCTV footage of the polling station in Bolgarh block under the Begunia Assembly constituency, where the incident took place during the third phase of voting in Odisha.

Sharing the video on her



Facebook account, Sarangi wrote, "The truth is never hidden. MLA Shri Prasant Jagdev has not broken EVM. That is proved clearly."

other EVM, a loud bang is heard. He is nowhere near it at that time and can be clearly seen in the CCTV footage standing and speaking to someone. He then votes and leaves the polling station.

Earlier in the day, Sarangi spoke about three evidences to prove that Jagdev had no role in toppling the EVM. "Today, I have received the CCTV footage. I also have an audio of a BJD worker stating the truth. Banamalibabu (her driver) has already told the media that he was threatened by police to name the MLA," she said

1 nabbed again

NISHAN PATTANAİK ■ KORAPUT

Two detained youths escaped custody after allegedly attacking a constable on Sunday night here.

According to sources, the police had detained two youths, identified as Umesh Guntha (25) and Sheikh Sain (25) from Hikimput panchayat, in connection with the

kidnapping of a minor girl from Khilua village.

However, Guntha escaped from custody earlier in the evening without the knowledge of the on-duty officers while Sain, taking advantage of the situation, struck constable Vhursit Takkri on the head with the butt of a gun and fled.

The other policemen found Takkri in a pool of blood and rushed him to Nandapur CHC after which

he was shifted to Koraput Medical College Hospital for further treatment.

Upon receiving news of the escape, a police team led by Nandapur SDPO Sambit Kumar Majhi launched a manhunt and apprehended Sheikh in the Bilaput village area on Monday afternoon.

However, Guntha remains at large. SDPO Majhi confirmed Sheikh's arrest and said he has been forwarded to court.

"Efforts are also underway to arrest the other accused involved in the kidnapping case," he added.

Koraput SP Abhinav Sonkar visited the Nandapur PS to investigate the incident. He questioned the duty officers about the escape and warned that necessary action would be taken following an inquiry. He directed the staff to expedite efforts to arrest the other accused.

Rs 50-cr scam: EOW arrests ponzi firm MD

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of Crime Branch on Tuesday arrested the managing director of a private firm for allegedly duping investors of more than Rs 50 crore.

The arrested was identified as Add India Pvt Ltd MD Mohan Kumar Parida of Kandagardi in Bhadrak district. He was nabbed from Chandbali in the district.

According to the EOW, a case has been registered on a complaint by one Chhita Ranjan Palo of Kalinga Nagar in Bhubaneswar against the company and its MD, who holds an MBA degree, and others for luring him and many other investors with high returns of 26% interest per month for three months on the invested amount under different schemes like autopool package and boosting package.

The victims were also promised a bonus of 2% for enrolling new members.

"An investor was required to join the schemes by depositing Rs 2,500, which is non-refundable. Following this, he was given a login ID under which he could enroll three more persons for commission or bonus. Initially, he was being given the Ayurvedic products of Rs 500

which was subsequently stopped. To win their confidence, some initial returns were also made. The MD, however, abruptly closed the schemes, the company office and fled after collecting Rs 50 crore from 2,000 investors in Odisha," the EOW investigation revealed.

In 2023, Polo deposited Rs 44.60 lakh and initially got a return of Rs 12,600. "Thereafter, no amount was paid to him," the EOW said.

The Add India (P) Ltd was registered with ROC, Cuttack, in 2020, having its registered office at Prachi Vihar, Palasuni, Rasulgarh. "The company was actually running a ponzi scheme in a pyramid-binary structure. The company was not authorised to accept any public deposit either by RBI or SEBI. It was also not issuing any money receipt, rather asking the investors to deposit the invested amount in its accounts. The initial returns were made from the investment of the new members," the agency said.

The collected money was diverted to several other accounts, it added.

The EOW has also seized a laptop that contains several incriminating contents like list of investors, the amount invested and payment sheet.

Korei seat set for BJD-BJP-Cong triangular fight

AKSHAY ROUT ■ JAJPUR

A triangular among the ruling BJD, BJP and Congress is on the cards in Korei Assembly constituency of Jajpur district. A stronghold of BJD since 2000, the constituency is witnessing an interesting electoral battle after the ruling party sprang a surprise by announcing the name of Sandhyarani Das as its candidate from Korei.

Sandhyarani is the mother of BJD's organisational secretary Pranab Prakash Das. Political observers said the ruling party has apparently fielded Sandhyarani from Korei with twin objectives. Winning the Assembly seat is likely to be easy for her as Korei is a family stronghold and has been represented by her husband Ashok Das five times. Besides, the candidature of Sandhyarani is being seen as a back-up plan for Pranab who is the BJD's candidate from Sambalpur Lok Sabha seat and is pitted against BJP heavy-



weight and Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. If Das fails to win, he can always get himself elected from Korei through a by-election.

Expressing confidence of winning the polls, Sandhyarani said, "People are happy with the welfare schemes launched by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik-led Government. I am confident of winning the election with a good margin."

On the contrary, BJP has fielded former MLA and popular Ollywood actor Akshay Das Nayak from the Assembly seat. Known for his



organisational skills, Akshay quit the BJD recently after being denied a party ticket and joined the BJP. Many senior BJD leaders and supporters of Akshay also followed suit and joined the saffron party. Akshay was elected from Korei on a BJD ticket in 2014. However in 2019, he was denied a party ticket and replaced by Ashok Kumar Bal who won the election by defeating his nearest rival Biswajit Nayak of BJP by a margin of around 30,000 votes. Soft-spoken and amiable, Akshay enjoys a strong support base in the constituency and has remained con-



nected with the voters since 2014.

Sources said Akshay holds an edge over other candidates and the saffron party is likely to benefit from the actor-turned-politician's popularity in Korei this time. Congress candidate Bandita Parida, the former chairperson of Vyasanagar municipality, had unsuccessfully contested the 2019 election from Korei. She too is a good organiser and has a large support base at the grassroots level. Bandita is banking on her local influence and the anti-incumbency against the BJD in Korei.

In Nasi-II beach Cyclone Remal hits Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

The gusty wind and torrential rain due to the effect of cyclone Remal in the Bay of Bengal played havoc for the turtle hatchlings at the mass nesting sites of Nasi-2.

Rajnarayan DFO Sudarshan Gopinath Jadav said, "Though only 1.20 lakh of endangered Olive ridley sea turtle hatchlings emerged from the egg shells at the mass nesting sites of Nasi-2 three days back, but the prevailing adverse weather due to cyclone Remal stopped the emergence of the baby turtles from the pits. "We are anticipating the eggs might have been destroyed due to the cyclonic rains."

Around 3 lakh Olive Rid-

ley turtles came ashore en masse to Nasi-2 within the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary and laid eggs within a span of five days since April 2. The emergence of hatchlings from egg shells continued for three days as 1.20 lakh baby turtles broke out of the eggshells and wandered around the sandy beach for nearly an hour before making their way to the swirling sea water. It was expected that the process would continue for at least 4/5 more days and more than 1 crore of baby turtles would come out from the egg shells. But the cyclone Remal played spoilsport.

Earlier, due to multi-layering at Nasi-2, more than 15% laid eggs were destroyed in some of the segments. Later, the predators like crows and seagulls also destroyed some eggs, though forest personnel were engaged to guard and drive away the predators.

If Modi gets 400 seats, PoK to return to India: Himanta

'While Odias jobless, all jobs with Pandian'

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

Intensifying poll canvassing for BJP MP candidate Baijayant Panda and for the MLA candidates of BJP in Kendrapada, Assam CM and BJP's star campaigner Himanta Biswa Sarma, on Monday, stated at a meeting in Patkura that if Modiji would get 400 seats then the PoK would be brought back to India.

"Now we have crossed 360 seats by the completion of the 6th phase poll. We are sure in the last phase we will reach 400 seats," stated the CM of Assam.

"Pandian holds CM

Naveen Patnaik hostage and has destroyed the future of Odia youths. If Odisha had good governance under BJD, it could become the number-one State in the country," said Biswa Sarma.

The Assam CM alleged that while the youths are largely jobless, all jobs are with only one individual VK Pandian. Youths here are migrating to other States for employment as they have no work in Odisha. There is no Government job here. Over one lakh Government jobs are vacant in Odisha. The non-Odias are getting jobs in industries here. The wealth of Odisha is being transferred to outsiders. The BJP Government, if voted to power, will give jobs to one lakh youths in the first year, assured the Assam CM.

Naveen, Pandian address rallies in Rahama, JSpur

KAHNU NANDA ■ JAGATSINGHPUR

BJD supremo and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik along with his close aide VK Pandian held two election meetings in Rahama and Jagatsinghpur on Monday and asked the people to bless BJD MP and MLA candidates in the elections on June 1.

Addressing both meetings, Naveen said that the people of Odisha have no need to pay electricity bills from July 2024.

He said it is one of the guarantees of the BJD. Patnaik also spoke about his Government's



much-hyped schemes such as BSKY, KALIA Yojana, Mission Shakti, Mamata scheme, LAccMI, Yuba 'O' scholarship, and others, benefiting the people of Odisha. He urged

people to vote for the BJD for a prosperous State.

Pandian, addressing the gathering, said the Prime Minister is saying that the Ayushman Bharat Yojana has

not been implemented in Odisha. "We are not implementing the central scheme because once we launch the scheme about 2 crore people will be excluded from health

benefits. Instead, we are continuing with State-sponsored BSKY health scheme covering people from all sections of society, Pandian explained.

Criticising BJP and Prime

Minister Narendra Modi, Pandian said the BJD in its elections manifesto has promised free electricity of 100 units to all, coinciding with the scheme BJP has launched pertaining to solar power. He said the solar scheme would burden the beneficiaries with Rs 50,000 to Rs 60,000 each.

He criticised a few other welfare schemes of BJP whose motto is to lure people during the election only.

CM Patnaik with Pandian first reached Rahama and subsequently in Jagatsinghpur. BJD Jagatsinghpur Assembly constituency candidate Prashant Muduli, Balikuda nominee Sarada Jena, and MP candidate Dr Rajashree Mallick were present.

Can BJD's Atanu win Mahakalpada for record 4th time?

As BJP too has chance

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KENDRAPADA

The Mahakalpada Assembly segment has proved to be the citadel of BJD since its formation in 2009 with party stalwart Atanu Sabyasachi Nayak having been the unchallenged leader. He won thrice from the seat by defeating senior leaders Bijay Pradhan (BJP) in 2019, Bijoy Mohapatra (BJP) in 2014 and late Balam Parida (Cong) in 2009.

In 2024, however, the situation has turned drastically at the grass root level as strong discontent is palpable against BJD. Three corepatris from three major political parties are contesting election in Mahakalpada. While Atanu is again contesting from the ruling BJD, Durga Prasanna Nayak is contesting from the BJP and Loknath Maharathy is in fray from the Congress. Though a triangular fight is on the cards, according to politi-



cal analysts, it is going to be a straight fight between BJD and BJP.

Atanu is confident enough to win for the fourth time in a row from Mahakalpada as the Naveen-led Government has done a series of developmental works for the people. "It is due to the efforts of Naveen that Arcel Mittal is going to set up its unit in Kendrapada. Besides this, financial assistance has been provided to the farmers through KALIA and Rs 15,000 package for fishermen community. CM Naveen Patnaik also did welfare works through schemes like BSKY,

Mission Shakti, Mamata, LAccMI bus and 5T school in our constituency," said Atanu.

He also attributed the non-completion of a mega water project for which CM Patnaik laid foundation stone in 2018 to the intervention of the NGT on a complaint. He assured that the long standing RoR (Record of Rights) problem of the Bengali settlers will be solved soon.

According to political analyst Ganesh Samal, the BJD has an upper hand this time. Atanu's rival Bijoy Mohapatra whose son Arabinda Mohapatra is a BJD candidate

for Patkura this time will not campaign against Atanu. So, thousands of supporters of Bijoy would definitely support Atanu to ensure his victory.

However, BJP candidate Durga Prasanna said, "The popularity of Atanu is at an all-time low as he has failed to carry out the much-required developmental work. He failed to solve the myriad problems of the constituency like lack of irrigation facilities, drinking water problems, bridges and corruption. The common talk in the constituency is that BJP should get a chance."

Mango yields drop by 50% in Koraput this yr

Thanks to bad weather during flowering, fruit setting stages

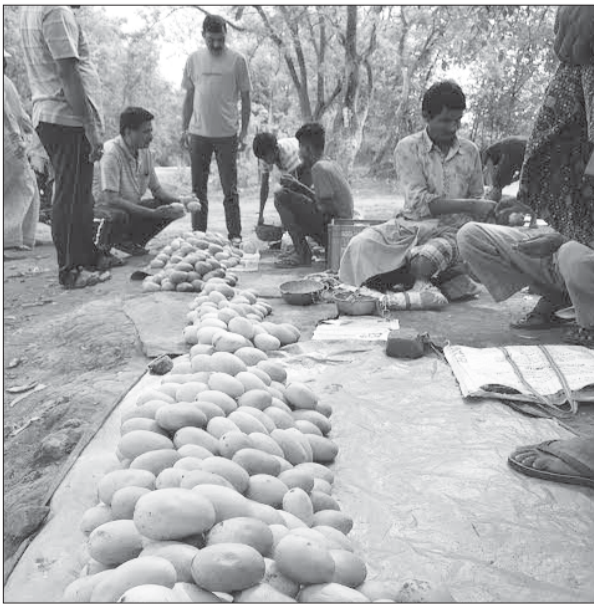
NISHAN PATTANAİK ■ KORAPUT

Koraput is known for its mangoes but this year the people of Koraput district may not enjoy the sweetness of mangoes due to a drastic fall in the production.

If yield has dropped by over 50 per cent, bad weather conditions, thunderstorms during flowering and fruit setting stages are said to have caused decline in production.

Mango crop coverage spreading across 15,000 acre in the district, including Kundra, Boipariguda, Borigumma, Damsatapur, Narayanpatana, Dasmantpur, Laxmipur, Nandapur and Koraput have been severely affected by thunderstorm and rain.

Local farmers here grow



both local and export varieties. While normal production yields three to four tonne per acre, this year's production has reduced to just one to two tonne, causing significant losses to the local farmers.

Inclement weather condition marked by a lack of rainfall during March and April further exacerbated the situa-

tion affecting the crops badly, sources said.

"We have suffered a lot due to low productivity this year, after a decade. There will be only one to two tonne mango production per acre which may not meet our cost of inputs," rued Trilochan gadba, a mango grower of Kundra block.

"The market prices for

mangoes have skyrocketed, with common varieties like Dasserri and Amrapali reaching up to Rs 100 per kg, compared to last year's price of Rs 40 per kg it is hard for us to purchase and eat," said Satya Hota.

"Borigumma mango market which is major centre of Koraput district was also affected due to low productivity. As low supply from local mango growers is recorded, we are looking to import from neighbouring states to meet the demands," said trader of Borigumma market Simanchal Patro.

To meet the local demand, traders are now importing mangoes from Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. Koraput's deputy director of Horticulture, Sudam Charan Biswal, acknowledged the fall in mango production, citing bad weather conditions during critical growth stages. "Mango has an alternative bearing habit, and this year's weather was not conducive during flowering and fruit setting stages," he added.

BJP urges voters to reject INDIA Bloc

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Tuesday exhorted people to not waste their votes by casting them in favour of the INDIA Bloc constituents as their poll prospects are marred by contradictions in their alliance and expressed confidence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi forming the government at the Centre for the third term with a massive mandate.

Addressing a Press conference at the BJP headquarters here, party national spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi claimed that differences among the INDIA Bloc constituents are coming out in open with the AAP fighting against the Congress in Punjab and TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee saying she will not attend the meeting of the INDIA bloc on June 1.

"The INDI alliance's contradictions are coming out in the open. When it's clear that these parties are fighting against



each other in Punjab and West Bengal, I would like to tell people of these states especially that they should think rationally as to who they should vote for in such a situation," Trivedi said. "You can clearly understand that voting for them would be in a way wasting your votes. The votes cast in favour of them would be of no significance," he added. Trivedi claimed that as the Lok Sabha elections are coming closer to its conclusion after the sixth phase of polling, it's "clearly visible" that people of

the country have understood the situation and the BJP-led NDA is on its way to achieve the target of winning more than 400 seats under Prime Minister Modi's leadership. "People of the country are decisively standing in support of the BJP," he added. Modi will get a third term as the prime minister as the INDIA bloc is on its way to suffer a massive defeat in the Lok Sabha elections due to the apparent contradictions in their alliance, the BJP leader claimed.

First anniversary of New Parliament House celebrated

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The first anniversary of the inauguration of India's magnificent New Parliament House was marked by celebrations on Tuesday. Reflecting on the glorious journey of the new Parliament Building, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla observed that since its first official use during the Special Session on 19 September 2023, the New Parliament House has witnessed intense debates, historic legislations, and collaborative efforts.

The historic Women's Reservation Bill 2023 (128th Constitutional Amendment Bill) or Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam was passed during this first Session. Archaic British era laws have also been phased out and new laws replacing them have been passed in the last one year. As the first anniversary of the New Parliament House is celebrated, its significance in shaping the nation's future has been



widely acknowledged, Birla remarked. It stands not only as an architectural marvel but also as a symbol of vibrancy of democracy—a venue where ideas merge, laws are formulated, and the voices of millions are heard, Birla concluded. Several dignitaries, including Speaker's of G20 nations, have

visited the new Building and appreciated its charming design and facilities, Birla recalled. He further said that the new Building, completed in record time of only two years seven months, has emerged as an embodiment of Atmanirbhar Bharat and the culmination of the wishes and aspirations of

the more than 140 crore Indians. Inaugurated on May 28, 2023 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it stands tall as a testament to India's vibrant democracy. Designed in a triangular shape, this state-of-the-art building houses both the Lok Sabha (the lower house) and the

Rajya Sabha (the upper house). It replaced the historic Old Parliament House, now renamed Samvidhan Sadan, which had served as the India's apex legislative body for nearly a century, he added. Mentioning about the need for a new Building, Birla recalled that the need for the new Building arose due to stability concerns with the older structure and its inadequacy to service the Parliament's present-day requirements. The original building, though steeped in history, lacked adequate space for Members of Parliament and their staff. Several Members of Parliament had also voiced their demand for a new building in tune with a new resurgent Bharat. Covering an area of 64,500 sqm, the new building accommodates around 1,272 members, with 888 seats in the Lok Sabha and 384 in the Rajya Sabha, a significant increase from the approximately 800 seats in the older structure, Birla mentioned.

Modi pays tributes to Savarkar, NTR on birth anniversaries



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday paid tributes to Hindutva ideologue Veer Savarkar on his birth anniversary. Born in 1883 in Maharashtra, Savarkar was a writer and politician who gave shape to the ideology of Hindutva and is seen as an icon by politicians supportive of the idea. Tributes to Savarkar who dedicated his life in the service of mother land, Modi said on X. Prime Minister Modi also paid tributes to former Andhra Pradesh chief minister and Telugu Desam Party founder N T Rama Rao on his birth

anniversary, saying his contributions to film and politics continue to inspire generations. In a post on X, Modi said, "Remembering the legendary NTR on his birth anniversary. He was a remarkable icon of Telugu cinema and a visionary leader. His contributions to film and politics continue to inspire generations." "From his unforgettable roles on screen to his transformative leadership, he is fondly remembered. We will keep working to fulfil his vision for our society," the prime minister wrote. A hugely popular actor, Rao founded the TDP in 1982 to counter the Congress and made it a formidable force in the state.

