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EPIC ELECTION BATTLE  
ENTERS DECISIVE PHASE

WORLD 8

IRAN'S SUPREME LEADER PRAYS  
FOR LATE PRESIDENT, OTHERS

MONEY 10

MARKETS CLIMB ON BUYING IN  
RELIANCE, INFOSYS

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# EC makes its presence felt

## Underlines nation's inviolable socio-cultural milieu

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With only two phases of the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections remaining, the Election Commission has now upped the ante against political parties particularly the BJP and the Congress asking them to desist from campaigning along caste, community, language, and religious lines, asserting that India's socio-cultural milieu cannot be made a casualty to elections.

The two phases will see polls on 115 seats including in Delhi on Saturday. The Election Commission on Wednesday in a stern warning to both the BJP and the Congress, the EC has also directed them to issue a formal notice to its 'star campaigners' disallowing them from making statements that "divide the society" and may cause tension between different castes and communities.

The EC had last month issued notices to JP Nadda on Opposition charges that Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a divisive speech in Rajasthan's Banswara. A similar notice had been issued to Mallikarjun Kharge, too, based on the complaints filed by the BJP against him and the main Opposition party's senior leader Rahul Gandhi regarding their remarks. The commission rejected the defence by Nadda and Kharge and asked them to instruct their parties' star campaigners to desist from campaigning along caste, community, language,



and religious lines.

The EC also asked the Congress not to politicise defence forces and make potentially divisive statements regarding socio-economic composition of the armed forces.

The EC had broken from norms when it issued notices to the BJP and Congress presidents on April 25 on complaints against Modi by the Opposition and against Rahul and Kharge by the ruling party. While the EC did not name Modi or Rahul, it asked Nadda and Kharge for their "comments" on the "star campaigners" alleged MCC violations.

"Elections are periodic exercises, they come and go, but political parties like yours

endure; even more enduring preserve is India's socio-cultural milieu; political parties are in the task of nurturing leaders for the country for present and future," the commission said. It also asked the Congress to ensure that its star campaigners and candidates do not make statements which give false impression that the Constitution may be abolished or sold. The EC asked the presidents of the two national parties to issue formal notes to their star campaigners to correct their discourse, exercise care and maintain decorum.

Referring to their respective replies to the notices issued to



them on April 25, the election authority said "technical loopholes or extreme interpretations of other political party's utterances" cannot discharge the parties and their campaigners from the core responsibility of their own content which ought to be corrective to the ongoing discourse and not further plummeting the quality of campaign discourse".

It reminded the two parties of provisions of the model code which state that no party or candidate will include in any activity which may aggravate existing differences or create mutual hatred or cause tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic.

In his reply to the notice, Nadda had maintained that the statements of BJP's star

campaigners rely on facts to expose the "mal intent" of the Congress to the nation. He had also told the EC that the Congress and the INDIA Bloc, in pursuance of vote-bank politics, have begun opposing India as a nation, its identity, its original Hindu religion.

The poll body rejected Nadda's defence describing it as "not-tenable" and asked him and his party's star campaigners to desist from campaigning on religious and communal lines. It also asked the BJP to stop campaign speeches that may divide society. "The commission expects BJP, as the ruling party at the Centre, to fully align the campaign methods to the practical aspects of the composite and sensitive fabric of India."

# Voter sympathy for Kejriwal ebbs

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Riding high on the electoral sympathy after the arrest of Arvind Kejriwal, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) seems to have lost its advantages after the alleged assault on Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal in the run up for the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi.

The Maliwal incident has dented Kejriwal's image badly, who is facing corruption charges in the excise policy scam case, which is visible in the party's campaign. The saffron party seems to have an upper hand in all seven seats as this has not gone well among the women voters.

Top BJP leaders are confident to repeat the 2019 results. The BJP, which is banking on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's charisma and corruption free administration in his 10 years rule, has now focussed its strategy, utilising the alleged assault on Maliwal, to portray its top leadership, including Kejriwal, as responsible — first through "silence", acceptance, and then a "direct attack" on Maliwal — for "denigration" and "assault" of their own women colleagues. On the other hand, Kejriwal who has maintained radio silence, seems to be on back foot, hurting the party's electoral prospects. The BJP's campaign strategy to counter the INDIA Bloc in Delhi has been to target the AAP more than the Congress.

Besides, the BJP has consistently raked up corruption allegations against the AAP, including the now-scrapped excise policy and 10 other alleged scams. AAP hopes Kejriwal's arrest will



generate sympathy for the party in the general elections and help it win maximum seats in Delhi and Punjab.

The BJP hopes that Kejriwal's arrest has dented his image and the image of a party with a difference (AAP), and it would not get any sympathy votes in Delhi. BJP leaders in Delhi, however, are confident of retaining all the seven seats the party has held since 2014. According to political pundits, the election is being contested between two personalities — Modi and Kejriwal in Delhi. This is for the first time that an election is being fought without any issues. Interestingly, there is no anti-incumbency factor against the Modi Government at the Centre. The BJP has crafted its electoral campaign well planned to corner the Kejriwal Government.

The BJP has also sought to balance the caste factor in announcing its candidates — fielding Harsh Malhotra a Punjabi from East Delhi against AAP candidate Kuldeep Kumar. Baniya leader Praveen Khandelwal from Chandni Chowk against Congress veteran Jai Prakash Aggarwal, MLA and Gujjar leader Ramvir Singh Bidhuri from South Delhi and AAP candidate Saharaj Pehalwan, Jat leader Kamaljeet Sehrawat

from West Delhi against AAP leader and former Congress MP Mahabal Mishra and Dalit leader Yogendra Chandolia from the reserved North West Delhi seat against Congress leader Udit Raj.

It has retained sitting MP Manoj Tiwari from North East Delhi where Congress has fielded former JNU president Kanhaiya Kumar. Aggarwal and Mishra have posed some challenges to BJP candidates while Kumar is facing a financial crunch to run the campaign. Kumar is collecting money through crowdfunding. The alliance of AAP and Congress, which are fighting jointly in Delhi, also seems to have not worked. Insiders said AAP supporters do not want to revive the Congress. Similarly, Congress supporters are also against the AAP.

Besides, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has also fielded seven candidates here with an aim for a stronger showing. In the early 2000s, the BSP emerged as a significant competitor to Delhi's established political parties. However, it gradually lost its support and voter share to the AAP and onwards. Despite this setback, the BSP's resilience and determination remained steadfast.

# Modi rips into INDIA Bloc's Communal plank

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday tore into the INDIA Bloc accusing it of being extremely "communal, extremely casteist and extremely nepotistic" as he alleged that the Congress is to be blamed for the anti-Sikh riots.

Addressing a rally in West Delhi's Dwarka sector 14, the Prime Minister said the BJP's development model is committed to 'nation first' but for the Congress and the INDIA grouping, the only agenda is 'family first'.

Modi denounced the communal and casteist agendas of the INDIA Bloc, accusing them of prioritising vote-bank politics over the welfare of the nation. He criticised their divisive tactics and highlighted instances of communal violence and corruption under their rule. "The country also understands



Delihites throng Dwarka sector 14 to welcome Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday

Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

that if by mistake any vote is cast in favour of the INDIA alliance, that vote is not going to be of any use to the country. Every vote given to BJP will strengthen the resolve of 'Viksit Bharat'. That is why this huge sea of people is also

saying in one voice 'Phir Ek Baar Modi Sarkar', he said. He said, "The BJP's development model says, Nation First. On the other hand, Congress and the INDIA alliance's only agenda is family first. This INDIA alliance is a

symbol of every evil that exists in the country today. They are highly communal, casteist, and family-oriented. Our Delhi has been a direct witness to their communalism." Attacking the Congress and the INDIA Bloc, he referred

to 1984 riots when Sikhs were burnt alive. "It was in this very Delhi that my Sikh brothers and sisters were burned alive with burning tires around their necks. Whose crime was this? Congress. Today, every party standing under the Congress umbrella is guilty of the Sikh riots. It is Modi who is delivering justice to the victims of the Sikh riots. As soon as Modi came to power, an SIT was formed. Hundreds of cases were reopened. The Congress leaders who were roaming freely have been punished by us," he said.

During his speech, Modi emphasised the stark differences between the governance models of the BJP and the Congress-led INDIA Bloc. He underscored the BJP's commitment to fast-paced

development and efficient governance, contrasting it with the slow progress and systemic injustice perpetuated by the Congress and its allies.

Speaking about the Congress and INDIA Bloc's misrule and caste-based politics, Modi said, "Who doesn't know about the prestigious Jamia Millia Islamia, a Central University in Delhi? For 60 years, it remained a regular educational institution, even there, Dalits, backward classes, and tribals used to get reservations. But in 2011, the Congress Government played a trick. Suddenly Jamia was declared a minority institution. This imposed a 50 per cent reservation for Muslims in Jamia. Earlier, all SC/ST/OBCs used to get reservations in admissions. Now even that has been restricted based on religion."

# SC slams Soren for half truths, he withdraws plea

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Jailed former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren on Wednesday failed to get any relief from the Supreme Court which pulled him up for "suppressing material facts" in his plea against his arrest in a money laundering case linked to an alleged land scam.

A vacation bench of justices Dipankar Datta and Satish Chandra Sharma allowed Soren's counsel Kapil Sibal to withdraw the pleas for interim bail for Lok Sabha poll campaigning and against his arrest after the apex court indicated that it would dismiss them as Soren has not approached the court with clean hands.

The court pointed out that Soren did not apprise it of the April 4 order of the special



PMLA court taking cognisance of the prosecution complaint, which is the Enforcement Directorate's equivalent to a charge sheet, and also that his regular bail petition was filed on April 15 and dismissed on May 13. "... You had approached two courts for the same relief... We have doubts that your client (Soren) was acting in a bonafide manner..." it said.

# WORST NOT OVER YET! Brace up for more fire from the skies

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

With the India Meteorological Department (IMD) issuing a red alert in Delhi forecasting the city to sizzle at 47 degrees Celsius on May 25, the day of the Lok Sabha polls, political parties are grappling with speculations about voter participation. A million dollar question is: Whether or not voter turnout in Delhi will surpass the 60 per cent mark recorded in 2019 general elections.

This phase six involves 58 Lok Sabha constituencies across six States, including Delhi, Haryana, Odisha, and Bihar, as well as two Union Territories. All seven seats in Delhi and all ten seats in Haryana will be contested in this phase amid fear of blistering heat with temperature going up. According to senior IMD



scientist Naresh Kumar, the rising temperatures, particularly in Rajasthan, have prompted the issuance of red alerts, indicating extreme heatwave conditions. In Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, while there has been a slight decrease in temperatures due to a western disturbance, the mercury is expected to rise again in the

coming days. As per the IMD, heatwave to severe heatwave conditions are very likely in most parts of West Rajasthan, in many/some pockets over Punjab, Haryana-Chandigarh, East Rajasthan and West Uttar Pradesh, in isolated pockets of northwest Madhya Pradesh and Delhi till Sunday.

Mahesh Palawat, vice president of Skymet Weather and a private Indian weather forecaster, was quoted by a media report that, "Our warning indicates that temperatures are likely to reach high heatwave levels in the national Capital."

The apprehension surrounding voter turnout in Delhi's upcoming elections is likely to be compounded by the heat index, which measures the apparent temperature that people feel outside due to a combination of high temperature and humidity. For example on Wednesday Delhi faced scorching temperatures at 42 degrees Celsius, however, the heat index soared to a staggering 51.6 degrees Celsius, highlighting the severe heat stress and discomfort endured by residents.

# Israel honours Kerala caregivers

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Noor Gilon, the Ambassador of Israel to India, while celebrating National Day of Israel in India said both the Government and the people of India stood on the side of Israel since October 7. Gilon thanked the Government of India and the people for standing with the Jewish nation in its hour of crisis. "From October 7, both the Government and the people of India stood on the side of Israel. And this we will never forget. The amount of support we get here is nothing short of amazing. It's a testimony of the extraordinary relations between the Indian and the Jewish people," said the Israeli Ambassador. Ambassador also paid tributes to two Keralites who risked lives to save aged couple during the attack by Hamas on October 7. "I take



this occasion to salute the heroism of people of Indian descent: Meera and Sabitha, caregivers from Kerala, who saved an elderly couple during the terror attack; and Romi (6), an Israeli child of Indian descent, whose parents were murdered in front of her, tried to protect her little sister — Lia (3) during the attack. They have shown extraordinary courage and a strong spirit, inspiring the

entire nation of Israel," said Gilon. The 76th anniversary of Israel was observed on Tuesday at New Delhi with a call to the Hamas to release the 128 citizens of Israel who were taken hostage by the Hamas on October 7, 2023. Israel's National Day was organised by the Embassy of Israel in India with Vinay Mohan Kwatra, the foreign secretary of India, gracing the occasion as chief

guest. Despite the deep wounds inflicted by the Hamas terrorists on Israeli people, the Ambassador paid glowing tributes to the two caregivers from Kerala who saved an aged couple from the jaws of death. He stated that this Independence Day was complicated and painful. "But our resolve is strong. While we mark this Independence Day, our thoughts are with the 128 loved ones who are still held captive. Their immediate release remains our sincere hope and ongoing mission. Speaking at the event, Foreign Secretary Kwatra said, "We join the people of Israel to celebrate this momentous occasion. It is deeply inspiring that the extraordinary journey of a nation that has not only survived and thrived against all odds, but also transformed itself into a flourishing landscape of innovation, advancement, and growth."