Exemplary synergy with Centre, State prevented loss of life, property during cyclone Remal: ICG



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Indian Coast Guard (ICG) said here on Tuesday exemplary synergy with Central and State agencies enabled prevention of loss of life or property at sea off West Bengal coast during cyclone 'Remal'. Making this assertion, ICG said the cyclonic storm had originated as a low-pressure area on May 22 and rapidly intensified into a severe cyclonic storm before making landfall on the intervening night of May 26-27 on the coasts of West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Headquarters of Coast

Guard Region (North-East) launched pre-emptive measures and ensured coordination with various central and state agencies, resulting in no loss of life or property at sea and managing the situation effectively. In view of the arrival of the cyclone, the ICG deployed ships, aircraft, and shore-based surveillance systems to ensure proactive surveillance and strategic diversion of the entire merchant fleet from the storm's path. Timely alerts were broadcast from ICG's Remote Operating Stations at Haldia and Paradip, warning fishing boats and transiting merchant vessels.

DoT conducts awareness workshop for Sanchar Mitras

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Department of Telecommunications (DoT), in collaboration with National Telecommunications Institute, Ghaziabad (NTIPRIT) conducted an Awareness Workshop for Sanchar Mitras here on Tuesday. Under Sanchar Mitra programme, students are engaged as volunteers to empower citizens with respect to their safe and smooth journey in digital world, by raising awareness about various citizen centric services of Department and dangers of cyber fraud. The Sanchar Mitra have been selected from the students of the prestigious educational institutions which are housing 100 5G Use Case Labs. Over 250 Sanchar Mitras, the student volunteers, have been selected across India. Madhu Arora, Member (T), Digital Communication Commission, interacted with Sanchar Mitras during the inauguration of the workshop. She said, "Telecommunications plays a vital role in today's digital world. It is imperative that the citizens are aware of today's digital trends and developments, thus, Sanchar Mitra is a steppingstone of our efforts to



raise awareness and empower citizens." She further described them as 'agents of change' in our society, helping bridge the gap between Department's initiatives and the citizens these initiatives intend to serve, particularly in remote areas where access to information is limited. She spoke on the importance of two-way communication with focus on Sanchar Mitra as a feedback mechanism, relaying valuable insights regarding challenges faced by citizens to DoT to help department form better strategies. She urged them to make use of this unique platform to unlock future opportunities in telecom and related fields. She lauded the efforts of DoT in ensuring citizen safety in times of natural disasters and through innovative solutions like Sanchar Saathi. India's technological manufacturing prowess was also highlighted with the milestone of creating an 4G &

5G indigenous stack appreciated during the workshop. Deb Kumar Chakraborti, Director General, NTIPRIT, emphasised on the role of Sanchar Mitra in bridging the communication gap between citizens and DoT. He enlisted providing affordable connectivity for all, grievance redressal, tackling cyber threats, safe citizen centric solutions, as the primary duties of DoT. DG (NTIPRIT) gave valuable suggestions on the expansion of Sanchar Mitra programme. The roles of Sanchar Mitras in this programme will be multifold: They will play an instrumental role from raising awareness on various telecom related citizen centric services like Sanchar Saathi, promoting digital literacy, and educating on dangers of cyber fraud; to reporting of issues, collecting feedback and coordination with field offices. The workshop organized by NTIPRIT for Sanchar Mitra acted as an induction programme, enhancing the capacity/understanding and effectiveness of volunteers. Aimed at the holistic awareness of telecom issues, the interactive workshop focussed on communication skills and provided an overview-cum-demonstration of key citizen-centric services.

Modi ended culture of appeasement: Union Minister

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi ended a culture of appeasement that prospered during the opposition-ruled era, besides ensuring equitable public service delivery, irrespective of caste or creed, Union Minister Jitendra Singh said on Tuesday. The Centre, under the prime minister's leadership, ensured that all eligible people got benefits of different government schemes. "Prime Minister Modi has ended a culture of appeasement that prospered during the opposition-ruled era. Now the government works to empower the last person in the last queue. There is no discrimination with anybody when it comes to the distribution of benefits of government schemes to eligible beneficiaries. There is equitable public service delivery to all," Singh said. He said all people, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, are now getting the government benefits timely. "Minorities and people living in opposition parties-ruled states are also getting benefits of different central government schemes," Union Minister of State for Personnel Singh said.

Agnipath scheme will be scrapped when INDIA Bloc comes to power, says Kharge

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Tuesday accused the Modi Government of playing with national security by "imposing" the Agnipath scheme, and said the military recruitment programme would be scrapped when an INDIA Bloc Government is formed at the Centre to give justice to the patriotic youth of the country. The Congress also said the Agnipath scheme is a "national security threat" and it has shrunk the stream of recruitment which can compromise the country's security for the next decade.

"By imposing the Agniveer scheme, the Modi government has played with India's national security. We have three questions, whose befitting reply the public will now give to BJP in the last phase of the elections," Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said in a post in Hindi on X. "Is it not true that Agnipath has reduced the number of recruitments from 75,000 per year to 46,000 per year? Is it not true that the Defence Minister of the country has to repeatedly reiterate that he will reconsider the Agniveer scheme, make changes and improvements in it," he asked. "Is it not true that the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) and the Army are concerned about the continuing decline in induction of new soldiers which is set to



reach its highest level by the end of this decade," the Congress chief asked in his post. He said on the other hand, the country's borders are facing Chinese infiltration, occupation and encroachment, for which more military force is needed, on the other hand, the Modi government has "destroyed" the lives of our patriotic youth through the Agnipath scheme. "The Congress guarantees that we will scrap the Agniveer scheme. Only then will our patriotic youth get justice! Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Hindustan," Kharge said. Earlier in the day, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said the scheme was a "national security threat". His attack on the government came over a media report which claimed that the

Department of Military Affairs is "actively" taking stock of the feedback on serving Agniveers from the services to analyse the effects of their induction to make the commensurate changes suitable for the Army, Air Force and the Navy. In a post on X, Ramesh said, "The Indian Armed Forces need to maintain a dense/continuous deployment of personnel along Eastern Ladakh to protect against Chinese aggression." "Agnipath has shrunk the stream of recruitment from 75,000 per year to 46,000 per year - the resulting shortfall of personnel can compromise our security for the next decade," Ramesh claimed. "Agniveers' also have a mere six months of training before being considered battle-ready," he said.

"This is the result of a policy that the Modi Sarkar made with zero forethought, zero consultation, and in the face of active opposition of the three Army chiefs. The outgoing PM/sva-ghoshit Bhagwan's arrogance is more sacrosanct than the security of the country," Ramesh said. On Monday, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi too accused the Modi government of "playing with" national security and the future of the youth by bringing in the Agnipath scheme. He had asserted that the programme would be scrapped when an INDIA bloc government was formed at the Centre. He also said the Agnipath scheme was an insult to the patriotism of the country's armed forces and the youth. Union Home Minister Amit Shah has stoutly defended the Agnipath scheme, saying there cannot be a more attractive scheme for the youth as it offers a guarantee of a full-term job for 'agniveers' who retire following a four-year tenure in the armed forces. The government rolled out the Agnipath recruitment scheme in June 2022 for short-term induction of personnel to bring down the age profile of the three services. It provides for recruiting youngsters between the age bracket of 17-and-half years and 21 for four years with a provision to retain 25 per cent of them for 15 more years.

NCC boys, girls mountaineering expedition flagged off by DG NCC



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The National Cadet Corps (NCC) boys and girls mountaineering expedition to Mount Kang Yatse-II peak was flagged off here by Director General NCC Lt General Gurbirpal Singh. The peak is located in the Ladakh region at an altitude of 6,250m/20,505ft, and this is the 87th NCC Cadets mountaineering expedition since 1970. The team comprises five Officers, 17 Permanent Instructors and 24 Cadets (12 Boys & 12 Girls) from various NCC directorates. The team will attempt to scale Mt Kang Yatse-II by the end of June. The DG NCC wished success to the team and highlighted the pivotal role of the NCC in youth development and the opportunities provided to the cadets to engage in diverse adventure activities. He encouraged the cadets to face the expedition's challenges with composure, courage, professionalism and an indomitable spirit.

Phase VI voter turnout reaches 63.37 per cent, EC releases data

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) on Tuesday released the voter turnout data of the sixth phase of voting for the 58 parliamentary constituencies in ongoing Lok Sabha elections, with figures indicating a turnout of 63.37 per cent. This marks an increase from the 59.06 per cent recorded at 7:45 PM on Saturday. Data showed with 64.95 per cent women voters voted in a large number as compared to 61.95 per cent male voters. The overall turnout for these 58 seats is slightly lower than the 64.73 per cent recorded in the 2019 elections, with the exception of the delimited Anantnag-Rajouri seat in Jammu and Kashmir. West Bengal registered the highest turnout at over 80 per cent, up from 79.5 per cent in 2019, followed by Odisha and Jharkhand. Uttar Pradesh saw the lowest turnout at 54 per cent. Notably, the Anantnag-Rajouri seat in Jammu and Kashmir recorded a turnout of 54.46 per cent, the highest since 1984. The voter turnout in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi was revised to 58.69 per cent. However, even the updated figure remains lower than the 60.6 per cent turnout in 2019. All seven parliamentary constituencies in Delhi also reported lower turnouts compared to the last



Lok Sabha election. As per data North East Delhi parliamentary constituency witnessed the highest polling in the state at 62.89%. Like 2019, New Delhi clocked the lowest turnout at 55.43%, followed by South Delhi at 56.45%. The polling percentage in North West Delhi recorded 57.85 %, 58.60 per cent in Chandni Chowk, 58.79 per cent in West Delhi and 59.51 per cent in East Delhi. Low voter turn out recorded at Maharajganj in Bihar, Faridabad in Haryana, Dhanbad in Jharkhand, Bhubaneswar in Odisha and Pulpur in Uttar Pradesh recorded 52.27 percent, 60.52 percent and 62.06 percent , 64.49 percent, 48.91 percent respectively. The EC also released the absolute number of voters for

all completed phases. Notably, these figures only account for votes cast using Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and do not include postal ballots, which will be counted on results day. The first phase, held on April 19, saw a turnout of 66.14 per cent, down from 69.29 per cent in 2019. The second phase, on April 26, recorded a turnout of 66.71 per cent, down from 69.43 per cent in 2019. The third phase, on May 7, saw a turnout of 65.68 per cent, slightly lower than the 66.58 per cent in 2019. The fourth phase, held on May 13, recorded a turnout of 69.16 per cent, slightly higher than the 68.8 per cent in 2019. The fifth phase, on May 20, saw a turnout of 62.2 per cent, higher than the 61.82 per cent in 2019.



Tribal population decreasing in Jharkhand's Santhal Parganas due to infiltration: Modi

PTI ■ DUMKA

Claiming that the tribal population was decreasing in the Santhal Parganas because of infiltration, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday accused the JMM-led ruling alliance in Jharkhand of "patronising" infiltrators, who he said were grabbing land and putting women at risk.

Addressing an election rally in Dumka, Modi said he had heard that the term "love jihad" was coined by the people of Jharkhand and that efforts were made in one district of the state to change the weekly holiday from Sunday, which was connected to the Christian community, to Friday.

"A big crisis looms over Jharkhand and that is infiltration. The Santhal Parganas is facing the challenge of infiltration. In many areas, the population of tribals is declining fast and the number of infiltrators is on the rise. The infiltrators are grabbing tribal lands. Tribal daughters are the target of infiltrators. Their security and safety are at risk. Their lives are also at risk," he said.

Apparently referring to two incidents that happened in 2022, Modi said, "Tribal daughters are being chopped into 50 pieces... Being burnt alive... Someone's tongue was pulled out. Who are these people who are targeting tribal daughters? Why is the JMM government patronising them?" The PM said that he heard that the term "love jihad" was coined by the people of Jharkhand.

"A friend was telling me that the term 'love jihad' emanated from Jharkhand. The people of Jharkhand have coined this term," he said.

Accusing the JMM of indulging in "communal and appeasement politics",



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a public meeting for Lok Sabha elections, in Dumka district

he said that despite Sunday being a holiday since the British era, in one Jharkhand district, it was changed to Friday.

"Sunday is not linked to Hindus but to the Christian community. It has been a holiday since 200-300 years. In one district, they changed the holiday from Sunday to Tuesday. First, they fought with Hindus, now they are fighting with Christians. What is going on?" Modi asked. "INDI Alliance's politics is based on the formula of communal appeasement, patronising separatists and protecting terrorists... Those who oppose it face the allegation of dividing Hindus and Muslims," he said.

The PM said that the opposition INDIA bloc was providing reservations on the basis of religion. "It will not be tolerated. Till Modi is alive, reservations cannot be provided for 'vote jihad'," he said. Modi claimed that when he "unmasked" the "communal and anti-tribal" veil of the opposition, he was accused of dividing Hindus and Muslims. "They think they can frighten

Modi by throwing dirt at him, but they do not know that the more they throw dirt, the more lotuses will bloom... Modi is bound to foil their propaganda of hatred," he said.

Alleging that the JMM-led coalition was looting the state's resources, he claimed that the state was now known for "mountains of cash".

"There are scenic mountains in Jharkhand, but now Jharkhand is known for the mountains of cash being unearthed. I had been CM for 13 years but never witnessed such huge amounts of cash. The JMM and Congress indulged in liquor scam, tender scam, mining and minerals scam, and a scam worth Rs 1,000 crore was unearthed in Sahibganj alone," he said.

"The leaders are such that they don't even hesitate to change the names of their parents to grab land. They have not even spared Army land," he added. Modi accused the JMM-led alliance of looting the foodgrains sent from the Centre for the poor and selling those in the black market.

Vowing that action against corruption

would be intensified in the country after June 4, Modi said scams were routine in the country before 2014 as "Congress indulged in loot 24x7", but after he came to power, he stopped it. Modi claimed the "INDI Alliance" tried hard to defeat Droupadi Murmu, who is a tribal, in the 2022 presidential polls. He said the country would see more development work in the next five years than it witnessed in the last 10 years.

He promised to build 3 crore pucca houses for the poor, make 3 crore women "lakshpati" and provide Rs 75,000 to each household under the PM Surya Ghar scheme for installing solar panels.

Modi said the Santhal Parganas region was bound to develop as works for a number of projects were underway, including the Varanasi-Ranchi-Kolkata greenfield expressway and a multimodal logistics hub in Sahibganj. The PM was campaigning for BJP's Dumka candidate Sita Soren, Rajmahal nominee Tala Marandi and Godda MP Nishikant Dubey. The elections in these constituencies will be held on June 1.

India needs strong leader, stable Government: Jaishankar

PTI ■ SHIMLA

The world is in a tense situation with ongoing conflicts unlikely to end quickly and India in this scenario needs a stable government and a strong and powerful leader "with networking, standing and respect", External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Tuesday.

Interacting with a select group of media persons here, he said there are ongoing conflicts in Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza-Iran and there are issues on the Indian borders too, adding a clear message should go that India has a strong leadership.

"The world is in a tense situation and the ongoing conflicts would not end so quickly and that's why India needs a stable government, a strong and powerful leader with networking, standing and respect," he said. "If your family was in Ukraine during the Russia-Ukraine war, who would you want at the top of the nation - Prime Minister Narendra Modi or some other face," Jaishankar asked.

"I see four-five years of difficult times ahead and the electorates should wisely vote as similar conflicts could happen on our borders," he told the media persons.

China is constructing roads, bridges and model village at the border on the land it took in 1962 and had made a road to Siachen with the coordination of Pakistan and India has also deployed forces,



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar during a discussion on 'Viksit Bharat @2047', in Shimla, Tuesday

improved logistics on the border and the budget for India-China border has been increased from Rs 3000 crore to Rs 15,000 crore, the minister said. The idea behind the vibrant village programme under which border villages are being developed is to stop flight of people from borders by creating basic facilities like infrastructure, water, digital connection and provide livelihood, Jaishankar said while responding to a question.

"We are living in a competitive world and China is asserting itself and India has also focused on manufacturing (Made In India) to make the country self-reliant, generate employment and self employment avenues for the overall development," he said. The minister also said India has given a clear message that terrorism would not be tolerated and terrorists would pay the price.

Ten years of the Modi

government is a symbol of positive change, he said.

"Our support base is increasing in the United Nations (UN) under Modi's leadership," he said and added that "Modi is being looked upon as a strong leader and today, nations look up to India."

Referring to the issue of India's permanent membership at the UN, Jaishankar said that in 1944, India was not an independent nation and could not get the membership. However, when Jawaharlal Nehru was the prime minister, India was offered a permanent seat, but Nehru said that China should be the permanent member, he claimed.

Hitting out at the Congress for raising sensitive issues in its political campaigns, Jaishankar also alleged that during the tenure of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, China infiltrated in Arunachal Pradesh but the opposition never went in public to embarrass the government.

Shah's remarks boost Anurag Thakur campaign; stakes high for Sukhu

PTI ■ HAMIRPUR (HP)

Stakes are high for Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu and Union minister Anurag Singh Thakur in Hamirpur Lok Sabha constituency where revolt in the Congress and four simultaneous assembly byelections have made the parliamentary contest exciting.

Thakur won the 2019 elections by 3,99,572 votes, 2014 polls by 98,403 votes, 2009 by 72,732 and 2008 byelection by 1,74,666 votes. Union Home minister Amit Shah's remarks that Hamirpur has got a ready-made minister and will not get an MP like him even if the people search with a lamp have given a boost to Thakur's campaign. It is also likely to benefit the BJP in the assembly byelections.

Sukhu and Deputy Chief Minister Mukesh Agnihotri are intensively campaigning in the constituency and accusing Thakur of making tall



promises and claiming that the Congress will wrest the seat this time.

The Hamirpur parliamentary constituency is considered a bastion of the BJP. Out of the 17 elections including two byelections held since 1952, the BJP has won 10 times, the Congress five and the Janta Party and an Independent once each. The BJP has lost only once in 1996 on this seat after 1984.

Anurag Thakur, who was

elected for the first time in 2008 bypoll following his father Prem Kumar Dhumal's resignation after taking over as chief minister of the state, won three more elections in a row in 2009, 2014 and 2019.

He is seeking the consecutive fifth term facing former MLA from Una, Satpal Singh Raizada, of the Congress.

It is for the first time that the Lok Sabha polls are being held in Hamirpur constituency with Congress chief minister Sukhu, hailing from Hamirpur district in the saddle, and the assembly segments of the chief minister, deputy chief minister Mukesh Agnihotri and cabinet minister Rajesh Dharmani falling under this constituency.

The Hamirpur Lok Sabha constituency comprises 17 assembly segments — five constituencies each in Hamirpur and Una districts, four in Bilaspur district, Dehra and Jaswan-Pragpur in Kangra district and Dharampur in Mandi district.

Gorakshpeeth reigns supreme in Gorakhpur where Yogi name is enough

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ GORAKHPUR

In Gorakhpur, the Gorakshpeeth has been the epicenter of political power for over three decades, drawing national attention to the Lok Sabha constituency. BJP MP Ravi Kishan, running for a second term, hopes to capitalize on the same influence that secured his initial victory.

Ravi Kishan's campaign heavily relies on the support of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who previously served five terms as Gorakhpur's MP. His main rival, SP candidate Kajal Nishad from the India Bloc, is banking on caste dynamics to gain votes. However, the temple's influence remains a significant factor in the race. "This is Gorakhpur, where Yogi's name prevails. Maharaj ji's (as Yogi is affectionately called) name alone is enough.

Whoever wins here does so because of Yogi ji," said Dinesh Pratap, a local resident.

The influence of Yogi Adityanath transcends religious boundaries within the constituency. "The majority of shops around the Gorakshpeeth temple, selling memorabilia, are owned by Muslims. They benefit from the temple's patronage and, out of respect for Maharaj ji, they vote for the BJP," explained Narendra Nath Srivastava, a retired government official. This unique blend of religious and political loyalty underscores Yogi Adityanath's enduring impact on Gorakhpur, solidifying it as a stronghold for the BJP.

Historically, the Congress party dominated Gorakhpur, winning six out of eight elections until 1984. However, the political landscape shifted with Mahant Digvijaynath's victory in 1967 and Harikesh Bahadur's win during the 1977



anti-Emergency wave.

After losing the seat in 1984, Congress struggled to regain its position. From the late 1980s, Gorakshpeeth reasserted its dominance. Mahant Avedyanath secured consecutive wins from 1989 to 1996, followed by Yogi Adityanath's five victories from 1998 to 2014. Mahant Digvijaynath had previously represented Gorakhpur in 1967, with Avedyanath succeeding him after 1969.

The Ram Mandir movement saw Avedyanath return to politics in 1989 under the Hindu Mahasabha, eventually aligning with the BJP. This partnership continued with Yogi Adityanath, solidifying Gorakshpeeth's influence over the constituency.

In the last two Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won all nine seats in the Gorakhpur and Basti divisions, highlighting the influence of Nath Peeth. Since Yogi Adityanath became Chief Minister in 2017, Ravi Kishan has served as MP since 2019, emphasizing his allegiance to Gorakshpeeth and Yogi's guidance. Conversely, the opposition's strategy appears entangled in the temple's influence. Despite SP candidate Praveen Nishad's 2018 by-election win, the BJP reclaimed the seat in the 2019 general elections. The SP's current candidate, Kajal Nishad, faces an uphill battle in this Nath Peeth-dominated

region.

The SP's efforts to mobilize the Nishad community have historically fallen short in general elections. Ravi Kishan's decisive win over SP's Rambhual Nishad last time prompted the SP to field Kajal Nishad, yet the Nishad Party remains aligned with BJP.

Ravi Kishan reiterates his campaign's core message: the Gorakhpur seat remains a "temple seat." Both BJP and Ravi Kishan are acutely aware that Nath Peeth's influence has historically outweighed caste considerations. Their strategy hinges on sustaining this faith-based loyalty to secure another term for Ravi Kishan.

The upcoming elections will test the resilience of Gorakshpeeth's influence against the opposition's caste-based strategy. As political activities intensify, the entire nation watches closely, anticipating the outcome in this critical constituency.

Bengal chit fund victims await justice amid LS polls corruption discourse

PTI ■ KOLKATA

For the past decade, 52-year-old Rishin Majumdar has been working two shifts, trying to repay a hefty Rs 30 lakh loan he took out to compensate the investors of Saradha group, where he once served as an agent.

"After the Saradha group collapsed in 2013, people who invested money through me wanted it back. I was beaten, and even my family members were not spared. I was then forced to take a Rs 30 lakh loan from a local money lender. I lost Rs five lakh in

the chit fund," Majumdar said.

His story is a familiar one among lakhs of people who fell victim to the multi-crore chit fund scams that rocked West Bengal in 2013.

As corruption scandals like school recruitment scams take centre stage in the Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal, the enduring and hopeful victims of the 2013 chit fund scams—one of the state's largest financial scandals since independence — are still waiting for justice after more than ten years. The chit fund scam of Bengal saw

several companies, most notably the Saradha Group, exploiting the trust of investors with promises of high returns.

At its peak in 2012, as many as 200 chit-fund companies operated in Bengal.

Over a decade has passed, yet the quest for justice for these victims remains unfulfilled, their lives forever altered by the deceit and betrayal of those they had trusted with their lifelong savings. Ashok Barui from Ballygunge and Sailen Pal from Baruipur represent the faces of this scandal. Despite their

education, limited opportunities led them to work as agents for these chit-fund companies, persuading thousands to invest their hard-earned money.

Their story mirrors that of many others in Bengal, all chasing the dream of swift wealth, only to be left in financial ruin.

"I had collected Rs 20 lakh from neighbours, relatives, and friends for the Saradha group. I took my family's savings of Rs 1 lakh and invested. Since the company shut down, I was beaten up. I returned some of the money

from my pocket, but it was too little," said Sailen, son of an auto driver, who worked as an agent in the Saradha group.

Investors and agents of these ponzi schemes were spread across the state, with a significant number from South Bengal, particularly from the eight Lok Sabha constituencies in North and South 24 Parganas, which will go to the polls on June 1.

Till 2013, an estimated two crore depositors were affected by the ponzi schemes involving companies like Saradha and Rose Valley groups. Despite investigations

by the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate, the total amount lost by investors remains unknown, with estimates suggesting it exceeds Rs 30,000 crore.

"My father invested his lifelong savings after retirement, but everything was lost. During elections, parties promise that the case will be solved soon, but nothing happens," Purnima Kundu said.

The BJP in the last Lok Sabha polls had promised that the culprits would not be spared and the defrauded investors would get back their money.

INDIA Bloc to suffer massive defeat in LS elections: BJP

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Tuesday exhorted people to not waste their votes by casting them in favour of the INDIA bloc constituents as their poll prospects are marred by contradictions in their alliance and expressed confidence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi forming the government at the Centre for the third term with a massive mandate.

Addressing a press conference at the BJP headquarters here, party national spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi claimed that

differences among the INDIA bloc constituents are coming out in open with the AAP fighting against the Congress in Punjab and TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee saying she will not attend the meeting of the INDIA bloc on June 1.

"The INDI Bloc contradictions are coming out in the open. When it's clear that these parties are fighting against each other in Punjab and West Bengal, I would like to tell people of these states especially that they should think rationally as to who they should vote for in such a situation," Trivedi said.

Cliffhanger in Karakat, where a Bhojpuri star has upset traditional equations

PTI ■ KARAKAT (BIHAR)

In news since Bhojpuri superstar Pawan Singh threw his hat in the ring, Karakat Lok Sabha constituency in Bihar is witnessing a cliffhanger of a contest.

Banking on his star appeal, Singh, whose decision to contest as an Independent has led to expulsion from the BJP, is locked in a multi-cornered contest that promises a nail-biting finish.

Established in the delimitation of 2008, comprising three assembly segments each of Rohtas and Aurangabad districts, Karakat has, so far, always voted for the BJP-led NDA, which is backing former

Union minister Upendra Kushwaha this time.

The INDIA bloc is represented by Raja Ram Singh Kushwaha, a former MLA of the CPI(M). Liberation who had won the Obra seat in Aurangabad twice in the late 1990s when his party was struggling to hold its own. As if the presence of Singh was not enough, the pitch has been queered further for NDA and INDIA with the entry in the fray of Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM, which has fielded Priyanka Chaudhary, a local zila parishad member, in whose favour the Hyderabad MP recently campaigned.

Kushwaha had won the seat on his debut in 2014 and the feat earned him a berth in the Union Council of Ministers.

By the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, he was out of the NDA and ended up losing the seat to Mahabali Singh of JD(U), from whom he had wrested the constituency five years earlier.

"I am sure people in Karakat remember my concern for its development during the five years I represented the seat," said Kushwaha who then headed the now-defunct Rashtriya Lok Samata Party. "In my capacity as Minister of State for HRD, I helped many children from Karakat get admission to central schools. I was always ready to help people from all castes and communities," claimed Kushwaha who now heads Rashtriya Lok Morcha.



Pawan Singh, who drew the biggest crowds among all candidates here while filing nomination papers, compares himself to "Abhimanyu" but hopes that, unlike the character from Mahabharata, he will emerge victorious from the labyrinth.

"I have a manifesto for Karakat, in which I share, among other things, my vision for promoting film-making and tourism, for which there is ample scope in this area full of hills, forests and waterfalls," said Singh.

Hailing from the adjoining district of Bhojpur, the actor-singer turned politician strikes all the correct notes, as he lists among his priorities the revival of moribund

industrial units in Dalmianagar township which old residents of Rohtas feel nostalgic about.

However, the NDA seems to have realised well enough that the candidate it supports is no heavyweight and Singh, an upper caste Rajput, could make a dent into what has been a BJP support base. No wonder, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah have canvassed in the constituency even though it is not being contested by their party.

Both the leaders made it a point to recount the horrors of Naxal violence and allege that a victory for the CPI(M) Liberation candidate could

lead to a resurgence of bloody battles between ultra-Left guerrillas and private militias of land owners.

Raja Ram Kushwaha banks on his own party's cadre, a force to reckon with in much of central Bihar, besides solid backing from its formidable senior ally, the RJD.

In the 2020 state assembly polls, the Mahagathbandhan had swept Karakat, with RJD bagging five assembly seats and CPI(M) notching up the remaining one. In the run-up to the June 1 polls, the alliance is busy, working at the ground level, to prevent a split in minority votes, a possibility of which looms in the wake of Owaisi's campaign for Chaudhary.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

A positive vote

The highest voter turnout in Kashmir in three decades bodes well for Assembly polls

At a time when almost the entire nation is reluctant to exercise its franchise, Kashmiris have shown courage and resilience to come out and vote despite its high-risk perception. Only Kashmir and Bengal have shown a surge in voter turnout this election. Bengal's case is understandable as it has been a political State all along but Kashmir has never shown such keen interest in general elections as in 2024. This surge in civic participation is being hailed by the Election Commission (EC) as a promising indicator for the forthcoming Assembly elections. It is being seen as a crucial step towards the restoration of democracy in the State. On August 5, 2019, the Government of India abrogated Article 370, which granted special autonomy to the region of Jammu and Kashmir. The move was accompanied by a series of political and administrative changes, including the bifurcation of the State into the Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. The decision was met with mixed reactions, both domestically and internationally, and led to a period of political instability and security concerns in the region. In the aftermath of this significant constitutional change, the Central Government has focused on integrating the region more closely with the rest of India, promising development, investment and a return to normalcy. One of the key components of this strategy has been the re-establishment of a democratic framework through local and Assembly elections. However, the biggest impediment had been people's resistance and mistrust of the civic authorities.

Now that they have voted in high numbers, they have in a way shown their willingness to have a democratic Government at the State level. The recent elections, which saw the highest voter turnout in three decades, mark a significant milestone in this process. The voter participation was markedly higher compared to previous elections, indicating a renewed faith in the democratic process among the Valley residents. This increase in voter turnout can be attributed to several factors, including improved security and Government initiative. This unprecedented voter turnout is a good omen for the upcoming Assembly elections. These elections are viewed as a pivotal moment for the restoration of democratic governance in J&K. The high turnout suggests that the people are eager to participate in the democratic process and would have their voices heard in governance. Their active civic engagement is essential for the legitimacy and success of the Assembly elections. It also reflects a broader acceptance of the political changes that have occurred since the abrogation of Article 370. Despite this positive development, several challenges remain. Additionally, the Government and EC need to address the grievances and aspirations of various sections of people to maintain the momentum of democratic engagement. Now the poll panel must ensure that the upcoming elections are free, fair and transparent, with a focus on maintaining the momentum of increased voter participation.



Government at the State level. The recent elections, which saw the highest voter turnout in three decades, mark a significant milestone in this process. The voter participation was markedly higher compared to previous elections, indicating a renewed faith in the democratic process among the Valley residents. This increase in voter turnout can be attributed to several factors, including improved security and Government initiative. This unprecedented voter turnout is a good omen for the upcoming Assembly elections. These elections are viewed as a pivotal moment for the restoration of democratic governance in J&K. The high turnout suggests that the people are eager to participate in the democratic process and would have their voices heard in governance. Their active civic engagement is essential for the legitimacy and success of the Assembly elections. It also reflects a broader acceptance of the political changes that have occurred since the abrogation of Article 370. Despite this positive development, several challenges remain. Additionally, the Government and EC need to address the grievances and aspirations of various sections of people to maintain the momentum of democratic engagement. Now the poll panel must ensure that the upcoming elections are free, fair and transparent, with a focus on maintaining the momentum of increased voter participation.

PICTALK



Students celebrate with their teacher over Secondary School Certificate (SSC) results, in Mumbai

India needs substantial defence investment

The BJP's defence manifesto, dubbed 'Modi ki guarantee,' pledges robust security measures but faces criticism for overlooking persistent threats and insufficient defence spending



ASHOK K MEHTA

India's Twin Challenges Warrant Active Deterrence: Achievable through Investment in Defence BJP's defence and national security manifesto is Modi ki guarantee for Surakshit Bharat. It launched a massive 15-day campaign to invite suggestions through face-to-face meetings and the NaMo app from around 10 mn supporters. The election manifesto is immersed in Modi pictures and a surfeit of Modi ki guarantees. There is plenty the BJP is taking credit for. Eliminating terrorism though attacks occurred only last week in J&K. Cross Border Terrorism has a tragic history: attack on Parliament in December 2001 (under BJP rule) and Mumbai 2008 under United Progressive Alliance (UPA) dispensation. In 2001 BJP applied coercive diplomacy -Operation Parakaram- which was partially successful. In 2008 UPA exercised strategic restraint - doing nothing. Its zero tolerance for terrorism was demonstrated by Uri and Myanmar surgical strikes in 2016 and Balakot air strikes in 2019. These created deterrence against spectacular terrorism. BJP's claim of no attack in the last decade is wrong; terrorists struck at Pathankot, Pulwama and Uri Brigade Headquarters and 2950 civilians and security forces were killed in terrorist-related incidents between 2014 and 2023. BJP's inventory of achievements is impressive: revocation of Article 370, 52 per cent reduction in Left Wing Terrorism, with Home Minister Amit Shah declaring it will be crushed within three years. There is an overall decline of 73 per cent in the insurgency in the northeast but no mention of Manipur where violence has continued for one year and repelling ordered twice. Manipur, a serious embarrassment for the Government will reignite insurgency. Given the violent situation on the India-Myanmar border, with the Junta fighting a losing battle with rebels, Myanmar will present a major threat to the North East. Hailing CDS as an achievement, the BJP emphasised the completion of theorisation soonest. Further infrastructure development in the northern



borders is matched by a thrust towards the security of the Indian Ocean Region. Defence manufacturing and Atmanirbharta figure prominently under Making India a Global Manufacturing Hub. There is no mention of China or Pakistan and dealing with the twin threats they pose even as the opposition has attacked the Government for loss of territory in east Ladakh which the Government has denied emphatically. Clean chit to China will resolve the border dispute on India's terms difficult if not impossible. Restoration of status quo ante (April 20, 2020), demanded by successive Army Chiefs, is also not realizable. The lack of political guidance to the Armed Forces is a major deficiency. The first indication in four years that agreement on theorisation is nearing came from RM Rajnath Singh this month. Leaving it to the CDS whose operational role is unclear to obtain consensus on the allocation of resources, the job profile of service Chiefs when theatre commanders are in place and operational command and control of theatres is unworkable without inputs from RM and NSA to CDS. Equally, NSA Ajit Doval and the National Security Council Secretariat have to update the National Security Strategy submitted by Integrated Defence Staff in 2021. Surprisingly, the Government has not taken



DEFENCE ALLOCATION HAS PLUMMETED FROM A HIGH OF 3.5 PER CENT IN CONGRESS RULE IN THE LATE 1980s WHEN I WAS A MEMBER OF THE DEFENCE PLANNING STAFF TO LESS THAN 2 PER CENT TODAY, EVEN WHEN THE GDP HAS RISEN EXPONENTIALLY

these two interlinked issues — Theatrisation and NSS— seriously enough. Speculation is rife these will happen within one year of BJP 3.0. During the UPA rule, NSS was prepared thrice. The issue most befuddling is the static of defence spending on which the 2024 BJP manifesto is silent. The Congress on the other hand has Stated in its current manifesto that it will arrest the decline in defence spending and allocate sufficient funds. Sufficiency of funds is a challenge no Government has addressed. Defence allocation has plummeted from a high of 3.5 per cent in Congress rule in the late 1980s when I was a member of the Defence Planning Staff to less than 2 per cent today even when the GDP has risen exponentially. The latest SIPRI report shows India's defence budget is USD 84bn compared to China's USD 296 bn. In defence allocation, for 2024-25, defence outlay was increased by 4.7 per cent which is the lowest in ten years (except in 2020-21) when it was 1.45 per cent of the GDP. As a percentage of GDP defence spending has not reached even 2 per cent at a time when two full-fledged wars are being fought along with several skirmishes. The capital budget for modernisation best illustrates the parsimony: the gap between the amount demanded and the amount allocated in 2015-16

was Rs 16,646 crore while in 2022-23 it rose to Rs 63,328 crore. Government officials offer the perennial excuse that defence forces can't spend the money. Amit Cowshish who was financial advisor (Acquisition) a decade ago says the 1.9 per cent of GDP in the current fiscal is 13 per cent of Government expenditure. A defence spending budget which is 3 per cent of GDP alone can begin to catch up with China in military capability.

The rest of the world is investing hugely in defence with 31 Nato nations committed to reaching 2 per cent of GDP with the UK pledging to reach 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2027. Even pacifist Japan has decided to put aside the 1 per cent spending on defence constitutional limitation and will spend 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2027 and invest USD 315 bn to augment capabilities and deterrence. The capital cost of catheterisation and attendant reforms have to be factored in. Modi has to bite the bullet to deter China and with Jaishankar try to make the twin threat challenge one-front. Modi's This is not the era of war is day-dreaming!

(The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka, and founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ERRANT VETS KILL KERALA'S WILDLIFE

Madam — Apropos the news story "Errant vets shoot to kill Kerala big cats, jumbos," published on May 27, this is my response. The recent deaths among wild animals in Kerala, including elephants, tigers, leopards and cheetahs, raise serious concerns about the State's conservation efforts. The tranquillizer shots administered by veterinarians are fatal in many cases, leading to questions about the competence of veterinary doctors and the quality of the drugs used. The animals are often captured and then killed, with the excuse that they are "trespassing" into human settlements in search of food and water. However, a closer examination reveals that the encroachment is the other way around, with human settlements expanding into former reserve forests. The destruction of water bodies and greenery due to encroachment and illegal quarrying has left the animals without a place to live, leading to starvation and, ultimately, death. The situation is dire and if left unchecked, Kerala's forests may soon become deserts and its wildlife may become museum pieces.

Dhruv Malhotra | Mumbai

WAR IN WEST ASIA PERSISTS

Madam — Apropos the news story " Hamas racket attack triggers air raid sirens in Tel Aviv," published on May 27, this is my response. There seems to be no end to the war in West Asia. While Hamas claimed on Sunday that it fired a 'large rocket barrage' at Israel's commercial hub of Tel Aviv, Israel has ignored the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) ruling, asking it to halt its offensive in Rafah immediately. It has also intensified attacks across Gaza. Israel's decision to ignore the ICJ ruling is unfortunate. In persisting with its military action to 'eliminate Hamas', Israel has inflicted untold suffering on Palestinians, giving rise to a humanitarian crisis in a region that could do without renewed polarisation. Far from achieving its objectives of destroying Hamas and its military infrastructure, Israel is probably aiding the terrorist group's fresh

Domestic airfares remain globally low



Apropos the news story "Domestic airfares on a northward trajectory; still among the lowest globally, say experts," published on May 27, this is my response. As a regular newspaper reader, the escalating airfares in India, soaring up to 40 per cent, have caught my attention. Despite being among the lowest globally, the recent surge reflects the challenges faced by the aviation industry, primarily due to capacity constraints exacerbated by supply chain issues. The rise in fares, though significant in percentage, seems less drastic considering inflationary pressures. Industry experts suggest this trend may persist until FY2026, signaling a structural shift. However, the affordability of air travel in India, compared to developed markets, remains commendable. The discourse around finding a balance between operational efficiency and revenue generation is crucial. Airlines must navigate this delicate equilibrium to ensure sustainability in a dynamic market landscape. Achieving profitability at varying load factors underscores the complexity of the aviation business, emphasising the need for adaptive strategies. In essence, while the surge in airfares may present short-term challenges, addressing underlying capacity issues and maintaining a balance between cost and revenue is imperative for long-term viability.