# No Char Dham Yatra sans registration-Uttarakhand govt

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Uttarakhand government has made it clear in unequivocal terms that the pilgrims without registration will not be allowed to proceed on the Char Dham Yatra. In an advisory issued

undertake the Char Dham Yatra. "This measure aims to streamline the pilgrimage process and ensure the safety and convenience of the devotees. In light of this, we request your support and

Raturi said that the pilgrims who have not completed the registration process are advised not to attempt visiting the shrines. She said that such pilgrims will be stopped at designated check-points and will not be allowed to proceed further without proper registration.

The CS said that the pilgrims should adhere to the specific dates for which they have been registered. This will help in managing the flow of visitors and maintain order at the Dhams.

The advisory asks the tour operators and travel agents to ensure that their clients have completed the necessary registration before commencing their journey. It will help in preventing any inconvenience or disruption during the pilgrimage.



to the pilgrims on Wednesday, the chief secretary Radha Raturi said that the State government has implemented a system of compulsory registration for all pilgrims intending to

cooperation in disseminating the following instructions to the concerned authorities and the general public in your respective states and union territories," the advisory reads.

# India marching ahead in science and technology sector: Dhama

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhama has said that India has marched ahead of major countries of the world in the field of science and technology and the developed nations are surprised at the pace of the development of India. Addressing a public meeting in support of BJP candidate Kartar Bhadana in Faridabad (Haryana) on Wednesday, Dhama said that India is scaling new heights of development under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Dhama said that India has become the fifth largest economy of the world. He said that PM Modi is working hard to fulfil the dream of Viksit Bharat by considering 140 crore Indians as his family members. The CM said that many schemes of welfare of poor are going on the country and added that schemes such as Jandhan Yojana, Ujjawala Yojana, Har Ghar Nal Yojana, Ayushman Yojana, Kisan Samridhi Yojana, PM Awas Yojana, Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana and others have changed



the lives of crores of people in the country.

PM Modi has taken many historic decisions such as implementation of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), ban on triple talaq and construction of a majestic temple in Ayodhya. He said that our armed forces are more powerful now. Dhama said that

Uttarakhand has become the first State in the country where Uniform Civil Code (UCC) has been implemented. Launching an attack on the Congress, the CM said that its objective is to come to power by spreading canard and engaging in the politics of dynasty. He said that while PM Modi talks about UCC, the Congress talks about

Muslim personal law board. The Congress leaders are making plans to impose inheritance tax.

He appealed to the people to vote for the BJP candidate Bhadana and send him to parliament. It will help in making Narendra Modi the Prime Minister of the country for the third consecutive term, he said.

# Godiyal demands all-party meet for Char Dham management

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Former Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president Ganesh Godiyal has demanded that the State government should convene an all-party meeting for management of the Char Dham Yatra. He said that devotees from all parts of the country wait eagerly for the opening of portals of the Char Dhams and they visit these shrines with reverence. The people of Uttarakhand

district magistrate (DM) of Uttarkashi has imposed section 144 from Janakichatti to Yamunotri which puts a question mark on the ability of the administration. Launching an attack on the State government, Godiyal said that the government has failed to identify the problem and solution. He said that chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhama is busy in election campaigns in different parts of



also wait for the Yatra to start. He added that however the mismanagement by the administration and failure by the State government to prepare a proper plan has resulted in chaos in the Yatra. Godiyal said that it appears that the Yatra has derailed due to the failure of the government. He said that the

country. "The government should call an all party meeting on the issue. The opposition is ready to suggest solutions to the government in the interest of the country. The imposition of section 144 in Uttarkashi has sent a wrong message to the devotees across the country," he said.

# Case registered against travel agencies after 55 pilgrims caught with fake registrations

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Authorities on Wednesday registered complaints against three tour and travel companies after the police found fake registrations of 55 pilgrims and travelers during checking in Rishikesh. The Dehradun senior superintendent of police Ajai Singh sent teams to other states to act against the agencies. The police on Wednesday checked the registration of a group of 19 people for the Kedarnath temple who belong to Hyderabad, West Bengal, Delhi and Karnataka. They informed the police that they registered to visit the Kedarnath temple through a Ghazibad-based travel agency Trippy Baba they found online.

They paid Rs 1.7 lakh online to the agency for the registration on May 23. They came to know about their registrations being fake after the checking in Rishikesh. A group of 30

people from Maharashtra including 16 men and 14 women were also found with fake registrations at the checking centre in Rishikesh. They informed the police that they paid Rs 1.65 lakh to a Haridwar-based travel agency Konark Travels for the registration of 30 people to visit two Dhams. Besides this, the police also found a group of six people with fake registrations.

They claimed to have carried out their registrations through a travel agency in Noida. Singh said that the police registered a case against these travel agencies under relevant acts. The SSP has also formed teams and sent them to the respective cities to investigate these agencies and against them. Besides this, the police also made suitable arrangements for these 55 pilgrims to continue their pilgrimage in the State, he added.

# Police consider adopting slot and token systems for Char Dham

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Considering the rising number of pilgrims reaching the Char Dham shrines, the Uttarakhand police are considering adopting slot and token systems to prevent long queues for Darshan and ensure crowd management inside temples. This was discussed in the review meeting of traffic

limited capacity of Char Dham temples. He also instructed the senior/superintendent of police of Uttarkashi, Chamoli and Rudraprayag to assess the carrying capacity of temples to ensure how many devotees can have Darshan in specific time duration besides assessing the vehicle capacity of parking lots

should be located near main towns where the pilgrims and travellers can get basic facilities easily like food, accommodation and other essential commodities. The police should also fix the duration of halting pilgrims in the holding areas and inform them about it in advance. He said that the traf-



management during Char Dham Yatra held by the officiating director general of police Abhinav Kumar on Wednesday with the senior police officials. He asked the officials concerned to consider these recommendations considering the

and the carrying capacity of devotees on Char Dham routes. The data will help the police to make an action plan, as per the DGP. He also directed the officials to identify new holding areas to mitigate traffic jams on Char Dham routes. These

fic plan should be publicised as much as possible to prevent pilgrims from any inconvenience. Besides this, the police will also fix the timing of the movement of mules operating in Kedarnath and Yamunotri, he added.

# More than 31 lakh registrations for the Yatra so far

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The unprecedented rush of pilgrims for the Char Dham Yatra and for the upcoming Hemkund Sahib Yatra is continuing. A total of 31,18,926 pilgrims have so far registered for the Yatra. The slots for the month of June are also full for the online registrations and to manage the huge surge of pilgrims, the State administration has stopped the off-line registration system till May 31.

10,37,700 pilgrims have registered for Kedarnath, 9,55,858 for Badrinath, 5,54,656 for Gangotri and 4,86,285 for Yamunotri. For Hemkund Sahib Yatra a total of 84,427 registrations have so far been done.

On Wednesday, 17,016 registrations were done for Badrinath shrine, 16,065 for Kedarnath, 9,347 for Gangotri and 7,624 for Yamunotri shrine. For Hemkund Sahib 4,817 registrations were done on Wednesday.

The data of the tourism department shows that

# 11 pilgrims sustain injuries after vehicle collides with truck

PNS ■ NEW TEHRI

A vehicle carrying 11 pilgrims collided with a truck at Bagwan in Kirtinagar area on the Rishikesh-Badrinath National Highway around 5:30 AM on Wednesday. The

vehicle going from Srinagar to Rishikesh in front of Akanksha Hotel in Bagwan. Both vehicles collided so hard that the front portion of the truck was completely wrecked. The 11 people



# One dead, three injured in road accident on Gangotri NH

PNS ■ UTTARKASHI

A man died and three sustained injuries after a utility vehicle they were travelling in met an accident near Sukki Top on Gangotri National Highway on Wednesday. The deceased man was identified as a local man named Vijaypal Singh (50). The injured include

Ratan Giri (40), Suresh Singh (26) and Ayush Semwal (17). Ratan sustained serious injuries while the remaining two sustained minor wounds. The officials said that the vehicle was going to Uttarkashi from Gangotri and the cause of the accident is yet to be ascertained.

injured include pilgrims belonging to Delhi, Ahmedabad, Ghaziabad and Rishikesh who were on their way to Char Dham pilgrimage, as per the officials. They informed that a truck was plying at high speed from Rishikesh towards Srinagar when it collided with the vehi-

also sustained serious injuries who were retrieved from the vehicle with the help of locals and the police and were admitted to Srikot Hospital in Srinagar. The officials said that their condition was stable. The investigation regarding the accident is ongoing, they added.

# Doctors advise pilgrims to be extra cautious during Char Dham Yatra

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Doctors have advised that pilgrims should exercise added caution and attentiveness regarding their health throughout the ongoing Char Dham Yatra. Those with pre-existing medical conditions are advised to carry necessary medication and observe precautions during the pilgrimage. Stress and reduced oxygen levels in high-altitude areas could potentially result in cardiac arrest among those suffering from prior conditions, the doctors said.

Considering the high altitude locations, he advised people to exercise extra caution regarding their health, especially individuals already suffering from ailments like diabetes, asthma and heart conditions. He further emphasised the importance for elderly individuals and those with existing health issues to consult their doctors and undergo necessary tests before embarking on the Char Dham Yatra. Dobhal highlighted the significance of individuals across all age groups taking short breaks during the journey, as continuous travel during the Yatra could impact their immune systems.



The Char Dham Yatra covers Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath all situated at high altitudes posing challenges for certain individuals during the pilgrimage. The deputy medical superintendent of Government Doon Medical College (GDMC) Hospital Dr Dhananjay Dobhal said that travelling to places at high altitudes can cause breathing issues for many individuals.

Senior physician at the district hospital Dr Praveen Panwar emphasised the importance of carrying medication for individuals already dealing with conditions like asthma, diabetes, hypertension and heart problems during the Char Dham Yatra. Due to the

high altitudes and low oxygen saturation at the Char Dham Yatra sites, those with pre-existing health issues are at risk of experiencing cardiac complications if they do not take proper precautions. Panwar advised pilgrims to take frequent breaks and gradually acclimatise to the high altitudes by starting at lower elevation sites. He cautioned that even young adults who believe

themselves to be healthy should not rush to higher altitudes as it can lead to health issues such as stress, hypertension and potentially cardiac arrest. He strongly recommended that all pilgrims carrying medication for existing ailments should take necessary precautions. Those with pre-existing medical conditions are advised to carry necessary medicines and be cautious during the Yatra.

# Administration gears up to demolish encroachments on Rispana riverbed MDDA issues notices to 413 slum dwellers

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The administration is gearing up to demolish about 500 encroachments from 129 slums settled on the riverbed of the Rispana River in the first week of June. After the Municipal Corporation of Dehradun (MCD) sent notices to 89 slum dwellers about two weeks ago, the Mussoorie Dehradun Development Authority (MDDA) has now sent notices to 413 slum dwellers. The administration has started making preparations to demolish all marked encroachments by June 30 as per the order of the National Green Tribunal (NGT). According to the officials, the MCD has received about 30 to 40 objections after notices were issued to 89 slum dwellers but only a few were

found genuine. The MCD is expected to demolish about 70 to 75 encroachments. Besides this, MDDA officials have also claimed that when the said lands were handed over to them over a decade ago, there were only about 100 establishments. However, MCD claimed that over 400 encroachments were settled on MDDA's land and sent its list to the officials concerned about three weeks ago. After analysing it, MDDA finally sent notices to all encroachers by Wednesday evening and asked them to raise objections supported by relevant documents that prove that their houses were established before 2016, as per the officials. Considering this, at least 300 encroachments of MDDA are expected to be demolished in



June. The officials said that a joint operation of the district administration, MDDA and MCD will be conducted to demolish these encroachments as per the order of the district magistrate Sonika. "MDDA will verify objections

raised by slum dwellers after a week. After this, a joint team will be formed to demolish encroachments as per DM order. The demolition process is expected to commence in the first week of June," the officials said.