Aaradhya Patel | Delhi

recruitment. In disregarding calls from its closest ally, the US, Israel is undermining the rules-based global order. About 143 countries have supported full UN membership for Palestine and three European countries—Ireland, Norway and Spain—have decided to formally recognise Palestine as a State for 'peace in the Middle East'. Israel's friends and partners, the US in particular, need to stress to Tel Aviv the diminishing returns of its current course of action. The peace and security in the region and the fate of the multilateral rules-based order hang in the balance. Disruptions like these have a long-term ripple effect on an already tense world.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

MARVELLOUS ANATOMY OF A BRANCH

Madam — Apropos the news story "Genesis of Growth: From Bud to Branch," published on May 26, this is my response. The intricate anatomy of a branch is a testament to the remarkable adaptability and resilience of trees. From the initial bud formation to the eventual shedding of

unproductive branches, each stage of growth is a masterclass in strategic planning and resource allocation. The delicate balance between auxin and cytokinin hormones ensures that the tree grows in a way that maximises its exposure to sunlight and minimises shading, while the development of lignin provides a robust defence against pathogens and pests. The branching patterns of trees are a reflection of their genetic makeup and environmental conditions, with different species adopting various strategies to optimise their growth and survival. The branches themselves serve as vital conduits for water and nutrient transport, providing habitat and support for a diverse range of organisms. Ultimately, the cycle of growth and retreat in trees serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of change and the wisdom of knowing when to let go, inspiring us to adapt and evolve in our own lives.

Kiara Mehta | Hyderabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Nurture dreams with open eyes and determination

Believe in the power of continued dreaming and the importance of supporting others in their journey towards realising their aspirations



SANJAY CHANDRA

Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon on 21 July 1969. We read about the historical event in the newspapers the next day. I think on a subconscious level, the event sowed the seed of the first dream that I saw with open eyes. For days on end, all that I could think of was ways to create a miniature earth and moon within the confines of our bedroom and the ways that I could send my own Apollo to the moon. My dreams kept on evolving. At that stage, all that I would look forward to was to move to the next class with good marks. Much later, coming from a family of first-generation engineers, it was only natural for me to join an engineering course. Towards the end of my course, I started dreaming of becoming an entrepreneur. I realised the difficulties in pursuing this goal at that stage due to the limitations of a middle-class background. I parked my dream, to be retrieved at an appropriate time. I thought of my next steps. At the age of 21, it was only



natural to dream of a good job, followed by marriage and children and promotions; till I realised that I wanted something beyond the predictable routine of a Government job. This led me to join the private sector. It was now time to bring forward my earlier dream of being an entrepreneur. The dreams kept on evolving with my advancing age; some were discarded, some were attained and few remain, hoping for fruition in the years to come. One unfulfilled dream is to help others, much younger and less privileged than me, to dream. A child is born a child. It does not know the meaning of being

poor, till others make it conscious of the disparity. I firmly believe that each human being dreams with open eyes; it could be a prayer to be able to see the dawn next day, a hope that the wages would be better tomorrow, or the belief in a better life.

I know a couple, now settled in America, who have started a foundation to assist the underprivileged young. The lady passionately told me about the introductory annual session that they arrange for the youngsters, usually at some rated property, to give them exposure to a life that currently is beyond their means, but which they might be able to lead one day if they pursue their dreams. I was sceptical as I thought that such an environment might be too intimidating. My fears might be unfounded. The Internet has made available a plethora of possibilities to the younger generation. A young boy, whose education we have been supporting for the past few years, wants to be an astronaut. He might not

make it, but the best advice that I could give him and others, is to continue to dream even if you fail — there is always something new to look forward to. We know of people who get paralysed or lose their eyesight and sometimes even their limbs. Yet, there are many instances of people overcoming their handicaps through sheer grit and courage. A visually impaired young woman found dumped in a waste bin 25 years back, cleared Maharashtra services examinations recently. There are many more around us. All that they need is for someone to help them nurture their dreams. We need only to remember writer Mary Anne Radmacher, "Nurturing is not complex. It's simply being tuned in to the thing or person before you and offering small gestures toward what it needs at that time."

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

FIRST COLUMN

THE MYSTICAL NATURE OF SHIVA'S THIRD EYE

It is a potent symbol of destruction, creation and spiritual awakening



SWAMI CHARANASHRIT

In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva, the destroyer and transformer among the Trimurti, is often depicted with a third eye on his forehead. This eye is not just a physical feature but a powerful symbol with deep spiritual and metaphysical connotations.

The Origin of Shiva's Third Eye

The third eye of Shiva, also known as the "eye of wisdom," is associated with many legends and mythological stories. One prominent story explains how Shiva's third eye emerged. It is said that when Shiva was in deep meditation, Kamadeva, the god of love, attempted to disturb his meditation by shooting an arrow of desire. In his fury, Shiva opened his third eye, from which a powerful beam of fire emerged, reducing Kamadeva to ashes. This event not only signifies the destructive aspect of Shiva but also underscores the concept of burning away desires and illusions to achieve a higher State of consciousness.

Symbolic Meaning

Spiritual Insight: The third eye is often seen as the center of higher consciousness and wisdom. It represents the ability to see beyond the physical and perceive the underlying truths of the universe. In this sense, Shiva's third eye signifies spiritual awakening and enlightenment.

Destruction and Regeneration: Shiva's third eye embodies his role as the destroyer of evil and ignorance. The fire that emanates from the third eye symbolises the destruction of impurities and the subsequent regeneration and purification of the soul. This destructive power is necessary for the creation of a new and purer State of being.

Inner Vision: Beyond its destructive capabilities, the third eye is also a source of inner vision and clarity. It allows Shiva to see beyond the superficial and understand the deeper realities of existence. This inner vision is essential for guiding his actions and decisions, making Shiva a just and wise deity.

**Cultural and Religious Significance**

The third eye holds profound importance in various aspects of Hindu culture and spirituality. It is often associated with the "Ajna" or "brow" chakra, one of the seven primary chakras in the human body, which is believed to govern intuition and insight. Practitioners of meditation and yoga often focus on this chakra to develop their inner vision and achieve spiritual growth.

In iconography, Shiva's third eye is frequently depicted in sculptures, paintings and other forms of art. It serves as a reminder of the deity's transcendent powers and his ability to look beyond the ordinary. Temples dedicated to Shiva often have representations of the third eye, symbolising the presence of divine wisdom and protection.

The Third Eye in Contemporary Understanding

In modern times, the concept of the third eye has transcended religious boundaries and has been embraced in various spiritual and esoteric traditions around the world. It is commonly associated with the pineal gland in the brain, which is thought to play a role in regulating circadian rhythms and has been linked to mystical experiences.

For many spiritual seekers, the third eye represents the pursuit of higher knowledge and self-awareness. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness and certain forms of yoga are often aimed at "opening" the third eye, enabling individuals to gain deeper insights into their lives and the universe. Shiva's third eye encapsulates the essence of Shiva's role in the Hindu pantheon as a deity who destroys in order to create anew, who sees beyond the physical to understand the profound truths of existence. The third eye serves as a guiding light towards enlightenment and inner peace, reminding us of the power of true vision and the necessity of transcending the illusions of the material world.

(The writer is a spiritual guide; views are personal)

Creating food systems for tropical climate



ISHOO RATNESH SRIVASTAVA

As climate change reshapes our environment, its impact on food systems becomes clear. We must model our food systems for resilience to ensure food security in a warmer world



Climate change is bound to affect our food systems. The impact of rising CO2 levels may impact crop yields in complex ways like altering plant metabolism, changing soil fertility, erosion by pests and several others. Thus our food systems must be modelled for resilience in a warmer world. While we must make behavioural shifts in our food habits, it is also important to revisit history to learn how science has contributed to addressing the food question in the past. The introduction of high-yielding varieties (HYVs) during the Green Revolution made us overcome the Malthusian trap in the mid-20th century, which threatened a mass starvation-like situation. HYVs produced more grains per plant, requiring less land and resources, however, the use of fertilisers and pesticides also increased.

Targeted & Precision Gene Editing

Genetic alterations in plant breeding are both natural and human-induced and have been there for years. These methods involve cross-breeding, altering DNA with radiation or planting a gene like a pest-resistant Bt gene inserted in the cotton seed. The conventional methods for human interventions involve changes in a large part of a plant's genetics, resulting in both intended and uncertain consequences like enhancing one trait and an inadvertent suppression of others. However, technologies like CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) offer precision cut-and-paste-like operations at the ladder level in the DNA helix (the nucleotides).

This accuracy thus minimises the risk of unintended edits in the genetic material. The tool is derived from natural defence systems in bacteria and the



GENETIC ALTERATIONS IN PLANT BREEDING ARE BOTH NATURAL AND HUMAN-INDUCED AND HAVE BEEN THERE FOR YEARS. THESE METHODS INVOLVE CROSS-BREEDING, ALTERING DNA WITH RADIATION, OR PLANTING A GENE LIKE A PEST-RESISTANT BT GENE INSERTED IN THE COTTON SEED

breakthrough led to a Nobel Prize win for Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier in the year 2020.

To get a more intuitive feel of the technology, think of the conventional gene editing technologies similar to a random insertion of a chapter in a book which might look rather messy whereas CRISPR has the ability of adding that chapter well aligned with the context and information flow of that book. Although not entirely free of risks, it is widely believed that CRISPR holds immense potential for creating climate-resilient crops like a wheat plant thriving in summer, similar to how the HYVs addressed the challenges during the Green Revolution.

The AI Advantage :

Proteins are the building blocks of life. These proteins are synthesised upon activation of certain genes in the plant or animal cell. One of the biggest mysteries of life on earth is to understand what triggers the synthesis of a particular protein in a cell and how a protein molecule is shaped in 3-D, as this understanding helps in determining the protein's function and how it would interact with other such molecules to create organ structures or say an enzyme.

AI tools like Google's AlphaFold attempt to predict these 3-D structures of protein molecules by reading the cellular codes in the form of amino acid sequences. It's quite similar to imagining a complex machine and its functional-

merely by reading the instruction booklet meant for its assembly. No doubt an AI-enabled enhanced and faster understanding of life's fundamental systems like the protein structures can help in the creation of more resilient crop varieties. Key Concerns: No doubt there are risks associated with gene edits. It is very much like tinkering with life's basic systems and this may have consequences beyond the intended genetic material, species, geographies and time horizons. Beyond the perceived threat of these scientific misadventures, there are ethical concerns associated as well like the creation of designer babies or large corporations monopolising the technology.

Way Forward:

While we must tread with caution in the gene space, we should also realise that genetically modified organisms have already entered into the world's food systems. A large part of animal feed is genetically engineered and several ingredients in human food too have such modifications.

The benefits of gene tech are not limited to food crops rather they have path-breaking implications on human health in terms of disease prevention or cure and myriad others. The recent introduction of indigenous CAR-T cell therapy by India, targeted towards genetically engineering T cells (immune system cells) for cancer cure is one such example. The Indian Council of

Agricultural Research is working in the field of CRISPR to develop robust knowledge systems, invest in genetic engineering research, create robust institutional mechanisms for stakeholder collaboration including the consumers and envisage regulations that blend civilisational ethics and the tenets of contemporary science.

The need of the hour is to build robust knowledge systems, invest in genetic engineering research, create robust institutional mechanisms for stakeholder collaboration including the consumers and envisage regulations that blend civilisational ethics and the tenets of contemporary science. In conclusion, climate change necessitates a resilient approach to our food systems, incorporating advanced technologies like CRISPR for precise genetic modifications.

This innovative tool, inspired by natural bacterial defenses, offers targeted solutions for creating climate-resilient crops with minimal unintended effects.

Combined with AI advancements in understanding protein structures, these technologies promise significant improvements in agricultural productivity and sustainability. While ethical and safety concerns remain, the benefits of genetic engineering extend beyond agriculture to human health.

By investing in research, fostering collaboration and establishing ethical regulations, we can harness these advancements to secure our food future in a warming world.

(The author is an officer of the Indian Railway Service of Mechanical Engineers. He has been a UK Commonwealth Scholar; views are personal)

Time to prioritise human life over commerce

The Ghatkopar tragedy underscores the urgent need for stricter safety measures and accountability to prevent future incidents driven by commercial greed

In a massive human tragedy, involving human negligence, 16 innocent lives were lost and almost 75 people were injured when a hoarding fell on a petrol pump in Ghatkopar, a suburb in Mumbai on May 13. It is guessed that the hoarding had a weak foundation and probably fell due to the heavy winds that were blowing that day and struck several people who were present at a nearby petrol pump. It is learnt that the hoarding was three times the size sanctioned by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and stood on the land owned by the Government Railway Police (GRP). The advertising panel that held the hoarding in question was put by Ego Media whose owner Bhavesh Bhide



SIDDHARTHA MISHRA

was arrested in this connection on Thursday.

This incident would not have occurred if care had been taken by those who are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring observance of legal norms. Any damage or harm caused to persons, naturally, raises concerns of some kind of negligence or human carelessness. It is apparent that some negligence was involved and legal norms were violated.

There was negligence on the part of the people who put up such a dangerous advertising panel as well as the local authorities.

The natural question here is why was the company allowed to put an advertising panel, that posed danger to human lives, in violation of the relevant norms and why some action to remove such a dangerous panel was not taken in time by the concerned authorities. There is clear negligence of the owners and workers of the company that put this panel on the public road as they could reasonably foresee that such a panel may cause harm or injury if care is not taken. But there is also apparent negligence of the local authorities whose accountability is required to be fixed

as their responsibility is to keep watch on city roads and, wherever necessary, take quick action to prevent accidents and damage. In this particular matter also, there is an obvious indifference towards the breach of duty and negligence as is apparent in the general attitude of apathy and lackadaisical approach in the Government functionaries as well as among the common people in India. This incident has posed many questions involving faulty urban governance in Indian cities as well as highlighting the general apathy towards human life in our country.

There is no doubt that the Ghatkopar incident was an accident and accidents do occur despite precautions and they happen even in the most

developed nations. But incidents and accidents causing deaths, injuries and damages are rampant in India, perhaps, much more than in any other country.

The national newspapers are full of news of deaths, injuries and damages caused either due to road accidents, dog attacks, fire incidents, drowning in rivers, lakes and swimming pools or due to negligence in many other situations including while doing medical procedures. What is surprising is that such news does not invite or attract much public reaction and only some hue and cry is raised in bigger matters for some time which is gradually forgotten. The Government officials also do not seem much bothered by such incidents and they also respond

momentarily to assuage the public outcry for the time being.

The thought that perplexes one here is how unfortunately so many innocent and precious lives were lost and what impact it would have had on their family members. Many of those who died must have been the sole breadwinners in the family on whose income the family may have been dependent. The unexpected deaths of near ones and injuries to those who survived must have caused huge shock and left indelible marks on the psyches of relatives and injured that will remain a constant source of pain for them for the rest of their lives. The loss of relatives as well as the source of income will turn this tragedy into a double

jeopardy for the shattered and grieving family members.

Anyone, with an awakened mind and a sensitive heart, who is witnessing rampant human tragedies regularly happening in India, naturally shudders to think about whether there is any guarantee of security or value of human life in this country. Ghatkopar tragedy among other such incidents again compels one to think that whether every individual, in this country, is so insecure and vulnerable that anything can happen to them anytime and anywhere and there is always a possibility of an accident occurring with them due to negligence and callous apathy of others towards human life. This dismal atmosphere makes the author recall a Statement

from a friend's son who had long back gone to study in England. When asked about the difference in life between India and England, he sadly quipped that in England people do not let even their animals die and go to every extent to save their lives, but in India, we see people regularly dying like animals, without much compassion being felt by Government or people. Hope that the Ghatkopar incident will raise concerns and make the Government and people more careful and responsible and a general atmosphere of care and value for human life shall prevail to save precious human lives in our nation.

(The author is a Sr Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law, the University of Delhi; views are personal)

Spain, Norway and Ireland formally recognise Palestinian state

EU rift with Israel widens

AP ■ BARCELONA

Spain, Norway and Ireland formally recognised a Palestinian state on Tuesday in a coordinated effort by the three western European nations to add international pressure on Israel to soften its devastating response to last year's Hamas-led attack. Tel Aviv slammed the diplomatic move that will have no immediate impact on its grinding war in Gaza.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez told his nation in a televised address from Madrid that "this is a historic decision that has a single goal, and that is to help Israelis and Palestinians achieve peace". Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz quickly lashed out at Spain on X, saying Sánchez's government was "being complicit in inciting genocide against Jews and war crimes".

Ireland and Norway soon joined Spain in formalizing a decision they had jointly announced the previous week. The Palestinian flag was raised in Dublin outside Leinster House, the seat of the Irish parliament. "This is an important moment and I think it sends a signal to the world that there are practical actions you can take as a country to help keep the hope and destination of a two-state solution alive at a time when others are trying to sadly bomb it into oblivion," Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris said before his Cabinet meets to formally sign off on the decision.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said in a statement that "for more than 30 years, Norway has been one of the strongest advocates for a Palestinian state. Today, when Norway officially recognizes Palestine as a state, is a milestone in the relationship between Norway and Palestine."

While some 140 countries have

recognised a Palestinian state - more than two-thirds of the United Nations - none of the major Western powers has done so. Still, the adherence of three European countries to the group represents a victory for Palestinian efforts in the world of public opinion, and will likely put pressure on EU heavyweights France and Germany to rethink their position.

Relations between the EU and Israel have nosedived with the diplomatic recognitions by two EU members, and Madrid insisting on Monday that the EU should take measures against Israel for its continued deadly attacks in southern Gaza's city of Rafah.

After Monday's meeting of EU foreign ministers, Irish Foreign Minister Micheál Martin said "for the first time at an EU meeting, in a real way, I have seen a significant discussion on sanctions" for Israel. Harris, the Irish leader, insisted Tuesday the EU should consider economic sanctions for Israel, saying "Europe could be doing a hell of a lot more". Norway, which is not an EU member but often aligns its foreign policy with the bloc, handed diplomatic papers to the Palestinian government over the weekend ahead of its formal recognition.

At the same time, the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell threw his weight behind the International Criminal Court, whose prosecutor is seeking an arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and others, including leaders of the Hamas militant group. The formal declaration and resulting diplomatic dispute come over seven months into an assault waged by Israel following the Oct 7 Hamas-led attack in which militants stormed across the Gaza border into Israel, killing 1,200 people and taking some 250 hostage. Israel's air and land attacks have killed 36,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between combatants and civilians. Last week's joint announce-

ment by Spain, Ireland and Norway triggered an angry response from Israeli authorities, which summoned the countries' ambassadors in Tel Aviv to the Foreign Ministry, where they were filmed while being shown videos of the Oct 7 Hamas attack and abductions.

Slovenia's Prime Minister Robert Golob said Monday his government will decide on the recognition of a Palestinian state on Thursday and forward its decision to parliament for final approval.

The United States and Britain, among others, back the idea of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel but say it should come as part of a negotiated settlement. Netanyahu's government says the conflict can only be resolved through direct negotiations.

In his speech on Tuesday, Sánchez said that the recognition of a Palestinian state was "a decision that we do not adopt against anyone, least of all against Israel, a friendly people whom we respect, whom we appreciate and with whom we want to have the best possible relationship".

The Socialist leader has spent months touring European and Middle Eastern countries, including stops in Oslo and Dublin, to garner support for the recognition of a Palestinian state. He called for a permanent cease-fire, for stepping up humanitarian aid into Gaza and for the release of hostages still held by Hamas.

Spain's foreign minister, José Manuel Albares, will meet with the Arab Contact Group in Spain's capital on Wednesday, including Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa, Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, and the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan.

Sánchez said that his intention was to back the beleaguered Palestinian Authority, which lost effective political control of Gaza to Hamas. He laid out his vision for a state ruled by the Palestinian Authority that must

connect the West Bank and Gaza via a corridor with east Jerusalem as its capital.

The Western-backed Palestinian Authority administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, cooperates with Israel on security matters and favors a negotiated two-state solution. Its forces were driven out of Gaza by Hamas when the militants seized power there in 2007.