# 2024 LS elections have 8,360 candidates, highest since 1996

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A total of 8,360 candidates are contesting the ongoing Lok Sabha elections, the highest since 1996, according to an analysis of official data. In the 2019 polls, there were 8,039 candidates, and in 1996, a record 13,952 candidates were in the fray for 543 seats of the Lower House of Parliament. The 2024 general elections are being held in seven phases, with five rounds of polling completed. The sixth and last rounds will be held on May 25 and June 1, respectively. Counting of votes will be taken up on June 4. The fourth phase of the elections held on May 13 had the highest number of candidates in the fray, 1,717 in 96 parliamentary constituencies in 10 states and Union Territories (UTs). The first phase held on April 19 had 1,625 candidates in 102 constituencies in 21 states and UTs, according to Election Commission (EC) data. There were 1,198 candidates in the second phase on April 26 in 89 constituencies across 13 states and UTs, 1,352 candidates in the third phase on May 7 in 94 constituencies in 12 states and UTs and 695 candi-



dates in the fifth phase on May 20 in 49 constituencies across eight states and UTs. In the upcoming sixth and seven phases on May 25 and June 1, there are 869 and 904 candidates, according to the EC data. Fifty-seven constituencies are going to polls in seven and eight states and UTs on May 25 and June 1, respectively. The number of candidates contesting the Lok Sabha polls has seen a rise of over four times from 1,874 in 1952 -- the first time elections were held -- to 8,360 in 2024, and the average number of candidates

per constituency has increased from 4.67 to 15.39 on an average, according to official data. There used to be only around three to five contestants per Lok Sabha seats on an average till as late as the sixth Lok Sabha elections in 1977 but in the previous elections 14.8 candidates contested per constituency across the country. There has been a marked increase in the total number of candidates contesting the elections over the years. While in 1952 there were 1,874 candidates for 489 seats with an average of 3.83 contestants per constituency, the number

steadily increased to 2,784 candidates in 1971 with an average of 5.37 per constituency, according to official data. In 1977, 2,439 candidates contested and average candidates per constituency stood at 4.5. The 1980 elections saw an increase in the number of candidates to 4,629 with an average of 8.54 per seat, the data showed. In 1984-85, the eighth general elections, had 5,492 candidates with an average of 10.13 contestants per constituency. The ninth general elections in 1989 had 6,160 candidates in the fray with an average of

11.34 per Lok Sabha seat while in the tenth general elections in 1991-92, 8,668 candidates contested for 543 seats with an average of 15.96 per constituency, according to official data. There were a record 13,952 candidates in the fray for 543 Lok Sabha seats in 1996 with the average contestants per seat increasing to 25.69 from 16.38 in the previous elections in 1991, the data showed. The increasing of security deposit from Rs 500 to Rs 10,000 by the EC apparently helped in bringing down the number of contestants per seat to 8.75 candidates in the 1998 Lok Sabha elections. It was after a long gap that the total number of contestants was less than 5,000 (4,750) that only increased marginally in the 1999 general elections to 4,648 candidates, averaging 8.56 candidates per seat. In 2004, the number of contestants again crossed the 5,000-mark with 5,435 contestants in the fray for 543 Lok Sabha seats, averaging just over 10 contestants per seat. The 2009 general elections saw a 8,070 candidates with the average of contestants per seat sharply increasing to 14.86. A total of 8,251 candidates are in the fray in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls.

# Women less than 10 per cent of LS picks: ADR

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Less than 10 per cent of the candidates contesting in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections are women, according to an analysis of data shared by the poll rights body Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). Of the 8,337 candidates analysed, only 797 are women, representing a mere 9.5 per cent of the total candidates contesting across the seven phases of the elections. This is the first election since the passage of the women's reservation bill to reserve one-third of seats in Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women, reviving a bill pending for 27 years for want of consensus among parties. The bill is yet to come into effect. During the first phase of the elections, out of 1,618 candidates, only 135 were women. This pattern continued in the subsequent phases, with women candidates remaining a small fraction of the total. Phase 2 saw 1,192 candidates of which affidavits of 1,198 candidates were analysed and as many as 100 were women. Phase 3 had 1,352 candidates, including 123 women and 244 with criminal cases. In phase 4, affidavits of 1,710 out of 1,717 candidates were analysed and 170 were women. Phase 5 had the fewest candi-

dates at 695, with 82 women, while in phase 6, affidavits of 866 out of 869 candidates were analysed, and there were 92 women. In phase 7, there will be 904 candidates candidates, with only 95 women. This significant gender imbalance has sparked criticism from political analysts and activists, who question why political parties are waiting for the women's reservation bill to be implemented instead of proactively issuing tickets to women. Dr. Sushila Ramaswamy, Professor at Delhi University's Jesus and Mary College, has emphasised that political parties should take concrete steps to promote women's candidacy. "Political parties should have been more proactive and fielded more women candidates," she said, highlighting the effectiveness of seat reservations for women within party structures, as seen in Britain's Labour Party. With women constituting near-

ly half of India's electorate, their under-representation in the candidate pool raises broader questions about the barriers hindering women's full participation in the political sphere, Dr. Iftekhar Ahmad Ansari, Associate Professor at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), said. Beyond symbolic gestures and promises, he stressed the importance of structural reforms to ensure equal opportunities for women in politics, underscoring the critical role of party leadership in promoting gender diversity. "Political parties must prioritise gender inclusion in candidate selection and provide adequate support to women aspirants," he emphasised. The issue of women's political representation extends beyond numerical quotas to encompass systemic changes in party dynamics and electoral processes, noted Farhat Jahan, a retired faculty member at Abdullah Women's College at AMU.

# SC cancels bail given by HC to eight PFI members

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday set aside a verdict of the Madras High Court which had granted bail to eight accused in a case registered under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act against alleged PFI operatives, holding that national security is of paramount importance. A bench of Justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal directed the accused, who were granted bail by the high court on October 19 last year, to surrender forthwith and go back to jail. "The impugned order passed by the high court is set aside," the bench said while pronouncing its judgement. The court observed it can't be denied that national security is always of paramount importance and any act linked to terrorism is liable to be restricted. The bench delivered its verdict on a plea filed by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) challenging the high court judgement granting bail to these accused. The eight accused —

Barakathullah, Idris, Mohamed Abuthahir, Khalid Mohammed, Syed Ishaq, Khaja Mohaideen, Yasar Arafath and Fayaz Ahmed — were arrested in September 2022. On October 20 last year, the apex court had posted the NIA's plea challenging the high court order for hearing after advocate Rajat Nair, appearing for the anti-terror agency, mentioned it for urgent listing. In its plea, the NIA had claimed that the PFI is a fundamentalist Islamic organisation and it was formed only to achieve the "dangerous goal" of establishing Muslim rule in India governed by Sharia law. It had said an FIR was registered against the alleged office bearers, members and cadres of the PFI, which had been spreading the extremist ideology across Tamil Nadu after establishing its state headquarters at Purasaiwakkam in Chennai and offices in various districts of the state through their front organisations. The petition said the accused had "conspired to commit acts of terror, recruited members for

furthering their extremist ideology and imparted training to commit terrorist activities, organised mass drills for displaying their might by gathering their members in combat uniforms, intending that participants shall be trained to use criminal force for violence against other religious communities to spread fear or alarm or insecurity. "It is respectfully submitted that the leaders/cadres of PFI had formed the organisation only to achieve a dangerous goal of 'Vision India 2047', that is to make this country ruled by Muslims as per sharia law," it had said. The plea claimed tactical weapons training was being imparted and there was evidence on record which showed that PFI cadres where influenced, brainwashed and indoctrinated by the accused. "All the acts were done by the accused in an effort to raise an armed militia to take up the fight for usurping and violating the sovereignty and integrity of the country," it had alleged. Rahul Datta.

# Congress questions EC over difference in voter turnout data

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Wednesday raised questions over the difference between the real time voter turnout data and the final figures released by the Election Commission, and said voters are worried over the "strange goings-on" in the poll body. Congress leader and head of media and publicity department of the party Pawan Khera said the difference is around 1.7 crore votes, and termed it as unprecedented. "Voters are worried about the strange goings on in the Election Commission through the four phases of voting. First, the Election Commission takes 10-11 days to bring out the final figure of voting and then the difference between real time data and final figure turns out to be 1.7 crore votes. This is truly unprecedented," Khera said on X. "Unanswered questions about the missing EVMs are also very worrying," he added.



AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh said, "This difference of 1.07 crore overall translates into an increase of 28,000 in each LS seat. This is HUGE." "The discrepancy is maximum in states where BJP is expected to lose seats heavily. What is happening?" Ramesh asked. Other opposition parties have also raised questions over the delay in release of final voter turnout. Lok Sabha polls are being held in seven phases and the results will be declared on June 4.

# IAF chief inaugurates emergency medical helpline for Air Force staff

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



In order to provide expert guidance and definitive care during medical emergencies of serving personnel and their families of the Indian Air Force (IAF) across the nation, an Emergency Medical Response System (EMRS), was inaugurated by IAF chief V R Chaudhari at Command Hospital Air Force, Bengaluru on Tuesday. IAF officials said here on Wednesday. The EMRS is a first of its kind 24/7 telephonic medical helpline for serving IAF personnel and their families across India. The system aims to provide prompt response by a team of medical and paramedical professionals to the caller experiencing the emergency anywhere across the country. The responding medical professional shall provide immediate advice to the caller, while simultaneously getting in touch with the IAF medical facility nearest to the caller. This facility symbolises IAF's commit-

ment towards incorporating technology to deliver high quality healthcare in the event of an emergency. The sole aim of EMRS is to save valuable lives. The event featured a demonstration of the system's capability and outreach, highlighting the ease with which expert guidance would be provided to the distressed caller, as well as expeditious launch of a medical support team from the nearest medical echelon. IAF chief, who originally envisioned this concept, highlighted the importance of the EMRS and further added "this initiative is not just a milestone for the Indian Air Force but a significant advancement in medical readiness, representing a critical step forward in the ongoing efforts to provide immediate and expert medical care during emergencies".

# CBI terminates service of inspector held taking bribe

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has terminated the services of its inspector Rahul Raj who was arrested by the agency while allegedly taking a bribe of Rs 10 lakh from the chairman of a Madhya Pradesh-based nursing college, officials said on Wednesday. Following its policy of "zero tolerance towards corruption", the agency sacked Raj under Article 311 of the Constitution that allows termination of services of government employees, they said. Raj was caught "red-handed" on Sunday while allegedly accepting an illegal gratification of Rs 10 lakh from Malay College of Nursing chairman Anil Bhaskaran and his wife Suma Anil, an official alleged. The couple has also been arrested. The CBI has also attached its Deputy Superintendent of Police Ashish Prasad to the headquarters. He was named in the FIR in the case. Sushil Kumar Majoka and Rishi Kant Asathe, both on attachment with the CBI from the Madhya Pradesh Police, will be repatriated to the state police soon as their alleged role in the bribery racket has surfaced. The CBI swung into action

after inputs and surveillance by its internal vigilance unit indicated that one of the support teams constituted on the orders of the Madhya Pradesh High Court to examine infrastructure in nursing colleges in the state was indulging in corruption. "CBI, ACB, Bhopal, had constituted seven core teams and three-to-four support teams, comprising officials from CBI, those nominated by nursing colleges in Madhya Pradesh and patwaris, in compliance of the directions of the high court for conducting statewide inspections to ascertain whether nursing colleges satisfied the laid down norms and standards for nursing colleges in respect of infrastructural facilities and faculty," CBI spokesperson said. The agency said during monitoring of inspections being carried out by the various teams, officials of one of the support teams, including Raj, were found to be indulging in corruption. It said it was observed that they were giving favourable inspection reports in lieu of bribes collected through conduits. The CBI has arrested 13 people, including Raj, for giving favourable inspection reports to nursing colleges in Madhya Pradesh in exchange for bribes collected through conduits, officials said.

# Alert citizens helping DoT prevent cybercrimes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Vigilant and alert citizens are playing an indispensable role in preventing cybercrimes. Through their proactive reporting of suspected fraud communications via the Chakshu-Report Suspected Fraud Communications facility on the Sanchar Saathi portal, these alert citizens are contributing significantly to a safer digital environment. Their watchful eyes and swift actions protect not only themselves but also countless others from falling victim to scams, phishing attempts, and fraudulent activities. By reporting suspicious messages, calls, and impersonation attempts, these citizens act as the first line of defence against cyber criminals, ministry of communications said here on Wednesday. This prompt approach of citizens helps the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) combat and prevent cybercrimes. The DoT expresses gratitude to the vigilant citizens who enable the Department in ensuring a safer and secure digital ecosystem. With these inputs, the DoT has been taking prompt and strict action on cyber/financial frauds. In the latest cases, people were being duped by fraudulent communication in the name of fake LIC officials and Insurance company represen-



tatives and SMSs for redemption of SBI Rewards. The DoT received inputs from citizens on 19.05.2024 regarding such frauds from 14 mobile numbers. Within 24 hours, the DoT analysed these cases and generated all linkages for these mobile numbers. Therefore, 372 mobile handsets linked to these mobile numbers were blocked on pan-India basis on 21.05.2024. Also, 906 mobile connections were suspended and flagged for re-verification. The Department has urged citizens to stay vigilant and report such fraud communications at 'Chakshu - Report Suspected Fraud Communications' facility of Sanchar Saathi portal (www.sancharsaathi.gov.in/sfc). Such proactive reporting helps DoT in prevention of misuse of telecom resources for cybercrime, financial frauds, etc. Advisories have been issued on a regular basis for the public to create awareness on fake

notices impersonating DoT/TRAI, suspected fraud communications and malicious calls via press, SMS, and social media. This collaborative approach is safeguarding citizens against fraudsters and DoT expresses gratitude to them for coming forward and reporting, keep vigilant, keep reporting and Let's fight it together Chakshu is the latest addition to the citizen centric facilities already available on the Sanchar Saathi portal of the DoT. 'Chakshu' facilitates citizens to report suspected fraud communication received over call, SMS, or WhatsApp with the intention of defrauding like KYC expiry or update of bank account/payment wallet/SIM/gas connection/electricity connection, sextortion, impersonation as government official/relative for sending money, disconnection of all mobile numbers by the DoT, etc.

# 10th International Day of Yoga held



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As the 10th International Day of Yoga was commemorated by the All India Institute of Ayurveda (AIIA) on Tuesday with a distinct focus on 'Yoga for Women Empowerment', Sister BK Shivani, a motivational speaker underscored the significance of yoga in nurturing resilience and informed decision-making, especially among the younger generation. Likewise, in her inaugural speech, AIIA Director Prof. (Dr.) Tanuja Nesari, appealed to everyone to celebrate this Yoga Day for women's empowerment, for guidance and to strengthen minds, spirits, and souls, to unite within ourselves, and to unite with the outside world by following Ayurveda's way of living. "Ayurveda and yoga are two sides of the same coin. Ayurveda is the physical aspect of yoga, and yoga is the spiritual aspect of Ayurveda," she said and urged everyone not only to teach but also to practice both yoga and Ayurveda. "Youth of today should understand the importance of perseverance and the significance of Yoga for bringing a change for the betterment of humanity," she said.

# Indian Navy must remain combat ready: Navy chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



The Indian Navy must remain combat ready at all times to safeguard national maritime interests, Navy Chief Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi has said. This assertion came amid China's increasing forays into the Indian Ocean and volatile situation in the Red Sea. In an address to officers posted at the naval headquarters here, the Navy chief helved into the current security environment in the strategic waters and consequent actions required by the Navy. He emphasised that as the primary manifestation of India's maritime power, the "raison d'etre of Indian Navy is to remain combat ready at all times to safeguard national maritime interests anytime, anywhere, anyhow". In his remarks to the officers on Tuesday, the Navy chief reiterated the unwavering commitment of the Indian Navy towards the government's Aatma Nirbharta (self-reliance) initiative. Admiral Tripathi laid emphasis on finding in-house solutions, innovation and embracing niche technologies to address the existing and emerging challenges in the maritime domain to remain a responsive

force. He conveyed to the mid and senior level leaders posted at the naval headquarters that they must remain focused on being "the solution providers" and "prioritising outcomes" towards a combat ready, credible, cohesive, and future ready Navy. The admiral praised the dedication and professionalism demonstrated by the personnel in meeting all mandated tasks by the service, according to a Navy spokesperson. In the last few months, the Indian Navy provided assistance to a number of cargo vessels after they came under attacks in strategic waters around the Red Sea. The Houthi militants have been targeting the merchant ships in the Red Sea apparently to build pressure on Israel to stop its military offensive in Gaza.



# Shah: INDIA Bloc does not have any leader who can become PM

**PTI ■ GHATAL (WB)**  
 Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday launched a blistering attack on the "corrupt INDI alliance" and said the opposition bloc doesn't have any leader who can become Prime Minister. While addressing a rally at Ghatal, Shah said the INDIA bloc leaders just want their dynasty to move ahead and "neither have any leaders to lead the country nor have any intention for the development of the nation." Shah, while referring to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir said "PoK is part of India and we will take it." "The INDI alliance doesn't have any leaders. The INDI alliance wants five PMs in five years. The INDI alliances neither have leaders nor have any intention for the development of the nation," he said. The BJP leader said the ongoing parliamentary elections are about choosing between "leaders of dynastic politics or honest leader Narendra Modi" who



considers the country as his family. "Sharad Pawar wants his daughter to be the chief minister. Mamata Banerjee wants her nephew to succeed her as chief minister. Stalin (Tamil Nadu CM) wants to see his son succeed him. Sonia Gandhi wants Rahul Baba to become the Prime Minister of the country. On the other side, there is

# Congress, SP Pakistan sympathisers: Modi

**PTI ■ BASTI (UP)**  
 Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday here called Congress and Samajwadi Party "sympathisers of Pakistan" and alleged that these parties are "scaring the country" with its nuclear power status. Addressing a rally here, Modi alluded to the partnership in UP between Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav in 2017, when the two campaigned together for the Assembly elections — and failed. "I am surprised by the repeated release of flop film of two 'shehzadas' of SP and Congress," Modi said. The Congress this time is contesting from 17 of the 80 Lok Sabha in a seat-sharing agreement with the SP. On Pakistan, Modi said, "This patron of terrorism which once used to dare us in such a condition that its people are hard up even for food grain... Pakistan is finished but its sympathisers, SP and Congress, are busy scaring the country."



"They say one needs to be scared of Pakistan because it has an atom bomb. Don't they know what is 56-inch (chest)? It's not the weak Congress government... But the strong government of Modi," he said at a rally campaigning for BJP's Basti Lok Sabha candidate Harish Dwivedi. "India does not spare those who try to bully it. India today hits them in their own homes," he said. Referring to Akhilesh Yadav's claim that the

Dharma... The shehzada of Congress wants to change the Supreme Court's judgement of Ram Temple. They dream of putting a Babri lock on the Ram temple and want to send Ram Lalla back to the tent," he said. Modi referred to the nearly two-year-long Emergency and said that Congress talks of Constitution but it did not even follow the party's constitution. He claimed that former Congress president Sitaram Kesri, who belonged to a backward community, was locked in a bathroom the day Sonia Gandhi was made the party's president. The PM also accused Congress of trying to change the Constitution and end reservation for the Dalits and backwards. "These people want to snatch the reservation of Dalit and Backwards and give it to those who do Vote Jihad. Congress wants to change the Constitution to give reservation to Muslims. Samajwadi Party is standing with Congress in its anti-Dalit and anti-backward conspiracy," he said. On the SP, Modi said it used to accord goons and rioters special protocol during its government. "Yogi Adityanath and his government had to make efforts to bring UP from the ditch it was thrown in long back," Modi said. Seeking the public's support, the PM said their votes will bury the "politics of appeasement in kabristan" and ensure the future of the country. "We have become the fifth largest economy. When India speaks, the world listens and tries to accompany India in the decisions made by it," he said. Modi was accompanied by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on the stage. Adityanath in his address expressed confidence of thumping victory for the BJP. "When we talk of crossing 400, SP and Congress start fainting because they are not even contesting on 400 seats together." BJP's Harish Dwivedi is pitted against Ram Prasad Chaudhary of Samajwadi Party. Polling in Basti will be held in the sixth phase on May 25.

# AP police teams on hunt for YSRCP MLA who damaged EVM

**PTI ■ AMARAVATI**  
 Andhra Pradesh Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Mukesh Kumar Meena on Wednesday said police teams have been formed to look for 'absconding' YSRCP MLA P Ramakrishna Reddy who vandalised an electronic voting machine (EVM) at a polling centre in Macharla constituency of Palnadu district. The CEO said police raided Reddy's residence this morning, but he was not found there. "His (Reddy) house was raided in the morning. He was not found, so several teams are now moving around to arrest him," Meena told media.

# Mamata compromising national security for sake of vote bank politics, says Shah

**PTI ■ KANTHI/GHATAL/PURULIA**  
 Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday accused West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of compromising national security for the sake of vote bank politics and "committing a sin" by allowing infiltrators to change the demography of the state. Addressing back-to-back rallies in Kanthi, Ghatal, and Purulia Lok Sabha constituencies, Shah said the TMC will "disintegrate" and there will be a "farewell of Mamata Banerjee's government" after the BJP wins 30 Lok Sabha seats in the state. "Bengal has become a safe haven for infiltrators. Due to infiltration, the state's demography is changing, impacting not only this state,



but the entire country. Banerjee is committing a sin by helping to change the demography of Bengal. She is compromising national security for sake of vote bank politics," he said. Alleging that "infiltrators are the vote bank of the TMC," Shah said Banerjee is opposing the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) to appease her vote bank. "TMC ko ghuspetiyo se pyar

aur CAA pe vaar' (TMC has a love for infiltrators and attacks the CAA). The infiltrators are the vote bank of the TMC," he said. Shah criticised Banerjee's recent comments against certain monks of Ramakrishna Mission and Bharat Sevashram Sangha, asserting that these socio-religious organisations are being threatened to appease the TMC's vote bank. "Banerjee is attacking the Sangha, but she is not aware that had it not been there, Bengal would have been a part of Bangladesh," he said. Addressing an election rally in Goghat under Arambagh LS constituency on Saturday, Banerjee had claimed, "Some monks of Ramakrishna Mission and Bharat Sevashram Sangha are working under the influence of BJP leaders in Delhi.

# JD(S) complains to police against Rahul for claiming MP Prajwal raped 400 women

**PTI ■ BENGALURU**  
 The JD(S) on Wednesday complained to Karnataka DGP Alok Mohan against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for allegedly claiming that Hassan MP Prajwal Revanna, who is facing charges of sexual abuse, has "raped 400 women." In a complaint, H M Ramesh Gowda, a former MLC and party's Bengaluru City president has sought registration of a criminal case against Gandhi under section 202 (Intentional omission to give information of an offence by a person legally bound to inform) of the Indian Penal Code for his alleged statement while addressing election rallies in the district headquarters of Shivamogga and Raichur on



May 2. The JD(S) leader also cited the alleged statement by Gandhi in his complaint, "Prajwal Revanna has raped 400 women and made videos. This is not a sex scandal but mass rape. And the Prime Minister, in front of the people of Karnataka, was

supporting and seeking vote for this mass rapist. He is saying that if you vote for this mass rapist, it would help him." The complainant said in the interest of justice for the alleged victims, Gandhi being a public servant is duty bound to give information of offence. "In view of the fact that Gandhi has made a specific statement that Prajwal has raped 400 women, he is aware of the information and details of the 400 women raped and has intentionally failed to disclose the details," he stated in the complaint. The 33-year-old Prajwal, who is the grandson of JD(S) patriarch and former PM H D Deve Gowda and is the NDA's candidate from Hassan Lok Sabha segment, is facing charges of multiple instances of sexually abusing women. The cases came to light after a number of explicit videos of sexual assault allegedly by Prajwal became public. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) is currently probing these cases. "Till date, the SIT has also not issued any notice to Rahul Gandhi calling for such information for the statement made by Rahul Gandhi," the complaint stated. However, no FIR has been registered yet in this regard, police said. Prajwal reportedly left for Germany on April 27, a day after Hassan went to polls, and is still at large. Interpol has also issued a Blue Corner Notice seeking information on his whereabouts.