The Palestinians have long sought an independent state in Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem, territories Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war. The idea of a land corridor linking Gaza and the West Bank through Israel was discussed in previous rounds of peace talks, but no serious or substantive peace negotiations have been held in over 15 years.

"We will not recognise changes in the 1967 border lines other than those agreed to by the parties," Sánchez added. "Furthermore, this decision reflects our absolute rejection of Hamas, a terrorist organisation who is against the two-state solution," Sánchez said. "From the outset, Spain has strongly condemned the terrorist attacks of Oct 7. This clear condemnation is the resounding expression of our steadfast commitment in the fight against terrorism. I would like to underline that starting tomorrow we would focus all our efforts to implement the two state solution and make it a reality."

Ireland's government said that it will appoint an ambassador and create a full embassy in Ramallah in the West Bank. Israel, which rejects the possibility of Palestinian statehood, recalled its ambassadors to Ireland, Norway and Spain after they announced the decision last week. Norway's Barth Eide added Tuesday that "it is regrettable that the Israeli government shows no signs of engaging constructively."

"The recognition is a strong expression of support for moderate forces in both countries," Norway's top diplomat said.

Israeli army says it used small munitions in Rafah airstrike

AP ■ DEIR-AL-BALAH

The Israeli military says an initial investigation into a strike that sparked a deadly weekend fire in a tent camp in the southern Gaza city of Rafah has found the blaze was caused by a secondary explosion.

Rear Adm Daniel Hagari, the chief military spokesman, said Tuesday that the military fired two 17-kg (37-pound) munitions that targeted two senior Hamas militants. He said the munitions would have been too small to ignite a fire on their own and the military is looking into the possibility that weapons were stored in the area.

Palestinian health officials say at least 45 people, around half of them women and children, were killed in Sunday's strike. The fire also could have ignited fuel, cooking gas canisters or other materials in the densely populated camp housing displaced people.



Children light candles during a march against Israel and in solidarity with Palestinians in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, on the Mediterranean Sea corniche in Beirut, Lebanon, Monday. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged Monday that a "tragic mistake" had been made after an Israeli strike in the southern Gaza city of Rafah set fire to a tent camp housing displaced Palestinians and killed at least 45 people, according to local officials.

The strike caused widespread outrage, including from some of Israel's closest allies. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said it was the result of a "tragic mishap".

New strikes in the same western Tel al-Sultan district of

Rafah that was hit Sunday killed at least 16 Palestinians, the Palestinian Civil Defence and the Palestinian Red Crescent said Tuesday. Residents reported an escalation of fighting in the southern Gaza city once seen as the territory's last refuge.

An Israeli incursion launched in early May has caused nearly 1 million to flee from Rafah, most of whom had already been displaced in the war between Israel and Hamas. They now seek refuge in squalid tent camps and other war-ravaged areas.

The United States and other allies of Israel have warned against a full-fledged offensive in the city, with the Biden administration saying that would cross a red line and refusing to provide offensive arms for such an undertaking. On Friday, the International Court of Justice called on Israel to halt its Rafah offensive, an order it has no power to enforce.

Missile attack damages ship in Red Sea off Yemen's coast

AP ■ DUBAI

A missile attack damaged a ship Tuesday in the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen, with a private security firm saying radio traffic suggested the vessel took on water after being struck. No group immediately claimed responsibility, but suspicion immediately fell on Yemen's Houthi rebels, who have launched a number of attacks targeting ships over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The attack happened off the port city of Hodeida in the southern Red Sea, near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that links it to the Gulf of Aden, according to the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations centre. The vessel "sustained damage" in the assault and later reported an "impact in the water in close

proximity to the vessel," the UKMTO said. "The crew are reported safe and the vessel is proceeding to its next port of call," the centre said.

The private security firm Ambrey said the vessel reported by radio of having "sustained damage to the cargo hold and was taking on water."

The location of the attack corresponded to the Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier Laax. The vessel reported being heading to Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. Grehel Ship Management of Piraeus, Greece, manages the Laax. A man who answered the phone at Grehel declined to answer questions about the attack and an emailed request for comment was not returned.

The Houthi did not immediately acknowledge the attack, though it can take the rebels

hours or even days to claim their assaults.

The Houthis have launched attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in recent months, demanding that Israel ends the war in Gaza, which has killed more than 36,000 Palestinians there. The war began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on Oct 7, killing about 1,200 people and taking some 250 hostage. The rebels have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, seized one vessel and sunk another since November, according to the United States Maritime Administration. Shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has declined because of the threat. In recent weeks, the tempo of Houthi attacks has dropped, though the rebels have claimed shooting down US surveillance drones.

Pope apologises for using vulgar term about gays

Vatican City (AP): Pope Francis apologised Tuesday after he was quoted using a vulgar term about gays to reaffirm the Catholic Church's ban on gay priests.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Brunetti issued a statement acknowledging the media storm that erupted about Francis' comments, which were delivered behind closed doors to Italian bishops on May 20.

Italian media on Monday had quoted unnamed Italian bishops in reporting that Francis jokingly used the term "faggotness" while speaking in Italian during the encounter. He had used the term in reaffirming the Vatican's ban on allowing gay men to enter seminaries and be ordained priests.

OpenAI starts training latest AI model

San Francisco (AP): OpenAI says it's setting up a safety and security committee and has begun training a new AI model to supplant the GPT-4 system that underpins its ChatGPT chatbot.

The San Francisco startup said in a blog post Tuesday that the committee will advise the full board on "critical safety and security decisions" for its projects and operations. The safety committee arrives as debate swirls around AI safety at the company, which was thrust into the spotlight after a researcher, Jan Leike, resigned and levelled criticism at OpenAI for letting safety "take a backseat to shiny products."

OpenAI co-founder and chief scientist Ilya Sutskever also resigned, and the company disbanded the "superalignment" team focused on AI risks that they jointly led. OpenAI said it has "recently begun training its next frontier model" and its AI models lead the industry on capability and safety, though it made no mention of the controversy. "We welcome a robust debate at this important moment," the company said.

AI models are prediction systems that are trained on vast datasets to generate on-demand text, images, video and human-like conversation. Frontier models are the most powerful, cutting edge AI systems.

The safety committee is filled with company insiders, including OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and Chairman Bret Taylor, and four OpenAI technical and policy experts. It also includes board members Adam D'Angelo, who's the CEO of Quora, and Nicole Seligman, a former Sony general counsel.

The committee's first job will be to evaluate and further develop OpenAI's processes and safeguards and make its recommendations to the board in 90 days. The company said it will then publicly release the recommendations it's adopting "in a manner that is consistent with safety and security."

Md Bagher Qalibaf re-elected as speaker of Iran's parliament

AP ■ DUBAI

Iran's parliament re-elected hard-liner Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf on Tuesday as its speaker, reaffirming its hard-right makeup in the wake of a helicopter crash that killed the country's president and foreign minister.

Of 287 lawmakers voting, 198 backed Qalibaf to retain the position he first took in 2021. He initially became speaker following a string of failed presidential bids and 12 years as the leader of Iran's capital city, in which he built out Tehran's subway and supported the construction of modern high-rises. Many, however, know Qalibaf for his support, as a Revolutionary Guard general, for a violent crackdown on Iranian university students in 1999. He also reportedly ordered live gunfire to be used against Iranian students in 2003 while serving as the country's police chief. In Tuesday's



Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, center, takes an oath during the opening ceremony of the new parliament term in Tehran, Iran.

vote, challenger Mojtaba Zounouri, a hard-line Shiite cleric who once led the parliament's national security commission, won 60 votes. A former foreign minister to hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Manouchehr Mottaki, received five votes.

Fears rise second landslide and disease outbreak loom at site of PNG disaster

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Authorities fear a second landslide and a disease outbreak are looming at the scene of Papua New Guinea's mass-casualty disaster because of water streams and bodies trapped beneath the tons of debris that swept over a village, a United Nations official said Tuesday.

A mass of boulders, earth and splintered trees devastated Yambali in the South Pacific nation's remote highlands when a limestone mountain-side sheared away Friday. The blanket of debris has become more unstable with recent rain and streams trapped between the ground and rubble, said Serhan Aktoprak, chief of the International Organisation for Migration's mission in Papua New Guinea. The UN agency has officials at the scene in Enga province helping shelter 1,600 displaced

people. The agency estimates 670 villagers died, while Papua New Guinea's government has told the United Nations it thinks more than 2,000 people were buried. Five bodies had been retrieved from the rubble by Monday.

"We are hearing suggestions that another landslide can happen and maybe 8,000 people need to be evacuated," Aktoprak told The Associated Press.

"This is a major concern. The movement of the land, the debris, is causing a serious risk, and overall the total number of people that may be affected might be 6,000 or more," he said. "That includes villagers whose source of clean drinking water has been buried and subsistence farmers who lost their vegetable gardens."

"If this debris mass is not stopped, if it continues moving, it can gain speed and further wipe out other communi-

ties and villages further down" the mountain, Aktoprak said. Scenes of villagers digging with their bare hands through muddy debris in search of their relatives' remains were also concerning.

"My biggest fear at the moment is corpses are decaying, ... water is flowing and this is going to pose serious health risks in relation to contagious diseases," Aktoprak said.

Aktoprak's agency was raising those concerns at a disaster management virtual meeting of national and international responders Tuesday.

The warning comes as geotechnical experts and heavy earth-moving equipment are expected to reach the site soon.

The Papua New Guinea government on Sunday officially asked the United Nations for additional help and to coordinate contributions from individual nations.

An Australian disaster response team was scheduled to arrive Tuesday in Papua New Guinea, which is Australia's nearest neighbour. It will include a geohazard assessment team and drones to help map the site.

"Their role will be particularly helping perform geotechnical surveillance to establish the level of the landslip, the instability of the land there, obviously doing some work around identifying where bodies are," said Murray Watt, Australia's minister for emergency management.

Australia's minister for the Pacific, Pat Conroy, said the government would also provide long-term logistical support for clearing debris, recovering bodies and supporting displaced people. The government announced an initial aid package of 2.5 million Australian dollars (USD 1.7 million).

New German citizens hit record high, many Syrians naturalised

Berlin (AP): Germany saw another big increase in the number of people gaining citizenship last year as large numbers of people from Syria helped push naturalisations up to their highest level since at least 2000, according to official data released Tuesday.

About 200,100 people were granted German citizenship in 2023, the Federal Statistical Office said. That was an increase of about 31,000, or 19 per cent, compared with the previous year.

The increase followed a 28 per cent rise in 2022, which also was fuelled by large numbers of Syrians being naturalised as increasing numbers of people who migrated to Germany between 2014 and 2016 fulfilled the requirements for citizenship.

Last year, 75,500 people from Syria were naturalised — the biggest single group, account-

ing for 38 per cent of the total — the statistics office said. That number was up 56 per cent compared with 2022. They had spent an average 6.8 years in Germany before becoming citizens.

About 10,700 citizens each of Turkey and Iraq became German citizens last year, putting those groups in second place.

The overall number of new citizens was the highest since current records started in 2000 following a change in the law under which people of German ancestry from the former Soviet Union, who arrived in large numbers in the 1990s, were automatically granted citizenship rather than having to apply for it.

Requirements for being granted citizenship include a working knowledge of German and proof of being able to support oneself financially.

Heat waves can be deadly for older adults

AP ■ MASSACHUSETTS

A deadly heat wave gripped large regions of Asia for weeks in April and May 2024. As temperatures climbed past 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43.3 Celsius) in India on May 7, campaigning politicians, local news announcers and voters waiting in long lines passed out from the oppressive heat.

From as far north as Japan to as far south as the Philippines, the relentless heat wreaked havoc on everyday life. Students and teachers in Cambodia were sent home from school, as their hand-held fans provided little protection against the stifling heat and humidity in their poorly ventilated classrooms.

Farmers in Thailand saw their crops wither and mourned the loss of livestock that perished under the punishing sun. Hundreds of people died from the heat.

Most of the planet has suffered the dire effects of extreme heat in recent years. A weeks-long heat wave in the southwestern United States in 2023 was



described as "hell on earth" in Phoenix, where temperatures hit 110 F (43.3 C) or higher for 31 straight days.

At the same time, Europe saw unprecedented high temperatures that killed hundreds and contributed to devastating wildfires in Greece. Regardless of where or when a heat wave strikes, one pattern is a constant: Older adults are the most likely to die from extreme heat, and this crisis will worsen in the coming years.

We study climate change and

population aging. Our research documents two global trends that together portend a dire future.

First, temperatures are hotter than ever. The nine-year period from 2015 and 2023 had the highest average temperatures since global records began in 1880. Second, the population is aging worldwide. By 2050, the number of people ages 60 and older will double to nearly 2.1 billion, making up 21 per cent of the global population. That proportion is 13 per cent today.

These combined forces mean that ever-rising numbers of vulnerable older adults will be exposed to intensifying heat. To understand the risks ahead, we developed population projections for different age groups and combined them with climate change scenarios for the coming decades. Our analyses show that by 2050, more than 23 per cent of the world population ages 69 and older will be living in regions where peak temperatures routinely surpass 99.5 degrees F (37.5 degrees C), compared with just 14 per cent today.

That means that as many as 250 million additional older adults will be exposed to dangerously high temperatures. Mapping the data shows that most of these older adults live in lower- and middle-income countries with insufficient services and limited access to electricity, cooling appliances and safe water.

In historically cooler regions in the Global North, including North America and Europe, rising temperatures will be the

main force driving older adults' heat exposure. In historically hotter regions in the Global South such as Asia, Africa and South America, population growth and increases in longevity mean that steeply rising numbers of older adults will be exposed to intensifying heat-related risks.

Policy makers, communities, families and older residents themselves need to understand these risks and be prepared because of older adults' special vulnerabilities to heat.

High temperatures are oppressive for everyone, but for older adults they can be deadly. Extreme heat worsens common age-related health conditions such as heart, lung and kidney disease and can cause delirium. Older people don't sweat as much as younger people, which makes it harder for their bodies to cool down when temperatures spike. These problems are intensified by common prescription medications, such as anticholinergics, which further reduce the capacity to sweat.

Belgium commits aid to Ukraine

Zelenskyy continues European tour

AP ■ BRUSSELS

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday picked up a second USD 1 billion promise of military aid in as many days for his war with Russia during a whirlwind tour through the European Union.

The pledge came from Belgium, which topped up the money with a commitment to give 30 F-16 fighter jets over the next four years. The Netherlands added to the goodwill by promising to quickly assemble with key EU partners a Patriot air defence system, which Zelenskyy sees as key in stopping Russia from hitting the power grid and civilian areas, as well as military targets, with devastating glide bombs that wreak wide destruction.

A day earlier, Zelenskyy signed a bilateral security agreement with Spain that allocates 1 billion euros (USD 1.1 billion) of military aid to Ukraine in 2024, and 5 billion euros (USD 5.4 billion) by 2027.

The bilateral aid is essential since the 27-nation bloc is again struggling to overcome Hungary's objections to the bloc itself providing billions of euros in military aid to Kyiv, which is in its third year of war following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion.

An estimated 6.5 billion euros (USD 7 billion) are stalled by the Hungarian government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who is considered Russia's staunchest ally in the 27-nation bloc. Single member states have wide veto powers and Hungary has long held up funds aimed at boosting Ukraine's defence efforts.

Zelenskyy met with Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo on Tuesday and as well as the immediate money obtained a security agreement aimed at providing guarantees of military help until Ukraine joins the NATO alliance.

Since Russia launched a spring offensive around eastern Kharkiv, Zelenskyy has insisted Ukraine urgently needs seven more US-made Patriot air defence systems to stop Russia hitting the power grid and civilian areas, as well as military targets, with devastating glide bombs that wreak wide destruction. Dutch Defence Minister Kaja



Ollongren, meeting with her EU colleagues, said that such a system will be built "in a short time frame." The Netherlands has the core components for a Patriot system and other EU nations will contribute other key parts and munitions. "Ukraine is also fighting Europe's fight," she said. Hungary, meanwhile, continues to oppose swift distribution of centralised EU aid, angering just about every one of its EU allies.

"We need all these critical decisions and still there are too many decisions which are not made," Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur told reporters ahead of the meeting. "The urgency is very, very acute."

Zelenskyy was to visit Belgium and Spain earlier this month but postponed all his foreign trips after Russia launched its offensive in the Kharkiv region. Ukraine has repeatedly tried to strike behind Russian lines, often with drones, though Russia's response to the new technology used in unmanned vehicles has improved in recent months.

The onslaught unfolding as the weather improves has brought Ukraine's biggest military test since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Slow deliveries of support by its Western partners, especially a lengthy delay in US military aid, have left Ukraine at the mercy of Russia's bigger army and air force.

Ex-PM Nawaz Sharif re-elected 'unopposed' as PML-N prez

PTI ■ LAHORE

Three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was re-elected "unopposed" as the President of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party here on Tuesday, six years after losing the post following a Supreme Court ruling in the Panama Papers case.

The 74-year-old veteran politician, who returned to Pakistan in October last year after a four-year self-imposed exile in the UK, was elected at the General Council meeting of the PML-N in Lahore, his party said in a post on X. Earlier, his party while sharing a video of preparations for the General Council meeting, had said: "Lion is returning to take his rightful place at the top."

The PML-N had earlier announced convening the general council meeting on May 11 but it was postponed to coincide with the celebration of 26 years of Pakistan becoming a nuclear power, Dawn

newspaper reported. Sharif was the prime minister when Pakistan conducted six nuclear tests on May 28, 1998. PML-N Punjab president Rana Sanaullah had hinted that the elder Sharif would be elected without a contest.

When asked why the party didn't adopt a democratic process to vote for a new president, Sanaullah said the party was a "servant of power corridors and it was Nawaz Sharif who made it a party of the public". He added that after Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, it was Nawaz Sharif who "made the party vibrant". Replying to another question on why Nawaz Sharif wasn't active in politics after 2013, February 8 general elections, Sanaullah said the former PM is not angry with anyone and he is active in the party. "All major decisions of the party and government are taken by him," he added.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had earlier this month resigned as the PML-N president citing the "unjust" dis-

qualification of the party supremo and his elder brother Nawaz Sharif from the PM Office.

Shehbaz, 72, said that it was time for the latter to "resume his rightful place as the president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz party." The February 8 general elections had delivered a fractured mandate and the PML-N did not get a clear majority. It joined hands with the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) led by Bilawal Zardari Bhutto and other smaller parties to form the government at the federal level when Nawaz relinquished the post of prime minister in favour of Shehbaz.

Much before that, in 2017, Nawaz had stepped down as the country's prime minister after the Supreme Court disqualified him for life from holding public office for not declaring a receivable salary. Following his trial in the Panama Papers case, the apex court, in February 2018, disqualified the PML-N supremo as the party's president.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev arrive to attend a meeting of the Council of Regions of Uzbekistan and Russia in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Monday. AP/PTI

Wickremesinghe's party suggests referendum to postpone elections

PTI ■ COLOMBO

The United National Party headed by Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Tuesday suggested holding a referendum to postpone both presidential and general elections and extending the terms of both offices for two years to pursue economic reforms to stabilise the country's economy.

The island nation's Elections Commission earlier this month said the presidential election would be conducted between September 17 and October 16. United National Party (UNP) general secretary Palitha Range Bandara presented a proposal to postpone both the presidential and general elections by two years and emphasised that if circumstances warrant, this proposal can be formally submitted to Parliament, paving the way for a referendum, news portal NewsFirst.lk reported.