# BJP gains ground as TMC battles to retain foothold in Suvendu Adhikari's backyard

**PTI ■ KANTHI (WB)**  
 The future of the Kanthi Lok Sabha constituency in West Bengal appears to be volatile on account of the dual and opposing factors of the BJP sharply gaining political ground and the TMC desperate to retain its sway over voters. While the BJP looks emboldened by its recent rural poll successes and the Adhikari family's defection to the saffron camp, the TMC seems to be counting on its grassroots connections and the state's welfare schemes which the party believes have attained last-mile connectivity with the electorate. Located in Purba Medinipur district, the Kanthi seat exemplifies dynasty politics through the influence of the state's Leader of Opposition Suvendu Adhikari, whose family members have held



other constituencies of the state, featuring a distinctly bipolar electoral landscape where voters face a clear choice between supporting the BJP and its national agenda or favouring the TMC government in Bengal and its welfare schemes. "In Kanthi, the binary nature of the contest underscores the significance of the political stakes involved, as voters will weigh their preferences between national and regional priorities. It will be a vote of 'Yes-BJP or No BJP and Yes-TMC or No-TMC'," political analyst Biswanath Chakraborty said. Known for its fluctuating political affiliations, Kanthi has moved on from being an erstwhile CPI(M) stronghold to a TMC bastion and, more recently, to a key political arena of the BJP. The initial transformation from the Left to the TMC was spurred by the 2007

Nandigram anti-land acquisition movement. The significant shift was driven by a grassroots uprising that followed strong disillusionment with CPI(M)'s land acquisition policies. Since then the Adhikaris, led by the family patriarch Sisir Adhikari and his sons Suvendu, Dibyendu, and Soumendu, have held key political positions within the TMC in the region. A dramatic shift occurred in December 2020, barely months ahead of the state assembly polls, when Suvendu defected from the TMC to the BJP. This move significantly altered the political balance of Kanthi and Purba Medinipur. Suvendu's departure from the TMC meant not just the loss of a key leader of Mamata Banerjee's party but also the transfer of a considerable support base to the BJP.

# Latur admin urges LS poll candidates to adhere to EC guidelines during vote counting on June 4

**PTI ■ LATUR**  
 The Latur district administration has sought cooperation from all candidates who contested the Lok Sabha polls from here and representatives of various political parties during the counting of votes on June 4. Latur Collector Varsha Thakur-Ghughe held a meeting at her office on Tuesday and appealed to all the candidates and representatives of the political parties to adhere to guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India regarding the counting process. Guideline handbooks for the election representatives were distributed on the occasion. The collector said the district administration here in Maharashtra has completed preparations for the counting of votes. All candidates are requested to inform the collector's office



about names of their representatives for counting. The representatives should be imparted training on the counting process and mobile phone is not allowed at the counting venue, the collector said. The Election Commission of India has appointed two observers for the counting process, she said.

**PTI ■ BHUBANESWAR**  
 Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to visit Odisha on May 29, aiming to provide a final boost to BJP's electioneering efforts in the state, party sources said. Modi's upcoming visit will include addresses at two election rallies in Balasore and Kendrapada Parliamentary constituencies, BJP's election in-charge for Odisha, Vijay Pal Singh Tomar said. This will mark Modi's fourth visit to Odisha within a month, highlighting BJP's concerted efforts to strengthen its electoral prospects in the state. Previously, the PM visited Odisha on May 6, 10, and 19, during which he addressed seven election rallies and held two road shows in Bhubaneswar and Puri.

# Vikramaditya, Kangana trade charges over black flag protest against her

**PTI ■ MANDI/SHIMLA**  
 Trading barbs over black flags shown to the BJP's Lok Sabha candidate from Mandi Kangana Ranaut in Lahaul and Spiti's Kaza two days back, the Congress' Vikramaditya Singh targeted the actor Wednesday over her remark against the Dalai Lama from April last year. "People of the tribal area worship Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama as their God and if someone passes any remarks against their God, they will surely not like it and protest," Singh, who contesting the election against Ranaut, said in Mandi in response to a question. Hitting back at Singh, Ranaut alleged that the Congress was behind the protest against her. The Congress has stooped to

hooliganism and the Kaza incident would prove to be the last nail in its coffin and contribute to her winning margin, the BJP candidate added. "I feel sad to see such hooliganism which reflects the Congress' character... People have seen the true face of the Congress, which is indulging in violence and hooliganism," she told media persons in Lahaul and Spiti's Udaipur. Singh, however, said his party had nothing to do with the incident and accused the BJP of blaming the Congress as it was losing the elections. They were referring to



black flags being shown to Ranaut by local people and Congress workers in Kaza on Monday. The Congress workers raised anti-Kangana slogans — "Kangana, go back, Kangana Vangana nahi chalegi", apparently enraged over her remarks on the Tibetan spiritual leader. Ranaut had in April last year tweeted a meme featuring the Dalai Lama that said, "The Dalai Lama receives a warm welcome at the White House". The photoshopped picture in the tweet showed the Dalai Lama sticking his tongue out with US President Joe Biden with a comment — Both of them have the same illness. Definitely, they could be friends. Following this, a group of

Buddhists staged a dharna outside her office in Mumbai. Ranaut later apologised, saying she did not mean to hurt anyone and that it was a harmless joke about Biden being friends with the Dalai Lama. After Ranaut faced the protest in Kaza on Monday, the Himachal Pradesh BJP filed a complaint with the state chief electoral officer. The party alleged that stones were pelted at Ranaut's carcade and party worker was injured. It also demanded the transfer of election officials and an investigation into the incident as both the BJP and the Congress were given permission to hold rallies adjacent to each other. However, Lahaul and Spiti SP Mayank Chowdhary told PTI that workers of both the BJP and the

Listing his priorities for the Mandi parliamentary constituency, Vikramaditya Singh, the son of former chief minister Virbhadra Singh and Himachal Congress chief Pratibha Singh, said his focus would be on bringing the municipal corporation of Mandi under the Smart City project and the construction of the Bhubhu Jot and Jalori Jot tunnels and the Kullu Medical College.





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Warcraft for all

Project Udbhav celebrates India's rich heritage in military statecraft and makes it citizen-inclusive

The adage, "If you want peace, be prepared for war," reflects a longstanding philosophy in India. Historically, India has maintained peace while staying strong, refraining from warmongering unless provoked. This approach stems from ancient Indian wisdom, emphasising the importance of advancement in warfare to deter any potential threats. India's rich and ancient heritage in military statecraft, rooted in the Vedas, Puranas and the Mahabharata, forms a significant yet often overlooked aspect of its cultural legacy. The Army's Project Udbhav aims to bring this historical wealth into the public eye, engaging citizens in the defence domain and fostering a deeper understanding of India's strategic and military traditions. The Vedas, among the oldest sacred texts, provide early references to warfare, strategy and the ethical dimensions of combat. The Puranas, a genre of ancient Indian literature, elaborated on the principles of statecraft and warfare. Texts like the Vishnu Purana and Agni Purana offer insights into military organisation, the roles and responsibilities of warriors and the strategic use of resources. The Mahabharata, one of the greatest epics in world literature, is a treasure trove of military wisdom. The epic not only narrates the Kurukshetra war but also delves into detailed discussions on strategy, the art of war and the moral dilemmas faced by warriors.

Other ancient Indian texts offer timeless wisdom adaptable to modern defence strategies, such as intelligence, psychological warfare and ethical conduct. Launched last year, Project Udbhav delves deep into these ancient texts and aims to promote indigenous discourse in the Army by integrating India's ancient strategic acumen into contemporary military domain, ensuring that the force remains future-ready. It is also an endeavour to involve our citizens and educate them about warfare for any eventuality. Involving citizens in understanding warfare and being prepared is crucial for several reasons. It fosters national pride and identity by highlighting India's intellectual and strategic achievements, countering one-dimensional portrayals of its history. Under Project Udbhav, workshops, seminars and online courses will educate citizens about ancient Indian military texts and their modern relevance. Collaborations with universities and research institutions will ensure academic rigour and accessibility. Additionally, a series of books, documentaries and articles will highlight various aspects of Indian military statecraft, including translations and commentaries on key texts for a broader audience. Project Udbhav is laudable as it represents an endeavour to weave a strategic vocabulary and conceptual framework deeply embedded in India's philosophical and cultural heritage. This initiative underscores the importance of understanding and valuing the rich military heritage that has shaped India's strategic culture, offering invaluable lessons for contemporary and future defence strategies. It is indeed a praiseworthy effort to revive ancient wisdom lest it is lost.



Weaver birds build a nest on a tree, in Nadia. P.T.I.

### PICTALK

# Epic election battle enters decisive phase



SIDHARTH MISHRA

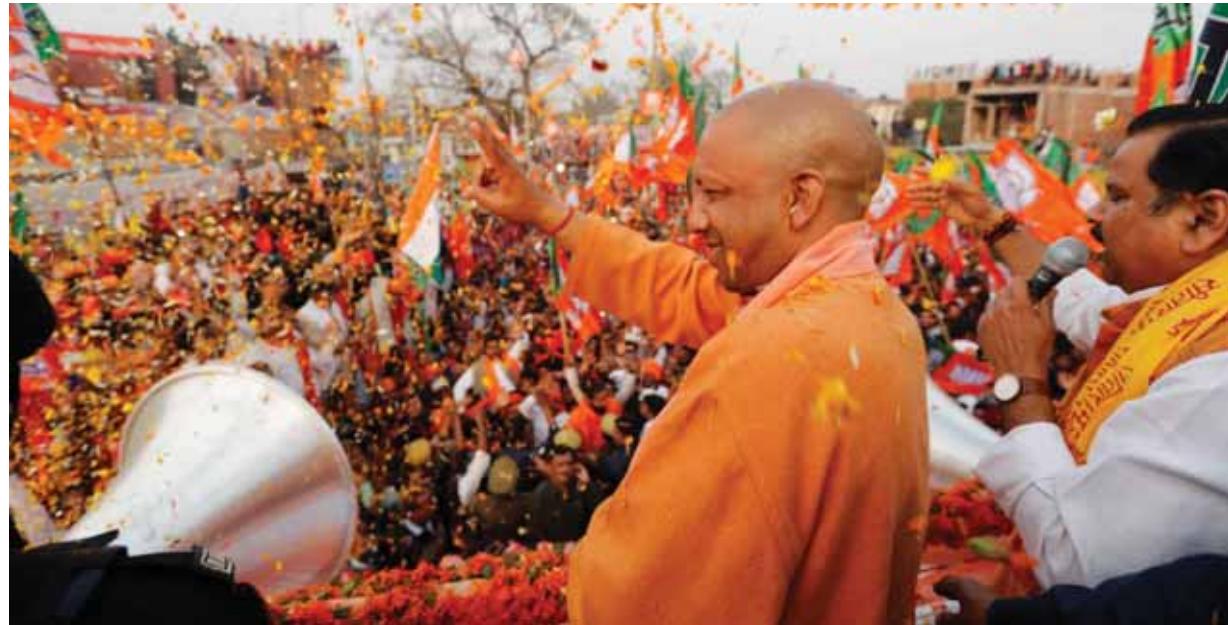
The ultimate battleground is UP, where Yogi Adityanath's unwavering leadership is crucial in the BJP's fight to maintain its stronghold

Another 10 days to go and the two-month-long election process would be over. These elections would be remembered for the spearhead of the ruling party, Narendra Modi and of the opposition, Rahul Gandhi battling the heat and dust of the famed Indian summer to spur their cadres to give the best performance.

In the national media, what's being discussed is the punishing schedule of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president JP Nadda trying to match him with almost equal vigour. From the opposition side, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge has ensured to create the perspective that the campaign just did not rest on the shoulders of the Gandhi family.

In any war, there always is a clinching battle that decides who won and who lost. In World War II, the Battle for Berlin proved to be the most crucial. It's the image of the Soviet soldiers putting the flag of the USSR on the Reichstag in Berlin in May 1945 which marked the defeat of Germany under Adolf Hitler.

Similarly, the general elections of 2024 will always be remembered and will be decided on who wins the battle of Uttar Pradesh. With 80 seats, Uttar Pradesh is the citadel of the BJP monolith, which has a dominant presence in the Hindi heartland States of Bihar, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Haryana. Unlike MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Haryana, in Uttar Pradesh the BJP is not in a direct contest with the Congress but a strong regional outfit — Samajwadi Party. UP also cannot be compared to Bihar, where it's fighting another strong regional party — the Rashtriya Janata Dal but in the companionship of another strong regional outfit — the Janata Dal (United). Thus in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP is completely on its own with nowhere else to look forward to but its cadres and leaders. Here the role of Uttar Pradesh chief



minister Yogi Adityanath becomes crucial. The Mahanth of the Goraknath Math has been in campaign mode ever since he retained power with a thumping majority in 2022.

He first delivered the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The consecration of the idol at Ramlalla temple in January this year has been the biggest-ever achievement of the right-wing schema in the country. This would not have been possible but for the determined, firm and passionate execution of the construction plan by the Uttar Pradesh Government of not just the temple complex but the whole of the city of Ayodhya.

The second has been to galvanise the cadres and keep them functioning for a full two months to ensure that the rivals are stopped and checked in their determined assault. He started the polls campaign with the Prabudh Jan Sammelan on March 27 and would continue it till May-end the last phase of polling.

Prime Minister Modi's campaign has been faulted several times and has also caused concern among his supporters for allowing the achieve-

ments of the past ten years to be pushed to the background in pursuing a very polarising agenda. The campaign has not aligned with Modi's espousal of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas" (Collective Efforts, Inclusive Growth, Everyone's Trust) slogan, which encapsulates an inclusive approach aimed at fostering economic growth and social cohesion.