"The UNP General Secretary highlighted a pivotal moment in Sri Lanka's history. The nation faced economic adversity, but resolute measures were taken to steer it away from the brink. These efforts yielded significant victories," Bandara told reporters here. "We have regained international trust, stabilised the economy, and provided relief to our citizens. Administrative reforms have streamlined governance, and the education system has returned to normalcy," he asserted. Range Bandara attributed these achievements to the current President's leadership and underscored that the country's current needs do not align with an immediate Presidential or Parliamentary election. "Instead, he called upon all members of parliament to rally behind a proposal: extending the current President's term by two years (or potentially five), along with a corresponding extension of the current parliament's tenure," the news portal said. Range Bandara urged unity across party lines, including opposition leader Sajith Premadasa's support, the news portal said. The Government has reached agreements with the IMF, World Bank and other donors on eco-

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conomic reforms and it is essential to extend the terms of the President and Parliament to make this exercise a success, another news portal, Daily Mirror, said quoting Bandara. "Stabilising the economy is more important than anything," Range Bandara told the media and added, "We propose a referendum to extend the terms of the President and Parliament as it is the most democratic way to do it."

Incidentally, President Wickremesinghe, 75, last week reiterated his intention to hold the next presidential election this year ahead of the parliamentary election. He had told the Cabinet meeting that day that financial allocations have only been reserved so far for the conduct of the presidential poll.

Wickremesinghe succeeded Sri Lanka People's Front - commonly known by its Sinhalese name Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) - elected president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to become president for the rest of the term when the latter was ousted, after the island nation declared first international

default, during street protests which lasted between April and July of 2022.

Rajapaksa gave in to calls for his resignation due to his inability to handle the unprecedented economic crisis.

Wickremesinghe since taking over has steered the economy to safety by securing an IMF bailout. Analysts, however, feel that Sri Lanka is not completely out of the woods yet.

Minister of Fisheries and the leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party Douglas Devananda on Tuesday said President Wickremesinghe's experience and performance, as well as his management ability, cannot be matched with any other politician in Sri Lanka.

Addressing the opening ceremony of the Training and Research building of the Medical Faculty of Jaffna University, the Sri Lankan Tamil minister said that because of the current economic crisis and the great instability in the country, it was his opinion that Wickremesinghe should continue to be the president and the people of the country should also have the same opinion.

46-yr-old man acted as handler of 4 arrested for IS links, suspects Lanka

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lankan security forces suspect that a 46-year-old man acted as a handler of the four Sri Lankan nationals who were arrested at Ahmedabad airport in India last week for suspected links with the banned Islamic State (ISIS) outfit, according to a media report.

Sri Lanka Police revealed that the wanted suspect, identified as Osmant Gerrard - a resident of Dematagoda, often changes his appearances, and these are some of his appearances that detectives suspect he may be using now, Newsfirst news portal reported on Monday.

Gerrard is believed to have facilitated the movement of the suspected Sri Lankans from the country to India, the news portal said on Tuesday.

Sri Lanka Police recently announced a cash award of Rs. 2 million for any credible information on the whereabouts of the wanted suspect. The exchange of information between Sri Lanka and India has commenced concerning

the Sri Lankans arrested in India. This collaborative effort involves both the Sri Lanka Army Intelligence Division and the Police Terrorist Investigations Division, the news portal said on Tuesday. The Gujarat Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) on May 19 arrested four Sri Lankans with links to the ISIS at the Sardar Vallabhai Patel airport in Ahmedabad. The ATS also seized three pistols and cartridges abandoned at a location in Ahmedabad based on geo-coordinates and seized a mobile phone from their possession. The four men had taken an Indigo flight out of Colombo to Chennai on May 19. Among the arrested individuals, Mohammed Nusrat is a businessman involved in importing telecommunication devices and electrical equipment from countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Dubai, the news portal said. Nusrat operated within Colombo, where he sold these imported goods.

Pak's top leadership says 1998 N-tests ensured 'credible min deterrence'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Commemorating the 26th anniversary of Pakistan's first successful nuclear tests, its top leadership on Tuesday said the historic move in 1998 has ensured a "credible minimum deterrence" to safeguard the country's territorial integrity. Pakistan conducted six nuclear tests on May 28, 1998, inside a deeply dug tunnel in the remote Chaghi mountain of Balochistan province, as a tit-for-tat response to India's nuclear tests in the same month at the Indian Army's Pokhran Test Range. Pakistan's nuclear tests, state-run Radio Pakistan, said were conducted in response to the regional security dynamics and one that ensured that Pakistan's defence capabilities were robust and credible.

Pakistan became the seventh nuclear nation in the world and the first Muslim state in 1998 having the nuclear arsenal in its defence stockpile to exercise

deterrence. Designated as 'Youm-e-Takbeer, translated as 'the day of greatness' or 'the day of God's greatness', and observed annually with national zeal and fervour, Sharif has declared Tuesday as a public holiday, for the first time in the recent past. Congratulating the nation in his message on social media platform X, Sharif said the day symbolises the collective effort of all facets of national power.

"May 28 signifies more than just a mere commemoration of a day; it encapsulates the narrative of our nation's arduous yet remarkable path towards establishing a credible minimum deterrence," he said, adding, "On this historic day, in 1998, PM Nawaz Sharif demonstrated bold leadership by rejecting nerve-wracking pressures and inducements to make Pakistan a nuclear-armed nation."

Sharif also paid tribute to Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali

Bhutto, the founder of Pakistan's nuclear programme for his "strategic foresight and unwavering commitment to the cause."

Sharif said the nation should resolve to work tirelessly to ensure economic security with the same spirit it made the defence invincible on May 28, 1998.

The Foreign Office in a post on X paid rich tributes to Pakistan's scientists, engineers and technicians for their contributions to the country's nuclear programme "which has also played an important role in the socioeconomic development" of the nation. "Pakistan's nuclear programme enjoys the unanimous support of all sections of Pakistani society including political parties, the armed forces, the scientific community, academia and the public at large. Pakistan is committed to global and regional peace and stability and reaffirms its resolve to

safeguard Pakistan's territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty," it said. Though both Prime Minister Sharif and the Foreign Office avoided mentioning or acknowledging the contribution of the father of Pakistan's atomic weapons programme in the nuclear project, Information Minister Attaullah Tarar paid tribute to the "architect of the nuclear programme, Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, his team and all the scientists". In his message, acting President Yusuf Raza Gilani reiterated the resolve to continue working towards a peaceful and stable world. "We successfully demonstrated our nuclear capabilities and joined the ranks of nuclear powers," he said and added that Youm-e-Takbeer serves as a testament to our nation's resilience, unwavering determination, and commitment to maintaining regional peace and stability.

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South Africa's surprise election challenger is evoking past anti-apartheid struggle

AP ■ DURBAN

The 59-year-old Dumisani Ndlovu has voted in every South Africa national election since he and the rest of the Black majority finally won the right 30 years ago. He has faithfully supported the liberation party-turned-ruling party African National Congress every time. That ends on Wednesday. In a way, nostalgia is calling. Ndlovu in this week's election is turning his support to the man, Jacob Zuma, whose career spanned from the liberation struggle to the presidency before falling out with his ANC colleagues and reemerging last year with a new political party. That MK party, named after the ANC's old armed wing, shows how the 82-year-old Zuma is leveraging the past to rally South Africans' support against the ANC, which he himself once claimed would rule until

"Jesus comes back." Here in the heartland of Zuma supporters, the eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal, cab driver Ndlovu has embraced the unlikely comeback of a political survivor after years of corruption allegations, criminal charges and prison. Even being barred from this election as a candidate for Parliament over a recent conviction hasn't blunted Zuma's influence. "They think they have finished him, but we are with him all the way. The ANC will pay," Ndlovu said. It is a rallying cry that could, for the first time, force the ANC into a coalition to stay in power. The new party is fielding other candidates for Parliament and appears likely to win seats. Zuma has become the wild card of the election for Africa's most advanced country, six years after resigning South Africa's

presidency under a cloud. His MK party was formed just over six months ago and yet is expected to drain significant support from the ANC, which already faced its sternest test. Zuma's credentials — he was in prison alongside Nelson Mandela for his work in the anti-apartheid movement — resonate especially in his home province of KwaZulu-Natal. Ndlovu, the cab driver, had backed the ANC since the end of the apartheid system of white minority rule in 1994. Now, one of his grievances against the ANC is what he calls its ill-treatment of Zuma. "He went to jail during apartheid and then they (the ANC) put him in jail again despite all his sacrifices. What kind of freedom is that?" Ndlovu said. Zuma was sent to prison in 2021 after refusing to testify at an inquiry looking into alleged corruption in

government during the time he was president from 2009-2018. He called that sentence an effort by the ANC to silence him.

Zuma said last week's Constitutional Court decision to disqualify him from standing as a candidate was part of a grudge against him by the ruling party and the courts. The constitution doesn't allow anyone to stand for election if they have been sentenced to 12 months or more in prison without the option of a fine. "I am going to fight for my rights until this country agrees that freedom must be a complete freedom, not for some and oppression for others," Zuma said. He now fights under the banner of the MK, which he has fashioned as the vanguard of anti-apartheid struggle ideals such as the distribution of land to Black people.

Nepal celebrates 17th Republic Day

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

As Nepal celebrated the 17th Republic Day on Tuesday, President Ramchandra Paudel said the federal democratic republic system has ensured complete political rights in the country while Prime Minister Pushpakamal Dahal 'Prachanda' said a republic system is not only a political system but also a lifestyle. Seventeen years ago in 2008, Nepal's Parliament, through a historic declaration, abolished the 240-year-old monarchy after the successful conclusion of the People's Movement II. Nepal was declared a Federal Republic Democratic state on May 28, 2008. On Tuesday, the Jeth 15 as per Bikram Era cal-

endar, Nepal is celebrating the Republic Day anniversary with festivities extended over three days.

In his message to the nation, President Paudel said the federal democratic republic system has ensured complete political rights in the country. "This is an opportune moment to move forward united for a prosperous future," he said, adding, "We had achieved the republic system along with freedom on this day 17 years ago. Nepal has obtained civil supremacy from this day and had set a foundation for a liberal, inclusive proportional Democratic Republic Nepal along with social justice." Prime Minister 'Prachanda' said that a republic system is not only a

political system but also a lifestyle and argued that the republic system has been institutionalised at the citizen's level with the development of a republican lifestyle at all walks of life in the society. "A republic is a system to best utilise one's rights while respecting others' rights too, and more than that the federal democratic republic is also local autonomy and the right to self-determination on fundamental issues. So, the government is making efforts with firm determination to share its dividends to the citizens," the Prime Minister said in his message.

The government has declared a national holiday on Tuesday to mark the Republic Day.

Taiwan's legislature passes changes seen as reducing president's power

Taipei (AP): Taiwan's opposition-controlled legislature passed changes on Tuesday that are seen as favouring China and diminishing the power of the island's president.

The changes pushed by the opposition Nationalist Party and its allies give the body greater power to control budgets, including defence spending that the party has blocked in what many see as a concession to China. The Nationalists officially back unification with China, from which Taiwan separated dur-

ing a civil war in 1949. They took control of the legislature with a single-seat majority after elections in January, while the presidency went to Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party, which favours Taiwan's de facto independence from China. Thousands of people gathered outside the legislature to protest the changes. The legislative chamber was festooned with banners promoting both sides in the dispute, while arguments on the floor broke into shouting and pushing matches.

First Syrian jet in over decade transports Muslim worshippers to Saudi for Hajj

Damascus (AP): For the first time in over a decade, 270 Syrians travelled on a direct flight early Tuesday from Damascus to Saudi Arabia for the annual Islamic Hajj pilgrimage, the Syrian Transportation Ministry said. The development is part of an ongoing thaw in relations between Damascus and Riyadh, which days ago appointed Saudi Arabia's first ambassador to war-torn Syria since severing ties in 2012. Syria was readmitted to the 22-member Arab League in 2023, after it had been suspended from the group for more than a decade over

President Bashar Assad's brutal crackdown on anti-government protesters in 2011. Most countries in the Arab world have since restored diplomatic ties with Damascus. A second plane of pilgrims is set to depart from Damascus to Jeddah late Tuesday, the ministry said. 1.8 million Muslims from around the world took part in last year's Hajj pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, making it one of the world's largest religious gatherings. This year, it's scheduled to begin on the evening of June 14. The Hajj is one of the five pil-

lars of Islam, and Muslims are required to undertake it at least once in their lives if they are physically and financially able to do so. The uprising-turned-civil war in Syria, now in its 14th year has killed nearly half a million people and displaced half of the country's prewar population of 23 million. The war has largely remained frozen and so have the efforts to find a viable political solution to end it. Poverty is rampant across the front lines, with aid dwindling and a growing number of countries sounding the alarm on surging migration.

Stock markets fall for third day, Sensex drops 220 points

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Extending the falling streak to the third day in a row, benchmark BSE Sensex declined by 220 points in volatile trade on Tuesday due to profit-taking in power, oil and capital goods shares ahead of results of Lok Sabha polls. After gyrating between gains and losses during the day, the 30-share BSE Sensex ended 220.05 points or 0.29 per cent lower at 75,170.45. During the day, it hit a high of 75,585.40 and a low of 75,083.22. The NSE Nifty dropped 44.30 points or 0.19 per cent to settle at 22,888.15 despite beginning the day on a positive note.



Analysts said that stock markets are witnessing 'buying on dips and sell on rallies' amid uncertainty ahead of the general poll results. Sensex and Nifty scaled lifetime highs on Monday but closed lower due to heavy profit taking at the day-end.

From the Sensex pack, Power Grid, NTPC, Tech Mahindra, Bharti Airtel, Tata Motors, IndusInd Bank, Reliance Industries, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Maruti were among the laggards. Asian Paints, Wipro, JSW Steel, Hindustan Unilever, Bajaj Finserv and Mahindra & Mahindra were among the biggest gainers. "The Indian market exhibited mild consolidation post the recent sharp surge. The uncertainty-led volatility is likely to continue as the market approaches the election outcome," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services said. Analysts said mid- and small-caps underperformed, while defensive sectors like pharma and FMCG were optimistic. "Nifty ended lower for third day in a row on Tuesday. Nervousness ahead of the election results is on the rise as is evident from the poor advance-decline ratio and falling volumes," said Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities. In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge declined 1.09 per cent and midcap index declined 0.63 per cent.

Among the indices, Realty dropped 2.22 per cent. Power (1.86 per cent), utilities (1.55 per cent), services (1.37 per cent), telecommunication (1.26 per cent), industrials (1.08 per cent) and capital goods (0.95 per cent) were among the laggards. Healthcare index emerged as the only gainer. As many as 2,510 stocks declined while 1,321 advanced and 102 remained unchanged on the BSE. A total of 1,795 stocks declined and 809 advanced on the NSE. "The Nifty lost 44 points to close at 22,888. It started on a positive note in today's trading session but couldn't sustain at higher levels and there was marginal profit-booking which was witnessed in the first half.

I-T department asks taxpayers to link PAN with Aadhaar by May 31 to avoid higher TDS deduction



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The income tax department on Tuesday asked taxpayers to link PAN with Aadhaar by May 31 to avoid tax deduction at a higher rate. As per income tax rules, if a Permanent Account Number (PAN) is not linked with biometric Aadhaar, TDS is required to be deducted at double the applicable rate. Last month, the income tax department issued a circular stating that no action will be taken for short deduction of TDS in case the assessee links his/her PAN with Aadhaar by May 31. "Please link your PAN with Aadhaar before May 31, 2024, if you haven't already, in order to avoid tax deduction at a higher rate," the department posted on X. In a separate post, the I-T department asked reporting entities, including banks, forex dealers, to file SFT by May 31 to avoid penalties. "The deadline to file SFT

(Statement of Specified Financial Transactions) is May 31, 2024. Avoid penalties by filing accurately and on time," the department said. The reporting entities which are required to file SFT returns with tax authorities include forex dealers, banks, sub-registrar, NBFC, post offices, issuer of bonds/debentures, mutual fund trustees, company paying dividend or buying back shares. These specified institutions are required to furnish the details of certain financial transactions or any reportable account registered/recorded/maintained by them during the year. Delay in filing of SFT returns may attract a penalty of up to Rs 1,000 for each day of default. Non-filing or filing inaccurate statement may also lead to levy of penalty. Through SFT, the income tax department keeps a track of high value transactions undertaken by an individual.

Claims of KAL Airways, Kalanithi on damages legally untenable: SpiceJet

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



In an escalation of the ongoing dispute, SpiceJet on Tuesday said the claims made by KAL Airways and Kalanithi Maran for more than Rs 1,323 crore in damages are baseless and legally untenable. On Monday, KAL Airways and Kalanithi Maran said they will seek more than Rs 1,323 crore in damages from SpiceJet and its chief Ajay Singh as well as challenge the recent Delhi High Court order in the ongoing dispute between the two sides. In a regulatory filing, SpiceJet said it strongly refutes the claims made by KAL Airways and Maran regarding seeking damages of Rs 1,323 crore. "These assertions are not only legally untenable but also a regurgitation of previously rejected claims by the arbitral tribunal and then the Delhi High Court," the airline said in the filing on Tuesday. According to the carrier, KAL Airways and Maran initially sought damages of more than Rs 1,300 crore during the arbitration proceedings. "This claim was thoroughly examined and subsequently rejected by a panel of three retired Supreme Court judges. Following this, KAL Airways and Kalanithi Maran appealed to the single-judge bench of the Delhi High Court, seeking the same

amount in damages, which was again rejected by the court," it said. SpiceJet also said the two parties chose not to pursue any appeal before the appellate jurisdiction and consequently, the matter attained finality. On May 17, a division bench of the court set aside a single judge bench order that had upheld an arbitral award asking SpiceJet and its promoter Ajay Singh to refund Rs 579 crore plus interest to Maran. The bench allowed the appeals filed by Singh and SpiceJet challenging the single judge's order, passed on July 31, 2023 and remanded the matter back to the court concerned to consider the petitions challenging the arbitral award afresh. Against this backdrop, Maran and his firm KAL Airways decided to challenge the ruling after consultation with their legal counsel. The decree holders — KAL Airways and Maran — "believe that the aforesaid judgement is deeply flawed and warrants further scrutiny." "In parallel, they are also seeking damages in excess of Rs 1,323 crore, as determined by FTI Consulting LLP, United Kingdom, a globally renowned firm that specialises in the estimation of losses arising out of breach of contractual commitments," KAL Airways said in a statement on Monday. Meanwhile, SpiceJet on Tuesday also said that following the court ruling, it will now pursue a refund of Rs 450 crore. The case dates back to early 2015, when Singh, who owned the airline earlier, bought it back from Maran after it was grounded for months due to resource crunch. As part of the agreement, Maran and KAL Airways had claimed to have paid SpiceJet Rs 679 crore for issuing warrants and preference shares. However, Maran approached the Delhi High Court in 2017, alleging SpiceJet had not issued convertible warrants and preference shares nor returned the money. On Tuesday, shares of SpiceJet declined 1.68 per cent to Rs 57.29 apiece in afternoon trade on the BSE.

Employers taking active measures to promote diversity, gender parity: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A significant percentage of employers in India are taking active measures to promote diversity and gender parity through progressive policies, upskilling, and flexibility and have realigned their hiring strategies by mandating women hiring at every level across sectors, says a report. According to New research conducted by ManpowerGroup India, 54 per cent of employers in India expressed optimism on their company's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives being on track in increasing women participation at different levels, way above the global

average of 46 per cent. The survey that examined 3,150 Indian employers, noted that internal leadership development programmes are most effective to help retain and secure diversified talent. Sector-wise, the Information Technology (IT) sector leads the way in strengthening its diversity ratio, closely followed by the healthcare and life sciences sector and financials and real estate sector, whereas the consumer goods and services sector has a long way to go. "India's gender diversity is among the best worldwide and it is encouraging to see women participation in the workforce increasing at a rapid pace. Organisations have realigned their hiring



strategies by mandating women hiring at every level across sectors," said Sandeep Gulati, Managing Director of ManpowerGroup India and Middle East. "Top-level management roles

are the most likely to lag in the number of women candidates, the survey said and added that this presents the greatest opportunity for employers to make a significant impact on their

workforce. The survey further noted that 80 per cent of employers said technology enhances flexibility and promotes gender equality, with 77 per cent voicing that tech advancements have supported this cause. Gulati expressed confidence in "India's ability to advance at a much faster growth rate if more and more women are added to the labour force." On pay equity, the report said over half (58 per cent) of respondents report pay equity initiatives are on schedule, while the remaining 32 per cent are behind schedule and 10 per cent have no initiatives. Information Technology, Communications Services, and Healthcare and Life

Sciences are outpacing the other industries. Energy and Utilities are lagging. According to the survey, employers expect most of the progress on gender equality to happen in the next two years. Even then, only 38 per cent of employers expect gender equality to be fully achieved in their organisation, compared to 21 per cent of organisations where gender equality is already fully achieved. In the latest edition of the ManpowerGroup Employment Outlook Survey, 3,150 employers from India were asked about their Diversity plans, progress and intentions, fostering diverse talent, and closing the gender gap.

May enter into health insurance; can explore inorganic options: LIC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



LIC chairman Siddhartha Mohanty has said that the insurer would enter into the health insurance segment and can explore inorganic options if such an opportunity arises. There are expectations that composite licences may be permitted by amending the Insurance Act, 1938, and the regulations of the Insurance Regulatory Development Authority of India (IRDAI), composite licensing for an insurer to undertake life, general, or health insurance under one entity is not allowed. LIC is not an expert in general insurance like fire and engineering but it can do health insurance, he said while sharing financial numbers for FY24. "Internal work is going on...We will explore inorganic growth in health insurance," he said. In February, a parliamentary panel suggested the introduction of a composite licence for an insurer to undertake life, general, or health insurance under one entity to increase the penetration of insurance in the country. The panel headed by BJP leader Jayant Sinha had suggested the government to introduce a provision of composite licensing for insurance companies and make the related amendment in legislation at the earliest. Observing that allowing composite licensing could provide further impetus to the insurance sector, owing to its various benefits, the report had said it can cut costs and

compliance hassles for insurers, as they can run different insurance lines under one roof. It can also offer customers more choice and value, such as a single policy that covers life, health, and savings, the report tabled in Parliament had said. It can boost insurance reach and awareness in India, as customers can get one insurance from one provider, with lower premiums and easier claims. The committee are aware that to enable composite licensing in India, the government and the IRDAI are planning to bring amendments to the existing insurance legislation, it had said. Meanwhile, insurance behemoth LIC on Monday posted a marginal 2 per cent increase in net profit at Rs 13,763 crore in the fourth quarter ended March 2024 as the corporation made provisions for wage hikes. The insurer had earned a profit of Rs 13,428 crore in the corresponding quarter a year earlier. The total income of the insurer during the reporting quarter rose to Rs 2,50,923 crore from Rs 2,00,185 crore in the same period of the preceding fiscal. LIC's income from first-year premium also improved to Rs 13,810 crore in the latest January-March quarter against Rs 12,811 crore in the same period of the preceding fiscal.

Banks' credit growth in FY25 to slow down to 14 per cent on lower GDP uptick, RBI measures: Crisil

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Domestic rating agency Crisil on Tuesday said the banking system's credit growth will drop by 2 percentage points to 14 per cent in financial year 2024-25. The slowdown will be due to lower GDP growth at 6.8 per cent in FY25, as against 7.6 per cent in FY24, RBI measures like higher risk weights on unsecured loans and also a high base, the agency said. Slower deposit accretion can keep a check on credit growth, the agency said, admitting that the differential between the deposit and credit growth has reduced over the past year. It said financial year 2024-25 witnessed a 16 per cent growth in bank credit, if one were to exclude the impact of the HDFC merger, and attributed the same to strong



economic activity and higher retail demand. "This fiscal growth will be tempered by a high base effect, a revision in risk weights and a somewhat lower gross domestic product (GDP) growth," the agency said. It was quick to add that the fundamental drivers of credit demand are broadly intact and a revival in private corporate capital expenditure (capex), especially towards the second half of fiscal 2025, can provide tailwinds as well. The corporate segment, which

accounts for 45 per cent of the overall loans, is estimated to maintain the growth at 13 per cent in FY25, it said, adding retail growth will slow down to 16 per cent from 17 per cent in FY24. Retail will remain the fastest-growing segment for banks, but will feel the drag of lower growth in unsecured consumer credit (25 per cent of retail credit) as banks realign their strategies following the regulatory stipulation of additional 25 percentage points risk weight and strengthen their underwriting processes to counter a potential rise in delinquencies, the agency said. The relatively higher yields in unsecured consumer credit and, hence, the ability to absorb the higher capital charge, will limit the decline in retail growth, it added.

Roadmap to smart asset allocation

PNS ■ MUMBAI

HDFC Multi-Asset Fund emerges as a dynamic choice, offering investors a pathway that aims towards balanced growth and stability. Crafted for those seeking long-term capital appreciation and income generation, HDFC Multi-Asset Fund presents an avenue for investment across diverse asset classes. The Multi-Asset Allocation Funds are particularly well-suited for investors aiming to diversify their portfolios and manage risk effectively, they not only help in mitigating portfolio volatility but also reduce reliance on any single asset class for generating returns, said the organisation.

Former American Express executive Sayantan joins Balancehero India as Head of Credit Risk

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Balancehero India, the driving force behind one of India's leading digital lending apps, TrueBalance, recently appointed Sayantan Ghosh, an alumnus of the Indian Statistical Institute, as its Head of Credit Risk Management & Data Science. Before joining Balancehero India, Sayantan had a stint with Statsfin and held various leadership positions at American Express. During his tenure with American Express, he led cross-functional teams in developing profitable new account underwriting strategies for international markets and implemented machine-learning risk scorecards to enhance credit risk management. He holds a Master of Statistics with a Major in Applied Statistics and Data Analysis from the Indian Statistical Institute in Delhi and Kolkata.



Commenting on the appointment, Souparno Bagchi, Chief Operating Officer, of Balancehero India said, "With his academic excellence and expertise in credit risk management and data science, I am confident that Sayantan will play a pivotal role in advancing our mission of financial inclusion. This position is a crucial pillar for digital lending platforms, and undoubtedly, with our new appointment, we are poised to drive innovation and excel, further advancing our mission."

HUDCO posts 24 per cent growth in net profit YoY

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Housing and Urban Development Corporation Limited (HUDCO) Board of Directors in its Board meeting held on 24.05.2024 at New Delhi approved the Audited Financial Results for Fiscal Year 2023-24. Sanjay Kulshrestha, Chairman & Managing Director of HUDCO, while expressing his satisfaction at the exceptional Financial Results said, "HUDCO, being a Government Company under aegis of MoHUA with lower levels of NPA and Debt-Equity and comfortable CRAR is envisaged to play a vital role in creating assets for

the nation and supplement efforts of Government of India for creation of sustainable and resilient Infrastructure, in line with Viksit Bharat 2047. With recently conferred "Navratna" status, HUDCO is amongst top 20 Navratna Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) in the country to have been accredited with this status. HUDCO is focused towards diversification of its resource base, establishing footprints in international markets through its maiden JPY denominated ECB offering and optimising overall cost to add competitive strength to its overall lending operation.

Madhur Gupta joins Hero Realty as CEO

New Delhi: Hero Realty Pvt Ltd (HRPL) has announced the joining of Madhur Gupta as its new Chief Executive Officer. Gupta brings a wealth of experience and a track record of transformative leadership to HRPL, said the company. He comes with a mechanical engineering background, an MBA also alumnus of IIM Lucknow, it said. Before joining Hero Realty, Gupta served as the CEO of Hero Steels Ltd, a part of Hero Enterprise. Under his leadership, Hero Steels Ltd achieved remarkable operational excellence and profitability, reaching a significant turnover of Rs 1000 crore.

Prakshapan, skill workshops held for MSMEs and startups

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The India-US CEO Forum's Working Group 7 (WG7) on entrepreneurship, inclusive growth, and promoting small businesses, in partnership with United Services Institute (USI) and CyberPeace Foundation, has launched the bilateral knowledge-sharing platform between the two nations, during the dialogue on inclusive growth, unlocking trade, empowering Startups and MSMEs in the Digital Age at USI. The discussion also saw the launch of 'Prakshapan', an innovation Hackathon, and Cybersecurity and AI Capacity Building and Skilling Workshops for MSMEs and startups. The workshops will

focus on protecting MSMEs and startups from online threats, and provide these businesses with the knowledge and tools necessary to build resilient security structures. Dr Subi Chaturvedi, Chief Corporate Affairs and Public Policy Officer, Global Senior Vice President (SVP), InMobi, and Sherpa WG7, said, "The dialogue and the knowledge-sharing platform will enhance the bilateral relationship and unlock trade between India and the US, promoting inclusive growth by empowering startups and integrating MSMEs in the global supply chain and fostering a resilient, innovative, and inclusive economy."

Minority shareholders to benefit from ITC Hotels demerger: Proxy advisory firms

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Minority shareholders are expected to benefit from the demerger of ITC's hotel business into a separate entity, ITC Hotels, as it may unlock value for them and improve return ratios of the FMCG major, as per reports of four proxy advisory firms. The reports from proxy advisory firms, including InGovern Research Services, ISS and SES, come ahead of the June 6 meeting of shareholders of ITC to consider and approve the demerger proposal. According to proxy advisory firm ISS, the demerger may

unlock value for its shareholders and improve ITC's return ratios. "The structure will enable ITC Hotels to operate with an optimal capital structure with the ability to access capital to fund its growth requirements. It can attract the right set of investors, strategic partners and collaborations whose investment strategies are more sharply aligned with that of the hospitality industry," ISS said in its report. Last year in August, ITC board had approved the demerger of its hotels business into a separate entity. Shareholders of ITC will get one share in the soon-to-be-

listed hotel entity for every 10 shares they hold in the company. Highlighting the benefit of demerger, another advisory firm InGovern said that the current ITC shareholders will receive a direct stake in a dedicated, publicly traded hotel entity, becoming shareholders of a specialized company focused solely on the hotel business. This move aligns with ITC's corporate strategy of fostering multiple growth drivers, ensuring continued interest in the hotel sector, and protecting against potential hostile takeovers in the future, it said.

Ronaldo finishes Saudi Pro League by setting season goal scoring record

AP ■ RIYADH

Cristiano Ronaldo finished the Saudi Pro League by setting the season goal-scoring record on Monday. Ronaldo scored twice in Riyadh as Al-Nassr defeated Al-Ittihad 4-2 and lifted his league tally to 35, one more than the record in 2019 by Abderrazak Hamdallah. In the final seconds of the first half, Ronaldo, who had already had two goals ruled out for offside, chested down a long pass from Mohammed Al-Fatih and opened the scoring with a low shot from the left side of the area. With 21 minutes remaining, the five-time Ballon d'Or winner celebrated wildly after heading home a corner from Marcelo Brozovic. He was substituted off the field five minutes later to a standing ovation from the home fans. It ended an action-packed season for Ronaldo, who scored four hat tricks and collected one red card. He was also suspended for an obscene gesture in February at Al-Shabab fans who had



been chanting the name of Lionel Messi, Ronaldo's longstanding soccer rival. Al-Nassr finished second in the league, 14 points behind local rival Al-Hilal, which won the championship more than two weeks ago and

completed the 34-round league unbeaten on Monday. Al-Hilal was too strong even without Neymar, who joined the club in August from Paris Saint-Germain but suffered a season-ending ACL injury in October.

Aleksandar Mitrovic stepped in and ended the season with a goal in the final seconds to clinch a 2-1 win over Al-Wehda. The Serbian striker, signed from London club Fulham last summer, reached 27 league goals, second only

to Ronaldo. On its way to the title, Al-Hilal went on a 34-game winning streak in all competitions, a new world record for a top tier team. "This season has been truly exceptional for the team,

arguably our best ever," coach Jorge Jesus said. "The credit goes to the immense talent within the squad and the incredible sense of unity that transcends both on and off-field interactions." Al-Ittihad's defeat at Al-Nassr ended a disappointing season for the defending champion. Karim Benzema, signed from Real Madrid, struggled with injuries and even with N'Golo Kante and Fabinho in midfield, signed from Chelsea and Liverpool respectively, the team from Jeddah could manage only fifth place. Poor results cost Nuno Santo his job as coach in November, and the Portuguese tactician returned to the English Premier League a month later to take over Nottingham Forest. Al-Ahli, the fourth of the Big Four clubs taken over by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund last June, finished third, 17 points behind Al-Nassr. Al-Ahli beat Al-Fayha 1-0 thanks to a late goal — his ninth of the season — from former Liverpool forward Roberto Firmino.



Praggnanandhaa beats Alireza in Armageddon

PTI ■ STAVANGER (NORWAY)

Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa got off to a flier and defeated Firouzja Alireza of France in the Armageddon game in the first round of Norway Chess tournament here on Tuesday. After an easy draw under normal time control, Praggnanandhaa got 10 minutes as white compared to Alireza's seven but with the condition that he had to win as a draw would have given black extra points. The Indian was clinical in his approach and carved out a fine victory in the endgame. The day saw all the games under classical time control ending in draws in both men and women's section and as many as six Armageddon happened to decide the winner in this unique format. World number one Magnus Carlsen played out a 14-move draw in classical and then a 68-move marathon draw with reigning world champion Ding Liren to seal the day in his favour while Hikaru Nakamura proved stronger than American compatriot Fabiano Caruana in the Armageddon. After the end of the first round, Praggnanandhaa, Carlsen and Nakamura share the lead on 1.5 points apiece while Alireza, Liren and Caruana follow them a half point behind. Each win under classical time control here is worth three points while the winner takes 1.5 home in the Armageddon with one point for the one on

the receiving end. Praggnanandhaa scored his first ever over-the-board victory over Alireza. It was an irregular queen pawn opening wherein Praggnanandhaa seized a small advantage and benefited from a casual 26th move by Alireza. Pouncing on the opportunity, a series of forced moves gave the Indian a decisive advantage and the game was over in 38 moves. The women's section, having the same prize fund as men's (USD 161000), also witnessed three draws in Classical time control between six competitors. Needing a draw with black pieces in the Armageddon, Koneru Humpy did not face many difficulties and got the 1.5 points. R Vaishali came up with an inspired performance with black against women's world champion Wenjun Ju of China but could not cash in on her chances. It was a tough Classical game for the elder sister of Praggnanandhaa as Wenjun took her for a long grind in a queen and opposite coloured Bishops endgame. The game was drawn after 80 moves thanks to Vaishali's resistance. Wenjun sacrificed a pawn early in the return game in a must-win situation and Vaishali had this extra pawn for quite some time. However, with the clock ticking away, Vaishali could not withstand the pressure. Wenjun won in 43 moves.

De Bruyne to lead Belgium at Euro 2024 with unretired Witsel

AP ■ BRUSSELS

Manchester City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne will lead a rejuvenated Belgium side including a once-retired Alex Witsel at the European Championship next month. De Bruyne and Witsel were on the 25-man list unveiled by coach Domenico Tedesco on Tuesday. Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, preparing for the Champions League final, was not. Full back Maxim De Cuyper, who won the Belgian league with Club Brugge last weekend, was the only newcomer. De Bruyne and Witsel are remaining members of the so-called golden generation of Belgian players. While De Bruyne's presence was expected, Witsel's was a surprise after Tedesco dropped him from his first squad last year. Witsel soon after announced his retirement from international soccer and did not play in qualifying. But Tedesco said Witsel's recent showings with Atletico Madrid convinced him the 35-year-old midfielder was the right choice. "I have the best feelings with Axel," Tedesco said. Tedesco said Courtois was not ready for Euro 2024, which starts on June 14 in Germany, after recently returning from injury. The men are at odds since a dispute last year, and Courtois announced in December he would miss the Euros. Tedesco succeeded Roberto Martinez as Belgium manager in February 2023.



He has yet to lose a game in charge of the Red Devils. Belgium will face Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine in Group E. Belgium's best result at the continental tournament was runner-up in 1980. **GOALKEEPERS:** Matz Sels (Nottingham Forest), Koen Casteels (Wolfsburg), Thomas Kaminski (Luton). **DEFENDERS:** Wout Faes (Leicester), Timothy Castagne (Fulham), Arthur Theate (Rennes), Jan Vertonghen (Anderlecht), Axel Witsel (Atletico Madrid), Zeno Debast (Anderlecht), Thomas Meunier (Trabzonspor), Maxim De Cuyper (Club Brugge). **MIDFIELDERS:** Aster Vranckx (Wolfsburg), Youri Tielemans (Aston Villa), Orel Mangala (Lyon), Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City), Arthur Vermeeren (Atletico Madrid), Amadou Onana (Everton). **FORWARDS:** Romelu Lukaku (Roma), Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta), Jérémy Doku (Manchester City), Lois Openda (Leipzig), Leandro Trossard (Arsenal), Johan Bakayoko (PSV Eindhoven), Dodi Lukebakio (Sevilla), Yannick Carrasco.

Team's plan was to stay close to US to earn Olympic qualification: Jacob

NEW DELHI. (PTI)

Determined to improve its time and qualify for the Paris Olympics, the Indian men's 4x400m relay squad had planned to shadow the formidable USA team at the World Athletics Relays, sprinter Amoj Jacob had revealed. The Indian men's squad comprising Muhammed Anas Yahiya, Muhammed Ajmal, Arokia Rajiv and Jacob qualified for the Paris Games after finishing second in their heat at the World Athletics Relays in Nassau, Bahamas earlier this month.

The Indian quartet finished with a collective timing of 3 minutes and 3.23 with USA (2:59.95) expectedly topping the heat. "We knew that we had the US in our Heats and they mostly run below 3 minutes. So, our plan was to stay close to them in the race, which will not only improve our time but also help us qualify for Paris Games," Jacob told SAI Media. "Our target was to register a time between 3:00 and 3:10 so that our confidence is high going into the Paris Olympics," he added. The Indian team was in third position when anchor-leg

runner Jacob took the baton from Arokia. The Delhi boy ran a fantastic race to overtake his Mexican opponent and finish second. India had failed to finish in the first-round qualifying heat after second leg runner Rajesh Ramesh pulled out midway due to cramps. Rajiv took the place of Ramesh in the team and he ran the third leg after Anas and Ajmal. Asked how the team dealt with Ramesh's absence Jacob, said "It was easy because we were practicing together. And we had trained the baton exchange with different combinations.

The only concern was to ensure that no one else got injured." "In fact, it is easier than 100 meters relay where better coordination is required. So, it was an easy transition for us. And because Rajiv was with us for a long time, he was in the camp, he was our senior. So, he knew what to expect and what not. And it was easy only," Jacob added. The 26-year-old added that reaching Bahamas a month before the competition helped the team acclimatise to the conditions well, which was key in securing Olympic qualification.

Nishant outclasses Otgonbaatar in two minutes, Abhinash loses close bout

PTI ■ BANGKOK

Nishant Dev out-punched his Mongolian opponent in just over two minutes to progress to the 71kg pre quarterfinals while Abhinash Jamwal ran out of luck as he was knocked out of the second Boxing World Olympic Qualifiers here on Tuesday. Dev, who had narrowly missed out an Olympic berth at the previous qualifiers, began with a flurry of punches against Mongolia's Otgonbaatar. Byamba-Erdeneto to force a standing count in the very first minute. A combination of a jab and cross hook led to another standing count and the Referee Stopped the Contest (RSC) with 58 second still left to play in Round 1. Earlier, Jamwal fought back with gumption after losing a close first round against Colombia's Jose Manuel



Viafara Fory in the 63.5kg bout. He clearly dominated the third and final round forcing a tie on points from all five judges. However as per the rules, the judges were asked to weigh the performance again and decide on the winner after the

scores were level. All of them then finally voted in Fory's favour after a long deliberation to seal the final score 5:0 for the Colombian. Third Indian boxer, Sachin Siwach will take on Frederik Jensen of Denmark in the 57kg round of 32 bout later in the day.