Prime Minister's initiatives, such as Make in India, Digital India and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), which underscore his commitment to modernising India's economy and infrastructure, have seldom found space in his speeches. This has somewhere allowed the opposition to attack the Government. On the other hand, Yogi Adityanath, who in the past seven years has combined his vision with a strong emphasis on law and order and cultural nationalism (Hindutva), has continued to keep his campaign on the same track. His leadership in Uttar Pradesh is characterised by a drive to restore cultural heritage and end minority appeasement, as seen in initiatives like the grand celebration of Diwali in Ayodhya and the renam-

ing of places to reflect their historical Hindu significance.

The lynchpin of his governance has been the emphasis on strict law enforcement, aiming to improve safety and reduce crime, which resonates even with many of his non-Hindu constituents. His determined perusal of anti-crime drives has found a fan following that goes beyond the traditional Hindutva admirers. Coming back to the battle of Uttar Pradesh, it would take the collective strength of the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Uttar Pradesh chief minister to make the BJP bandwagon have a safe journey to the national Capital. Modi and Yogi are both distinct personalities and both have significantly impacted Indian politics and governance, albeit in different ways. On June 4, in the event of the BJP unfurling its flag, the contributions of the Uttar Pradesh chief minister would as much be accounted for as that of the Prime Minister.

(The writer is the author and president of The Centre for Reforms, Development & Justice; views expressed are personal)



YOGI ADITYANATH, WHO IN THE PAST SEVEN YEARS HAS COMBINED HIS VISION WITH A STRONG EMPHASIS ON LAW AND ORDER AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM (HINDUTVA), HAS CONTINUED TO KEEP HIS CAMPAIGN ON THE SAME TRACK

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### AMOEBIA KILLS

Madam — Strange are the ways of meeting death for a young soul. A five-year-old girl has died of brain-eating amoeba after taking a bath in a pond in Malappuram district of Kerala. She was undergoing treatment at the Kozhikode Medical College of Institute of Maternal and Child Health. She had taken a dip in the pond on May 1 and started showing symptoms of fever, headache and vomiting on May 10. The girl, afflicted by amoebic meningoencephalitis, a rare brain infection caused by a free-living amoeba found in contaminated waters. Still waters are dangerous. Don't let go.

This is not the first case reported. Amebiasis is an intestinal (bowel) illness caused by a microscopic (tiny) parasite called Entamoeba histolytica, which is spread through human feces (poop). Often there are no symptoms, but sometimes it causes diarrhoea (loose stool/poop), nausea (a feeling of sickness in the stomach) and weight loss. The main symptoms of the disease are fever, headache, vomiting and seizures. All infected patients have lost their lives due to the disease so far, as the mortality rate for this rare brain infection is 100 percent.

Jayanthi Subramaniam | Mumbai

### DRONES IN AGRICULTURE

Madam — Apropos the article, "Promise and challenges of drones in agriculture", published on May 20, this is my response. Drones, or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) are becoming increasingly popular in India's agricultural sector. Drones offer a range of benefits to farmers, like improved efficiency and enhanced crop yields. However, some challenges may hinder the adoption of drone technology such as fear of job loss, lack of knowledge and training and regulatory barriers. Drones can capture high-resolution images and provide information on crop health, growth and yield.

### Leadership vacuum in Iran



Apropos to the front page article, "Iran Presidies in chopper crash after stinging Israel," published on May 21. The shocking death of the President in a helicopter crash had left Iran in the lurch and uncertainty from

all sides. For the last three years, after he took the Presidential position in 2021, Mr Raisi has managed to frame Iran as a Shia Muslim leader block of the world with his conservative cleric ideology.

His sudden death had created a leadership vacuum in Iran in the devil's time. The US and Israel are among the direct culprits of Tehran's current situation, despite their denial on personal grounds respectively. Iran needs time to cope with all the big losses it has suffered recently, according to the according to the President, Foreign Minister and other key authorities. The recent death incident had scratched the old scars of Iran when it lost its Revolutionary Guard General Qasem Soleimani. Iran has been a victim of targeted killings especially for VVIPs, ever since its bitter relationship with the US over the last two decades. Time will heal everything itself, the domestic and international uncertainty will shed away for Iran with time and normalcy will be restored.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

This can help farmers to identify issues early and take corrective measures to optimise their inputs and outputs. But, drones are expensive and many farmers may not have the financial resources to invest in this technology. Hence, there is a need for more subsidies incentives and economical financing options to make drones more affordable and attractive to farmers. It requires a coordinated effort from the Government, the industry, farmers and the civil society to create a conducive and supportive environment for the use of drones in agriculture. There is little doubt that drones can be a powerful tool for transforming Indian agriculture and ensuring the country's food security and prosperity.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

### MUSEUMS PRESERVE HISTORY

Madam — Apropos of the article "Museums are pillars of culture and education," published on May 21. Museums

are an inevitable part of our lives as they depict culture, history and artefacts. They tell us about the evolution of man and let us get familiar with the historical and scientific facts as well. But these days, people, especially children, hardly show interest in visiting museums as they find it boring. The educational institutions must include visits to museums in the curriculum to enable students to broaden their horizons and get valuable knowledge. Museums are a great source of understanding our civilisation, culture and heritage and help explore various branches of research work. The Government should take the initiative to help the masses visit museums as they are the storehouses for preserving our ancient history and heritage.

Abhilasha Gupta | Mohali

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

# Fighting age fraud for Indian football's integrity



ARYAN RAJVANSH

From local matches to the big leagues, age falsification distorts fair play and erodes the essence of sportsmanship

The issue of age fraud has plagued Indian football for decades. This persistent dishonesty has not only undermined the integrity of the sport but has also stunted the growth of genuine talent, ultimately leading to India's poor performance at the senior team level.

For the last 50 years, age fraud has been an open secret within the football community. Players, coaches and officials are all aware of it, yet the problem persists unchecked. From local tournaments to State, district and national leagues, age fraud is rampant. Shockingly, it even extends to the national team, where overage players take the field under pretences. This systemic dishonesty is a national disgrace. The lack of genuineness and honesty in our footballing ecosystem is a national embarrassment.

My personal experience highlights this issue vividly. When I was 14, I shared accommodation with much older players-some even 24-yet they possessed fake birth certificates claiming



they were my age. These older players competed alongside me in national leagues, creating an uneven playing field and undermining the credibility of the competitions. This personal encounter opened my eyes to the widespread nature of this fraud. The impact of age fraud is profound. Young, talented players who play by the rules find their careers destroyed by those who cheat the system. Genuine athletes are overshadowed by older players who dominate youth categories through sheer physical C cognitive advantage. This not only robs honest play-

ers of opportunities but also skews the development pathway, leaving India with a senior team that lacks the authentic experience and growth needed to compete internationally.

Cases of age fraud emerge regularly from all corners of the country, yet there is little action from authorities. Until the Government takes decisive measures to eradicate this issue, Indian football will remain stagnant. The current State of affairs ensures that we will never achieve success on the international stage. It is a profound shame and it undermines the spirit of the sport. The rigged system favours deceit over talent

and honesty, leaving the sport in shambles. It is time for a rigorous overhaul, strict enforcement of age verification processes and a zero-tolerance policy towards fraud. Only through a genuine commitment to integrity can Indian football hope to reclaim its lost potential and earn respect on the global stage.

Until then, we must acknowledge this harsh reality: as long as we continue to cheat, we will never truly win. The future of Indian football depends on our ability to foster a culture of honesty and fairness, giving every player a fair chance to shine based on merit, not deception. The future of Indian football hinges on our commitment to integrity. We must give every player a fair chance to succeed based on their true abilities. Until we do, our dreams of footballing glory will remain just that—dreams. The time for change is now, for the sake of our sport and the generations of players to come. (The writer is a football coach; views are personal)





## FIRST COLUMN

## DELETERIOUS EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE GASLIGHTING

It is a menace that undermines individuals' perceptions, beliefs and reality



SAKSHI SETHI

In the network of modern workplaces, emerges a shadowy spectre, threatening the very fabric of organisational culture and well-being - Gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation in which one person seeks to undermine another person's perceptions, beliefs or reality often done regularly or subtly making the victim doubt their perception, memories or sanity by shifting blame or responsibility onto the victim.

Gaslighting can create a hostile work environment where employees feel anxious and confused and at times even question their competence causing a detrimental effect on themselves, their teams and organisational culture. It is a form of psychological manipulation that can have serious consequences for the well-being and productivity of those involved. When talked about the workplace, the term Gaslight can manifest in myriad forms, often subtle and insidious. It may begin with seemingly innocuous comments undermining an individual's contributions or abilities and may gradually lead to dealing with small instances of manipulation that escalate over time. Gaslighting tactics often target an individual's sense of self-worth, competence and confidence resulting in significant emotional distress, including feelings of anxiety, depression and confusion. It even isolates victims from their support networks by undermining their relationships with coworkers, friends and even family members.



It is often believed that toxic workplace gaslighting can stem from various causes that are often rooted in systemic issues, interpersonal dynamics or individual motivations such as power imbalances, insecure leadership, lack of accountability, interpersonal conflicts and many more. When communication breaks down, tensions escalate, egos clash and employees/individuals start resorting to gaslighting as a means of gaining leverage or inflicting harm.

Addressing the toxic workplace gaslighting requires a comprehensive approach that involves raising awareness, fostering a culture of respect and accountability and providing support for those impacted. Promoting transparency, accountability and psychological safety in organisations is crucial to recognise toxic gaslighting behaviour effectively.

Undoubtedly, workplace gaslighting thrives on power imbalances and psychological manipulation. Victims of gaslighting suffer immense stress, anxiety and identity erosion. Prolonged exposure leads to physical health issues like headaches, GI problems and sleep disturbances, weakening immunity and increasing illness risks.

It becomes crucial for the victims to first recognise and validate their experiences, refusing to internalise the gaslighter's manipulations. The use of assertive communication techniques, such as "I" Statements and boundary-setting, can help individuals confront gaslighting behaviour while preserving their self-esteem and dignity. Additionally, fostering a culture of accountability and transparency within organisations empowers employees to speak out against gaslighting tactics without fear of reprisal. Remember, when personal gain takes precedence over ethical conduct, gaslighting may become a tempting strategy. The only way that may benefit the victims of gaslighting is by seeking support from trusted colleagues, mentors or mental health professionals. By creating a workplace culture that promotes open communication, respect and accountability can the organisation help prevent gaslighting and other forms of manipulation from taking hold as left unchecked, it can inflict lasting psychological harm, exacerbating issues of mental health and well-being in the workplace.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

## Do not withdraw capital support for oil PSUs



UTTAM GUPTA

The Government slashes equity infusions for three major oil sector CPSUs by 50 per cent, contradicting its 2023-24 budget commitments



In the Budget for the financial year 2023-24 (April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024) presented on February 1 last year, the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced an equity infusion of Rs 30,000 crore in three Central public sector undertakings (CPSUs) viz. Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL), are majority-owned by the Government of India (GOI). She had also proposed Rs 5,000 crore for buying crude oil to bolster its strategic reserves (SRs) in underground storages at Mangalore in Karnataka and Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. The equity infusions in IOCL/BPCL/HPCL were meant to support their capital investment plans for the transition to 'Green Energy' and achieve 'Net Zero' objectives. Net zero refers to a situation where the emissions of polluting gases such as carbon dioxide due to human activities and their removals are in balance over a given period. On the other hand, the allocation for SRs was meant to guard against the possibility of any disruption in its supply.

Under the above, IOCL and BPCL had done necessary spade work including approval by their respective boards for coming up with 'rights issues' of requisite amounts to enable the Union Government to give effect to its capital contribution (albeit by way of equity) promised in the budget. In the case of HPCL, the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) having acquired majority equity shares from the GOI in FY 2017-18 was to come up with the issue of the preferential issue to give effect to the latter's budgetary intention. However, in a big climb down, in November 2023, the Government reduced the amount of equity infusion to the trio by 50 per cent to Rs 15,000 crore even while deferring implementation of the budgetary announcement on the SRs. Meanwhile, the Interim Budget for FY 2024-25 presented by Sitharaman on February 1, 2024, didn't show any allocation for equity infusion for FY 2023-24. The said amount has been earmarked for the FY 2024-25. This was confirmed by Finance Secretary T V

Somanathan at a post-budget press conference. As for SRs, the budget documents do not provide any funds either in the revised estimate for FY 2023-24 or during FY 2024-25.

Why did the Government climb down?