Indian boys and girls defend South Asian team titles

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's under-19 girls team retained its title at the South Asian Youth Table Tennis Championships after blanking hosts Sri Lanka 3-0 in the final in Kandy. India had got the better of Nepal 3-0 in the semifinals before taking on the hosts in the final. He first defeated Naviru Sayali Wani beat Bimandee Bandara 11-6, 12-10, 11-8, Pritha Vartikar downed Tamadi Kavindya 7-11, 11-3, 11-7, 6-11, 11-8, and Taneesha Kotecha beat Divya Dharani 11-8 11-7 11-7 in the summit clash to lift the trophy on Monday. In the Under-15 section, the results were no different. Divyanshi Bownick accounted for Yoshini Jayawardena 11-8, 11-7, 11-9, Syndrela Das followed it

up with a 11-9, 11-9, 11-4 win over Shanya Muthuli before Kavya Bhatt ended the ordeal of Samindi Weerasooriya to win 11-3, 11-8, 11-7. In the Under-15 boys final, also against the hosts, Sarthak Arya won both his singles, to be the architect of India's win. He first defeated Naviru Nethsitha 11-4, 11-5, 11-5, and Soham Mukherjee consolidated India's lead when he downed Akian Bojith 11-6, 11-6, 11-5 for a 2-0 lead. However, Sahil Rawat lost to Agasthya Ananditha 7-11, 11-3, 11-6, 9-11, 10-12 as the Lankans pulled one down. But Sarthak completed the job by winning the fourth rubber when he beat Akian Bojith 11-3, 11-8, 11-8.

Carapaz misses out on Ecuador's road cycling spot at Paris Games

AP ■ QUITO (ECUADOR)

Richard Carapaz will not be at the Paris Olympics to defend his road cycling title. Ecuador's only representative at the Olympics in the road cycling race and individual time trial will be Jhonatan Narváez, the national cycling federation said in a statement on Monday. Carapaz said on his social media he wished "the best of luck to Jhonatan," and added he will keep reaching for new goals. The two cyclists had a tough battle for Ecuador's spot in Paris. Carapaz was the first Ecuadorian to win a grand tour, the 2019 Giro d'Italia. He also made the podium at the Tour de France and Spanish Vuelta, but hasn't finished any grand tour since 2022.

Shooters level gun tampering allegations against top rifle coach

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A reputed national coach has been accused of tampering with rifles of some shooters by their parents, a charge that has been vehemently denied by the national federation, which has urged the aggrieved individuals to file a complaint. One of the parents of the allegedly affected shooters, who declined to be named, told PTI on Tuesday that he had to purchase a new equipment for his ward after the original rifle was "spoilt" by the coach. They also refused to reveal the coach's identity. "Yes, my ward's gun was spoilt by the coach. We had to buy a new one because of that. How can the coach just come and do all these setting

changes (alter the settings) without the approval of the shooter just one day before a world Cup," the father of the shooter said. "It happened during the ISSF World Cup in Bhopal last year. Not only this, every other match also, the coach does it, whenever the coach goes abroad, all these things are done." "Earlier, parents used to travel with the shooters... When we are present the coach doesn't touch the gun. The logic the coach gave (for changing the settings) was 'you need to experiment'. But experimenting just a day before the World Cup, what experiment are you doing?" he asked. The father also alleged that a lot of shooters had met the NRAI (National Rifles Association of India)



officials and brought it to their notice. "There was a meeting held in NRAI in front of all the shooters and shooters also told the NRAI these things. The federation has promised they will look into it. The

NRAI knows about it," the father added. NRAI secretary Rajiv Bhatia refuted the charge, saying he was not aware of any such instance. "I have no idea, nobody has approached us. We have not

received anything. I don't think so (this has been done)," Bhatia said. "Even if such a thing has been done, they (shooters) should have the guts to come forward, why these allegations come up once they are not selected? The Bhopal World Cup happened in March last year, so much time has elapsed," he added. Another parent of a rifle shooter alleged that the coach had an "old record" of tampering with guns. "My ward had gone to play a World Cup and the the coach had tampered with the gun in connivance with a jury (member). The coach has an old record of tampering with guns. "We have not brought it to the notice of NRAI as we fear retribution from the national body," he alleged.

Two more shooters write to NRAI on Olympics Air rifle shooters Nancy, who finished fourth in the Olympic Selection Trials recently and Tilottama Sen, placed third after the OST, have written to the NRAI requesting the federation to be considered for the Olympics. While Nancy is a 'deemed quota winner', Tilottama bagged the Paris quota at the Asian Championship in South Korea last year. In her letter, Nancy has said that more than just the trials, "an athlete's overall performance of the last one year and his/her international matches should also be considered." "My world ranking is third and my India ranking before the trials was No.1 besides I am a deemed quota winner,"

added Nancy in her letter to the NRAI. She has also listed her scores in international competitions before the trials to strengthen her case. Tilottama's father, Sujit Sen, has said that his daughter lost out to Ramita for the 10m air rifle Paris berth because of an amendment done by the NRAI to its selection policy in November last year. Contingent for Munich World Cup It is learnt that NRAI, in its selection committee meeting on Monday, decided to send the top-three position-holders in the Olympic Selection Trials to participate in the ISSF World Cup in Munich (May 31-June 6). The remaining two have been cleared on no-cost to

government and will compete only in the Ranking Points Only (RPO) category. RPO shooters are those, who even if they top the qualification round, cannot enter the finals and fight for medals. In 10m air rifle, Elavenil Valarivan, Ramita and Tilottma will compete for medals by virtue of being the top-three finishers in OST, while Nancy and Mehuli Ghosh can only compete as RPOs. Nancy, however, has decided to skip the World Cup. A source told PTI that Mehuli should not have been included in the RPO category as the NRAI's policy states that all those securing Olympic quotas "should play as main player and not RPOs," said the source.

Far from IPL, bowlers set to lord over batters in T20 World Cup

PTI ■ BENGALURU
Put through the wringer in the IPL, can bowlers hope to breathe a bit easy in the T20 World Cup next month? The genesis of this question lies in the transformation that T20 batting underwent in the latest edition of the IPL. The 250-mark was breached only once in the league till this season, but teams went past that point eight times in the just-concluded edition. Many of the batters who led that revolution, such as Australian Travis Head and West Indian Andre Russell, will be seen in action in the ICC showpiece in the Americas next month. So, it's quite natural for fans to expect another batting waltz. But their approach cannot be as one-dimensional in the World Cup as it was in the IPL for a variety of reasons. To begin with, teams will not have the luxury of an Impact Player in the World Cup. So, they will have to be ready to switch to an attritional style of cricket as and when the situation demands.

Mitchell Starc underlined that point after playing a big role in guiding Kolkata Knight Riders to their third IPL title. "There is an Impact Player Rule here (in IPL) and not in the T20 World Cup. You are going to rely more on your all-rounders. You cannot put your batting all-rounder at No. 8, like you did in the IPL. "I don't think that you'll see these kind of high scores in the T20 World Cup, purely because there will be one batter less," said Starc. In the earlier part of the IPL, Chennai Super Kings used Shivam Dube, a pace bowling all-rounder, exclusively as a batter through the Impact Player rule, though he usually walked in at No. 4 or 5 in place of a bowler. Dube produced a couple of match-winning knocks against Royal Challengers Bengaluru and the Knight Riders. But in the World Cup, the left-hander will have to showcase his bowling skills too to get a slot in the eleven as vice-captain Hardik Pandya plays a similar role and remains the first-choice. Skipper Rohit Sharma has made that bit



quite clear already. "I will be expecting if we need Shivam to ball a few overs, he will. Same with Hardik, he has come and bowled whenever needed. All-rounders must do that whatever their role is," he had said after the announcement of India's squad. However, that's just one part of the story. The batters will also have to negate pitches that will be very different from the ones they got used to in the IPL. "The West Indian pitches are no longer what they used to be in the '80s or in the '90s. They are now slower, and at times gripping," a veteran curator told PTI.

"I am sure the bowlers, particularly spinners, will have much more say than in the IPL, especially from the second week of the tournament. "India have included four spinners in their squad. It was maybe because of the nature of the pitches in the West Indies. Hence, I don't think we may see all those 250 totals there," he added. In the USA, only Florida has prior experience in hosting high-profile cricket matches. New York and Texas are bracing for their maiden foray into the sport. Will that have an impact on the scoring rate? "Yeah! It can be as initially the teams might be looking to assess the pitch and other conditions. I think these drop-in pitches that are being used in some of these venues are more consistent than the natural pitches. So, we may see a few high scores in that round," he said. David Warner, who has immense experience in playing international and franchise cricket in the West Indies, concurred. "The pitches in the Caribbean being dry, the ball will get roughed up and it's going to spin. I don't think they're going to be as compact as they are here (in the IPL). The lacquer on the ball is staying longer (in IPL) and hence it's not getting chewed up and hence very little turn on offer. "I've played a lot of cricket over there and played in the CPL (Caribbean Premier League). The wickets tend to get lower and slower," Warner pointed out. The average run-rate in this IPL was a whopping 9.56, the highest ever in the history of the tournament, and the average score remained upwards of 180. The average first innings score in Hyderabad was in the vicinity of 230. However, the stadiums in the West Indian islands are cut from a different cloth as some statistics will reveal. The average T20 score in Antigua is a dawdling 123 and at Barbados it is 138. It is even bleaker in Guyana at 124, at 115 in Trinidad and at 118 in St. Vincent. Gros Islet tops the chart with a princely 139. By the look of things, the bowlers are set to be royalty in T20 at least for a month.



India is strongest side even with injuries: Morgan

PTI ■ LONDON
India's remarkable reservoir of talent and formidable depth within their squad makes them strong contenders to win the upcoming T20 World Cup, feels former England skipper Eoin Morgan. India have gone with almost the same squad as they had in the last edition of the T20 World Cup while adding the likes of young Yashasvi Jaiswal, Yuzvendra Chahal and Sanju Samson. "The strongest side even with injuries throughout the tournament is India. Their strength and depth is absolutely incredible," Morgan said on Sky Sports. "And it's almost probably, we're talking about who the players that were missed out in their squad of 15 because of the quality that they possess. "They are favourites for me, the quality they have on paper, if they produce it I think they can beat anybody quite well in the tournament," he added. India were spoilt for choice as they were forced to leave the likes of Shubman Gill and KL Rahul. "The only decision I would have had differently and if I was selecting the squad, I would have Shubman Gill over Yashasvi Jaiswal. I have played alongside him, I know how he thinks. I know how he works. "I feel he's a future leader within that side and I think in big moments, in World Cups the more leaders the better. Even if he's sitting on the sideline, you still need inspiration from here and there, a sense of positivity," India head into almost every

tournament as favourites but they haven't won an ICC title in over a decade. The last trophy the 'Men in Blue' lifted was the Champions Trophy in 2013. In the last edition of the T20 World Cup they were hammered by 10 wickets by eventual winners England in the semifinals in Adelaide. "I think they can (win), because they have to go to a stage now where Adelaide would hurt, recently losing the (ODI) World Cup at home to Australia in front of 1,25,000 Indian fans. "The spinner will come into the game, the level of batsmanship will come into the game if the wickets slow down like we think. But also that excellence in power hitting is the point of difference for me. Shivam Dube has to play, I think he'll set this World Cup alight. **IRONY THAT ONLY TIME INDIA WON T20 WC WAS PRE-IPL: ATHERTON:** Many argue that India's cricket in T20 format has improved by leaps and bounds since the advent of the IPL. But former England captain Michael Atherton pointed out that it is ironic that the only time India won the T20 World Cup was before the IPL came into being. "It's also an irony, because everyone talks about the IPL and how it has improved India's T20 cricket. The irony is that the only time they have won is pre IPL," Atherton said. India were the first T20 World Cup winners in 2007. Under the captaincy of the talismanic Mahendra Singh Dhoni, they had beaten arch-rivals Pakistan.

Want Hardik to come good in T20 WC, he has gone through a lot: Harbhajan

PTI ■ CHENNAI
Former India off-spinner Harbhajan Singh has nothing but empathy for Hardik Pandya as he navigates a challenging phase in his career and is hopeful that the all-rounder, who "hasn't been a free man in the last two months", will become one during next month's T20 World Cup. Pandya endured a forgettable IPL both as captain and player with his team Mumbai Indians ending bottom of the heap in the points table. What made things worse was the incessant jeering of fans whenever he took the field, including at MI's home turf — the Wankhede Stadium. But Harbhajan expects the tide to turn in the Americas during the T20 showpiece. "When he wears that blue jersey, he will be a different Hardik Pandya because we know he can score those runs and take those wickets. I want Hardik to come good as he has gone through a lot and I wish him all the very best to have a very good tournament for India," Harbhajan told PTI in an exclusive interview. "If he has a good tournament, obviously India will have a great chance to go forward," he said. "Yes, his form is a bit of a concern...And lot of other stuff was going on around him, his shifting from Gujarat to Mumbai, was a big change and the team (MI) didn't react



too well to Hardik coming back and that too as captain," the 43-year-old added. The reason for the fan backlash against Pandya was MI's decision to hand him the captaincy after taking it away from the long-serving Rohit Sharma. There was speculation throughout the season that MI's dressing room was a divided house due to the change of guard. Rohit will now captain the national side with Pandya as his deputy in the World Cup starting June 1. Harbhajan, a multi format World Cup-winner, urged the team management to bring Pandya and Rohit on "same page". "...It looked like they (MI) were not playing together as a team. So there was a lot going on. Hardik wasn't a free man in the last two months. I believe both of them and many others who have played in different teams will have to come together to do something special for the nation..." he said. "Winning a World Cup is a bigger achievement than winning an IPL trophy, so I would urge the management to bring everyone together, have them on one page and make sure they play like one. "I believe it's the responsibility of the management to come together, and win together. Even if they lose they should be losing together."

BUMRAH WILL NEED SUPPORT: Jasprit Bumrah is the only speedster among the chosen three (the other two being Arshdeep Singh and Mohammed Siraj), who doesn't need conditions to be successful, feels Harbhajan. "Pace attack definitely could be a concern because because Bumrah is in a different league for the kind of bowler he is. He will win you games on any kind of pitch. He doesn't need conditions whereas other bowlers like Arshdeep and Siraj would need help from conditions. "If there's bounce, Siraj might do well. He is tall, can also swing it both ways, hits the deck hard and has got pace. But if wickets are slow then the challenge begins for other bowlers. "There will be lot of responsibility on Bumrah's shoulders but I hope other guys also take responsibility to be someone special." **IPL PERFORMANCES WON'T MATTER:** Harbhajan said IPL form would make no difference to the players' fortunes in the ICC showpiece. "No matter what you have done in your IPL career or previously, this is what counts the most...If I was in their shoes, I would be looking for this opportunity to showcase that I have been better than what I have been doing," the 'Turbanator' stated. **VIRAT IS A CHANGED T20 BATTER:** Harbhajan was mighty impressed with how Virat Kohli tweaked his T20 game during this year's IPL by adding shots to his repertoire, which drastically improved his strike rate. "Virat has shown a lot of improvement from last year to this year and people spoke about his strike rate. It was in 130s during last year and this time it is in 160s," he said. "Of course it's a big big change. Virat and Rohit will have to score quickly in Powerplay but also need to respect the conditions in USA and West Indies." **IF GAMBHIR BECOMES COACH:** Harbhajan doesn't know whether Gautam Gambhir, who is being spoken of as the favourite to take over India's head coach position from the outgoing Rahul Dravid, will get the job but he does believe it would be a crown of thorns for whoever chooses to wear it. "If I say it properly, it is a speculation, which is doing rounds...The biggest thing a coach can do is to bring everyone together, so that team plays together. So, whether Gautam becomes coach or Ashish Nehra, or whosoever gets the opportunity, hope they do better than what others before them did." He also ruled himself out of the race. "I don't think I will be able to give that much time. At this stage of my life I have a young family and I need to be around them and look after them. Yes, when the right time comes, I will put my foot forward and say I am ready for it," he concluded.

Could not go to airport because I was nervous about facing people in a wheelchair: Pant

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Dashing Indian wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant revealed that he was reluctant to visit the airport after his life-threatening injury as he was apprehensive about facing people while wheelchair bound. The 26-year-old had suffered multiple injuries following a near-fatal car crash on the Delhi-Dehradun highway in December, 2022. He miraculously cheated death but the injuries required a major knee surgery and an extensive rehabilitation about which Pant has already opened up. "The accident was a life-changing experience for me. When I got up after it, I wasn't even sure if I would be alive, but God was very kind to save me," Pant said on "Dhawan Kareenge", a talk show hosted by India cricketer Shikhar Dhawan. "I couldn't go to the airport because I was nervous about facing people in a



wheelchair. I couldn't even brush my teeth for two months, and for six to seven months, I suffered unbearable pain," Pant recalled. However, the flamboyant batter returned to action after 14 months in the recently concluded IPL, giving glimpses of his devastating best.



India A to play Australia A ahead of Border Gavaskar Trophy

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
India 'A' will play two first-class matches against Australia 'A' in the run-up to the marquee Border Gavaskar Trophy later this year, CA announced on Tuesday. The two games are scheduled to be played at the Great Barrier Reef Arena in Mackay and the MCG from October 31-November 3 and November 7 to 10 respectively, Cricket Australia said. The warm-up games will provide an opportunity for fringe players from both sides to push for a Test berth. "Hosting those A matches at the upgraded Great Barrier Reef Arena and the MCG give these 'A' matches significant status and will provide great opportunities to players from both sides to put up their hand for selection," said Peter Roach, CA Head of Cricket Operations and Scheduling. The Indian team will also play a three-day intra-squad match at the WACA Ground from November 17. India had played warm-up matches against Australia A in their previous tour Down Under in 2020-21 as well. The opening Test is set to be held at the Optus Stadium in Perth from November 22. It will be the first time since the 1991-92 season that the marquee series has been extended to five Tests. "To have that (the series) running simultaneously with the women's ODIs and preceded by two significant Australia A v India A matches will be terrific for our fans," Roach added. The Indian women's cricket team will also be touring Australia around the same time. The second ODI between the two sides on December 8 is set to clash with the second Test. Australia have not won the Border Gavaskar Trophy since 2017, having lost all past four series 2-1, including two at home in 2018-19 and 2020-21.

ICC grants List A status to Major League Cricket in US

PTI ■ SAN FRANCISCO
The ICC has granted official List-A status to Major League Cricket matches in the US in only its second season, a move aimed at promoting the game in one of the biggest sports markets. The International Cricket Council's decision comes a week before MLC commences its second season and less than a week before the Americas host cricket's showpiece event, the T20 World Cup. The ICC's move makes MLC as the official T20 league and America's first world-class domestic tournament. "Now, every century, half-century, 've-for', run-out, win, loss, and championship will be documented as official career statistics in an internationally recognised



format of the game," said MLC in a statement. The official status to MLC means it will provide local US players and upcoming stars of the game the opportunity for international recognition, furthering the development of domestic talent in the country. "The List-A status comes after the MLC's successful inaugural season and underscores its unwavering dedication to delivering premier cricket in the United States," the statement added. MLC CEO, Vijay Srinivasan, had recently announced the expansion of tournament from 19 games in 2023 to 34 by 2025. "We saw cricket mania sweep across the US last year off the back of our inaugural season of Major League Cricket. Now, we take exciting momentum into the highly anticipated ICC T20 World Cup and season two of the MLC," said Srinivasan. "With an unforgettable summer of cricket on our doorstep, we're ready to capture the hearts of American sports fans with our thrilling, adrenaline-charged game that is the most exciting emerging T20 tournament around the globe," he added. Sanctioned by USA Cricket, MLC saw several players from across the world, including New Zealand and Australia among others, take part in the tournament last year. Six teams — Los Angeles Knight Riders, MI New York, San Francisco Unicorns, Seattle Orcas, Texas Super Kings, and the Washington Freedom — featured in the inaugural edition.