Even as the Ministry of Finance (MoF) hasn't given any reason, it seems the decision was prompted by a significant boost to their profitability during 2023-24. The IOCL posted a standalone net profit of close to Rs 40,000 crore as against a profit of a little over Rs 8000 crore during 2022-23. The BPCL posted a net profit of around Rs 26,500 crore in 2023-24, compared to about Rs 1,850 crore profit during 2022-23. The HPCL posted a profit of around Rs 14,500 crore during 2023-24 against a loss of about Rs 9,000 crore in 2022-23.



JUST BECAUSE DURING FY 2023-24, THEY HAVE IMPROVED THEIR PROFITS DUE TO CONTINUING MODERATION IN THE PRICE OF CRUDE OIL, IT WON'T BE LOGICAL TO TRIM THE PROMISED BUDGETARY SUPPORT

When the companies can generate good profits hence, a good investible surplus for meeting their investment commitments, why do they need the Government's budgetary support? But, there is much more than what meets the eye on a plain reading of the profit numbers. First, out of the net profit, a substantial amount is paid as dividends to the shareholders. For instance, in case IOCL @Rs 7 on a share of Rs 10 each, the payout during 2023-24 on a total of 1,412 crore outstanding shares would be around Rs 10,000 crore.

Second, these undertakings are engaged in the business of refining crude oil to produce a range of finished products such as petrol, diesel, LPG etc besides importing them to meet their demand. That makes their operations highly capital-intensive. Consequently, their investment requirements for expansion and growth are heavy. This is exacerbated by their commitments regarding the transition to 'Green Energy'. While IOCL has decided to

achieve 'Net Zero' by 2040, BPCL and HPCL intend to reach this goal by 2045.

Third, the most potent reason as to why the Government shouldn't backtrack on the capital support once promised to oil PSUs has to do with the loss the latter had suffered during FY 2022-23, courtesy of directions given by the former regarding setting retail prices of petrol and diesel. To understand the full ramifications of such orders, let us look at some basics.

Petrol and diesel were deregulated long back in June 2010 and November 2014 respectively. As a result, oil PSUs got the freedom to fix their retail prices. The price is fixed as refinery-gate price or RGP (import parity price or IPP and export parity price or EPP of the fuel in the ratio of 80:20) plus freight, marketing costs, marketing margin, dealers' commission taxes and duties. Considering that over 85 per cent of India's crude oil needed for making refined products is imported (the balance 15 per cent is sourced from domestic companies such as ONGC, Oil India Limited or OIL) etc, an increase/decrease in its international price should lead to corresponding increase/decrease in the retail price of petrol and diesel but only if the marketing PSUs are allowed to fix the price strictly as per the formula. But, this is rarely done. The Government issues tacit instructions to IOCL/BPCL/HPCL (together, they account for around 90 per cent of the domestic fuel retail network in the country) to fix the retail price. This is driven by extraneous considerations. Ever since the start of the Ukraine war in February 2022, the international price of oil has been on the boil. The average of the basket of crude oil that India imports during April-September 2022 was \$ 103.7 per barrel against the \$90 per barrel that prevailed before the war started. But,

these PSUs were told to keep the price of petrol and diesel unchanged for six months. This led to substantial under-recovery from the sale of these products.

For instance, in June 2022, the price of petrol in Delhi remained at Rs 97 per litre corresponding to the pre-war crude price of US\$ 90 per barrel. This was despite the price of crude jumping to US\$ 116 per barrel which would have required the price to be set at Rs 112 per litre. Consequently, on the sale of petrol during June 2022, the PSUs suffered under-recovery of Rs 15 per litre (112-97).

Cumulatively, the three PSUs incurred a loss of around Rs 40,000 crore during the first half of FY 2022-23. As the crude price started to decrease from October 2022 onward, their finances became a shade better during the second half. For the whole year, they posted a meagre profit of Rs 850 crore. The capital infusion of Rs 30,000 crore proposed in the budget for 2023-24 was meant to help them offset the losses incurred in the previous year.

Just because during FY 2023-24, they have improved their profits due to continuing moderation in the price of crude oil, it won't be logical to trim the promised budgetary support. Moreover, they need some cushion to guard against crude prices moving north yet again; that possibility is not ruled out considering the continuing tense geopolitical situation. For the same reason, the Government shouldn't defer bolstering the strategic buffer of crude oil.

In sync with its emphasis on 'predictability' and 'stability' of the policy, having deregulated petrol and diesel, the Government shouldn't interfere in the process of setting prices by the oil PSUs.

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

## Is AI a game changer or a disruptor in the communication landscape?

Artificial Intelligence has introduced complex dilemmas, balancing data-driven insights with human ingenuity and profoundly impacting various sectors

The growing tentacles of AI have become a push factor for change, innovation and disruption in the borderless world that we live in today. AI tools, processes and its vast architecture have been billed as game changers, influencing a vast range of stakeholders including policymakers, Governments, multi-lateral bodies, agencies and institutions, which are responsible for carving out the road ahead. The debate today hovers around whether AI has become a disruptor or a transformative catalyst leading to a new normal, which is unpredictable, tech-driven and bereft of the necessary human connection. It has disrupted the communication engagement matrix to a terrain that at



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

times is daunting, unpredictable, spontaneous and instant. In the given context, it is important to understand that AI has truly created layers of dilemma, a tug-of-war related to ideas, content, data analysis and the conflict between human minds and data-driven mindsets. We are in a situation perhaps where we over-depend on machines, their learning tools & predictability leading to an

ecosystem that is technology savvy, the behaviour of stakeholders being driven by data metrics and accompanying models and influenced by the power of prediction. The impact of AI has been profound in several areas, as the search for the unknown has grown bigger. A report on India's media and entertainment sector published by EY #Reinventin 2024 mentions that AI can provide an Rs 450 billion boost to the Indian M&E sector by 2027. The report also mentions AI and especially Gen AI - gives it the tools the sector has always dreamed of and can result in a 10 per cent revenue growth and 15 per cent cost efficiency. AI is now used for measuring the effectiveness of campaigns, the growth of cus-

tomised solutions for addressing issues, analysing data for data-driven narratives and stakeholder engagement and changing equations in the context of the client-agency relationship. There is a need to balance human competence with tech tools and the fear of the unknown in the future. For AI to succeed its performance indicators must be based on open, transparent and inclusive. Its tools are re-engineered to reflect the spirit of "Oneness", and "The World is One Family" and the social and economic impact is studied and analysed. As far as outreach is concerned, the need is to balance the technology push that characterises AI outlining its operational efficiency and the creative quotient of human

beings. As a tool for outreach AI supplements outreach with data-focused audience insights which provide practitioners with a feel of audience preferences and behaviours leading to focused and targeted communication strategies. The data processing of the medium also leads to a better and more comprehensive understanding of stakeholder demographics, dynamics, strategy protocols and audience behaviour. There is an urgent need to integrate the communication matrix with the broad themes to ensure a seamless operation of both verticals. AI being futuristic commands the means to create a positive perception of the AI architecture. Some of the themes to be discussed are AI and Machine

Learning in communication networks, AI-powered communication networks: Shaping a greener digital future and including other sectors such as health, environment and education. In all such discussions, the process of communicating the theme will be critical for both policymakers and practitioners. It is also critical that in the era of change, the continuity of technology is weaved with access that is open and democratic. The benefits of positive change must be beneficial to all through the principle of open sourcing; tools, processes, opportunities and community participation. There must be standard operating procedures and processes that ensure the standardisation of algorithms, address

the frailties of human behaviour and integrate the machine and human mind. Technological advancement is only possible if the gap is bridged between the haves and have-nots. AI as a tool for policy formulation and information dissemination should be based on the strong foundations of adaptability, cohesiveness, inclusivity, access and a proper understanding of the complex and diverse social ecosystem of which we are its key constituents. As the impact of AI grows across different terrains, the evolution has to be in sync with human abilities and the irreplaceable human trait that characterises outreach. To ensure a sustainable process, AI needs to follow the five mantras of outreach commu-

nication: Being Receptive, Responsive, Responsible and Reciprocal and Reconcile to the needs and requirements of an ecosystem that believes in equity, equal participation, mutual recognition and collaboration. The success of communication depends on the balance between perception, tools and trust i.e. positioned across different platforms and sectors. A model of this nature will certainly ensure a perfect symphony between AI and the communication landscape bringing forth an effective and lasting communication process.

(The writer is a former civil servant. Views are Personal. Inputs by Vaishnavie Srinivasan and Zoya Ahmad)



# Norway, Ireland and Spain give recognition to Palestinian state

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Norway, Ireland and Spain said on Wednesday they are recognizing a Palestinian state, in a historic but largely symbolic move that deepens Israel's isolation more than seven months into its grinding war against Hamas in Gaza. The announcements came as the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is seeking arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his defense minister and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is considering allegations of genocide that Israel has strenuously denied.

Palestinians welcomed the announcements as an affirmation of their decades-long quest for statehood in east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — territories Israel seized in the 1967 Mideast war and still controls. Israel recalled its ambassadors to the three countries and summoned their envoys, accusing the Europeans of rewarding the militant Hamas group for its October 7 attack that triggered the war. Netanyahu's government, which is opposed to Palestinian statehood, says the conflict can only be resolved through direct negotiations, which last collapsed over 15 years ago.

As if to underline the point, Israel's far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir paid a provocative visit Wednesday to a flashpoint holy site in Jerusalem sacred to Jews and Muslims in a move that could escalate tensions across the region. Ben-Gvir said the visit was a response to the move by the three European countries. "We will not even allow a statement about a Palestinian state," he said.

The Al-Aqsa mosque compound is the third holiest site in Islam, and the hilltop on which it stands is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount.

With their formal recognition, planned for May 28, the three countries will join some 140 — more than two-thirds of the United Nations — that



Demonstrators display Palestinian flags and chant slogans while marching Tuesday in Boston. AP/PTI

have recognized the state of Palestine over the years. The United States and Britain, among others, have backed the idea of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel but say it should come as part of a negotiated settlement. The announcements from Europe came in a swift cascade. Norway, which helped broker the Oslo accords that kicked off the peace process in the 1990s, was the first to announce its decision, with Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store saying "there cannot be peace in the Middle East if there is no recognition."

Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris called it an "historic and important day for Ireland and for Palestine," saying the announcements had been coordinated and that other countries might join "in the weeks ahead."

The international community has long viewed the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel as the only realistic way to resolve the conflict, and in past weeks several European Union countries have indicated they plan to recognize a Palestinian state to further those efforts. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who announced his country's decision before parliament, has spent months touring European and Middle Eastern countries to garner support for recognition, as well as for a possible cease-fire in Gaza.

"This recognition is not against anyone, it is not against the Israeli people," Sanchez said. "It is an act in favor of peace, justice and moral consistency." He said it was clear that Netanyahu "does not have a project for peace," while acknowledging that "the fight against the terrorist group Hamas is legitimate."

Israel's government harshly condemned the decision taken by the three countries. Foreign Minister Israel Katz recalled Israel's ambassadors and summoned the three countries' envoys in Israel. He said they would watch grisly video footage of the October 7 attack. "History will remember that Spain, Norway, and Ireland decided to award a gold medal to Hamas murderers and rapists," he said. He also said the announcement would undermine talks aimed at a cease-fire and hostage release in Gaza that came to a standstill earlier this month.

President Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, welcomed the moves toward recognition, saying they would contribute to efforts to bring about a two-state solution. Hamas also welcomed the decisions and called on other nations to "recognize our legitimate rights and support the struggle of our people for liberation and independence, and ending the Zionist

## 'Israel addresses Biden's concerns over Rafah op'

Cairo (AP): Israel has addressed many of President Joe Biden's concerns over its long-simmering plan to carry out a wide-scale military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah aimed at rooting out Hamas, a senior Biden administration official said Tuesday.

The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and requested anonymity, said that in talks over the weekend with White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan, Israeli officials incorporated many changes into their planning that seem to meet concerns about deepening an operation in an area that has been flooded with Palestinian refugees during the seven-month war. Biden had previously said he opposed a wide-scale operation in Rafah that did not prioritize the safety of innocent Palestinian civilians.

The official said the administration stopped short of green-lighting the Israeli plan but said Israeli officials' altered planning suggested they were taking the American administration's concerns seriously. About 900,000 Palestinians have fled Rafah in recent weeks after the population swelled to about 1.5 million.

occupation of our land." Hamas, which Western countries and Israel view as a terrorist group, does not recognize Israel's existence but has indicated it might agree to a state on the 1967 lines, at least on an interim basis.

The announcements are unlikely to have any impact on the ground. Israel annexed east Jerusalem and considers it part of its capital, and in the occupied West Bank it has built scores of Jewish settlements that are now home to over 5,000,000 Israelis. The settlers have Israeli citizenship, while the 3 million Palestinians in the West Bank live under seemingly open-ended Israeli military rule.

# Singapore Airlines cooperating in severe turbulence probe

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Singapore Airlines on Wednesday said it is fully cooperating with relevant authorities in the investigation into the London to Singapore flight which encountered severe turbulence, leading to the death of one passenger and injuring nearly 60 others. Geoffrey Kitchen, a 73-year-old British passenger, died likely due to a heart attack on the Singapore Airlines (SIA) flight SQ321, operating from London (Heathrow) to Singapore on Tuesday, said Kittipong Kittikachorn, General Manager of Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok, to where the flight was diverted under emergency. Nearly 60 passengers were injured after the flight on May 21 encountered "sudden extreme turbulence over the Irrawaddy Basin at 37,000 feet about 10 hours after departure". The carrier said the remaining

passengers aboard the Boeing 777-300ER aircraft carrying 229 people were examined and treated at the airport.

The SIA is fully cooperating with the relevant authorities in probing this incident, the flag carrier's Chief Executive Officer, Goh Choon Phong, said.

As many as 58 people are still receiving medical treatment in three hospitals in Bangkok, Channel News Asia reported, citing officials at the Samitivej Srinakarin Hospital.

At least 20 injured passengers are being treated in intensive care units, while 38 passengers are receiving in-patient care, the report said.

The Samitivej Srinakarin Hospital has 41 patients, while 15 patients are in the Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital, and two are in Bangkok Hospital, it said. Of the patients in Samitivej Srinakarin Hospital, nine successfully underwent surgery on Tuesday and five more are

expected to undergo surgery on Wednesday, it added.

As many as 131 passengers and 12 crew members, who earlier arrived in Singapore via a relief flight on May 22, were received at Changi Airport by Goh. The SIA, in its latest update, confirmed an additional five passengers and one crew member will return to Singapore on Wednesday.

Another 74 passengers and six crew members, including those receiving medical care and their family members and loved ones who were on the flight, were still in Bangkok.

"For passengers with onward connections, we have rebooked them on alternative flights. We have also arranged hotel accommodation or lounge access for them to rest until their next flight," Singapore's flag carrier said. "On behalf of the Singapore Airlines Board, I extend my deepest condolences to the family and loved

ones of our passenger who passed away on May 21, 2024, in the SQ321 incident. I assure all passengers and crew members who were on board the aircraft that we are committed to supporting them during this difficult time," said Peter Seah, Chairman of Singapore Airlines.

"I also wish to express my gratitude to everyone in Singapore, Thailand, and around the world who are assisting those affected by this incident," Seah said. The nationalities of the passengers are as follows: 56 from Australia, three Indians, two from Canada, one from Germany, two Indonesians, one from Iceland, four from Ireland, one from Israel, 16 from Malaysia, two from Myanmar, 23 from New Zealand, five from the Philippines, 41 Singaporeans, one South Korean, two from Spain, 47 from the United Kingdom, and four from the US.

# UK hails drop in visas as stranded Indian workers appeal for help

PTI ■ LONDON

The UK government on Wednesday hailed a significant drop in healthcare visa applications following its restrictions on family dependants, even as hundreds of Indian care workers who find themselves unfairly stranded in the country appeal for help.

Latest Home Office statistics reveal a 76 per cent drop in overseas workers applying for jobs in the UK's care sector and a 58 per cent fall in family dependents in the Health and Care visa category in the first full month since restrictions were in place, compared with April 2023. Indian nationals topped the Health and Care visa grants last year. The number of dependants, or spouses and children, in the student visa category, also registered a significant drop of 79 per cent over the same period since those new rules came into force earlier this year. "This monthly data is the most

up-to-date picture of visa levels, showing that on current trajectories legal migration continues to fall across key routes," said UK Home Secretary James Cleverly.

"The British people deserve an immigration system that puts their interests first. Our approach is about control and fairness; to the highly skilled coming here who deserve a decent wage, to taxpayers who shouldn't be relied on to support them, and to British workers who shouldn't be undercut," he said.

The monthly data was released to reflect the impact of changes by the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak-led government, which is keen to show falling immigration numbers ahead of a general election later this year. Since March, previously unmonitored care providers in England acting as sponsors for migrants are required to register with industry regulator Care Quality Commission (CQC) — a move the govern-

ment said will address worker exploitation and abuse within the sector.

Indian nationals have topped the Health and Care visa grants, with 38,866 given out last year, and are now facing the brunt of these previously lax rules governing dubious recruitment agencies. "Some of these victims had borrowed thousands of pounds to get the visas and now face deportation for no fault of theirs," said the National Council of Gujarati Organisations (NCGO) UK, which is lobbying on behalf of these workers, many of whom are from Gujarat.

"Some of these agencies are bogus and operate from a hired desk at serviced offices. The majority of them were not checked for their genuineness by the Home Office and were issued with quotas like confetti," said Kanti Nagda of the NCGO UK, which is now seeking a meeting with the Home Secretary to appeal on behalf of these workers.

# Four accused of killing Nijjar appear before Canada court

Ottawa (PTI): Four Indian nationals accused of killing Khalistan separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar last year in Surrey were ordered by a Canadian court to have no contact with several people in the community, as they made their first joint appearance before it in the case that has severely strained ties between India and Canada.

Three of the four suspects — Karan Brar (22), Kamalpreet Singh (22) and 28-year-old Karanpreet Singh — appeared in person for the first time in B.C. Provincial Court in Surrey. The fourth suspect — Amandeep Singh, 22, — appeared by video link. Amandeep Singh remains in custody in Ontario where he was facing unrelated weapons offences before being arrested on May 10 for Nijjar's killing. Judge Mark Jette spoke to the men through an interpreter as he placed them under a no-contact order, before adjourning until the suspects' next appearance on June 25, CBC News reported.

Prosecutor Marcel Daigle said the time until the next hearing will allow the Crown to fulfill its evidentiary disclosure obligations to the suspects' lawyers. Those appearing in person wore red prison sweatsuits as they entered the courtroom.

Richard Fowler, the lawyer representing Karan Brar, told the Vancouver Sun, "it's completely understandable given the context why there is an enormous amount of community interest in this case. That level of community interest makes me...to ensure that those charged with these offences have a fair trial." Attendees at the latest hearing for the men were searched before entering the courthouse, while the supporters of Nijjar held a protest outside.

Sheriffs at the hearing placed people's phones in plastic zipper bags and kept them outside the courtroom in plastic bins, with the judge warning observers that recording audio and taking pictures was prohibited, the report added. Nijjar, 45, was killed outside Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia on June 18, 2023.

# Iran's supreme leader prays for late president, others

AP ■ DUBAI

Iran's supreme leader prayed Wednesday over the coffins of the country's late president, foreign minister and other officials who were killed in a helicopter crash earlier this week. Later, hundreds of thousands of people followed a procession honouring the dead down Tehran's main boulevard.

Iran's Shiite theocracy views mass demonstrations as crucial evidence of its legitimacy and the people's support. Still, Wednesday's funeral service for President Ebrahim Raisi and others saw a turnout that onlookers described as noticeably lower than the 2020 procession honouring Revolutionary Guard general Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad. Many of the participants said they came to Tehran for the ceremony from other cities and towns across the Islamic Republic, an indication of how those in Iran's capital viewed Raisi, who won the presidency in a record low turnout and later oversaw repeated crackdowns on all dissent — including in the



Iransians follow a truck carrying coffins of the late President Ebrahim Raisi and his companions who were killed in a helicopter crash on Sunday in a mountainous region of the country's northwest, during a funeral ceremony for them in Tehran, Iran, Wednesday. AP/PTI

wake of the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini that sparked street protests over Iran's mandatory hijab, or headscarf. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who openly wept for Soleimani, also remained composed while reciting the stan-

dard prayer for the dead. "Oh Allah, we didn't see anything but good from him," Khamenei said in Arabic, the language of Islam's holy book, the Quran. He soon left and the crowd inside rushed to the front, reaching out to touch the

coffins. Iran's acting president, Mohammad Mokhber, stood nearby and openly cried.

The death of Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and six others in the crash on Sunday comes at a politically sensitive moment for Iran, both at home and abroad.

Raisi, who was 63, had been discussed as a possible successor to the position among Iran's political elite — particularly one who is a Shiite cleric, like Raisi. During Raisi's term in office, Iran launched an unprecedented attack on Israel last month as its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip rages on. Iran has supported Hamas through-

out the war and provided weaponry to the militants.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh attended the prayers Wednesday morning, just two days after the International Criminal Court's prosecutor said he'd seek an arrest warrant for him and others over the October 7 attack that sparked the latest Israel-Hamas war. In the unprecedented assault on southern Israel, Hamas-led militants killed 1,200 people and seized 250 hostages. The ICC prosecutor is also seeking arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant for their conduct in the war, which has seen more than 35,000 Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip and also hundreds in the West Bank.

Haniyeh recounted meeting Raisi earlier this year in Tehran during Ramadan, the holy Muslim fasting month, and heard the president say the Palestinian issue remains the key one for the Muslim world. He also described Raisi calling the October 7 attack an "earthquake in the heart of the Zionist entity."

# Nepalese climber Kami Rita climbs Everest for 30th time

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Nepal's veteran summiteer Kami Rita Sherpa made history on Wednesday by scaling Mt Everest for the 30th time, breaking his own record that he made 10 days ago for the highest number of ascents on the world's highest peak.

The 54-year-old legendary mountaineer reached the 8,849-metre peak at 7:49 am local time, according to Tashi Lakpa Sherpa, Chief Executive Officer at the 14 Peaks Expedition high-altitude sports company.

Kami summited the peak for the 29th time only 10 days ago. "He has scaled Everest on May 12 for the 29th time," The Himalayan Times newspaper quoted Tashi Lakpa as saying.



Kami, a senior mountain guide at the 14 Peaks Expedition and Seven Summit Treks, climbed Mt Everest for the first time in May 1994, the report said. He was born on January 17, 1970, and his mountaineering journey began in 1992 when he joined an expedition to the highest peak as a supporting staff. Kami developed a deep passion for climbing from a young age and has been scal-

ing mountains for over two decades, Tashi Lakpa said.

Besides Mt Everest, he has also conquered Mt K2, Cho Oyu, Lhotse, and Manaslu.

Last year, he successfully scaled Mt Everest for the 27th and 28th times in the same season.

His closest rival, 46-year-old Pasand Dawa Sherpa of Solukhumbu, also completed his 27th summit of Everest last year. Altogether, 414 climbers from 41 expeditions have acquired permission to scale Everest this season. Official data from 2023 showed that since 1953's Hillary-Norgay summit, around 7,000 mountaineers have successfully scaled Mt Everest while over 300 have lost their lives.

# Trump hush money trial concludes without his testimony

AP ■ NEW YORK

Donald Trump's hush money trial moved into a new phase Tuesday, drawing closer to the moment when the jury will begin deciding his fate after testimony concluded without the former president taking the stand in his own defense.

"Your honor, the defense rests," Trump lawyer Todd Blanche told the judge. Trump's team ended with a former federal prosecutor who was called to attack the credibility of the prosecution's key witness, one of two people summoned to the stand by the defense. The Manhattan district attorney's office called 20 witnesses over 15 days of testimony before resting its case Monday.

The jury was sent home for a week, until May 28, when closing arguments are expected, but the attorneys returned to the courtroom to debate how the judge will instruct jurors on deliberations, a sort of road map meant to help them apply the law to the evidence and testimony. The two sides haggled over word choices, legal phrases and how to describe various campaign-related issues.

Trump, the first former American president to be tried criminally, did not answer questions about why he did not testify.

Trump had previously said he wanted to take the witness stand in his own defense, but there was no requirement or even expectation that he do so. Defendants routinely decline to testify. His attorneys, instead of mounting an effort to demonstrate Trump's innocence to jurors, focused on attacking the

credibility of the prosecution witnesses. That's a routine defense strategy; the burden of proof in a criminal case lies with the prosecution. The defense doesn't have to prove a thing.

Yet even as Trump denounces the trial as a politically motivated travesty of justice, he has been working to turn the proceedings into an offshoot of his presidential campaign. He's capitalized on the trial as a fundraising pitch, used his time in front of the cameras to criticize President Joe Biden and showcased a parade of his own political supporters.

Prosecutors have accused the presumptive Republican presidential nominee of a scheme to scoop up and bury negative stories in an illegal effort to influence the 2016 presidential election. Trump has pleaded

not guilty to falsifying business records to conceal the alleged scheme and denied any wrongdoing. It's the first of Trump's four criminal cases to go to trial, and quite possibly the only one before the 2024 presidential election.

"They have no case," Trump said outside court. "There's no crime."

He also again attacked the prosecutor, despite repeated warnings from Judge Juan M. Merchan not to violate a gag order that bars him from publicly commenting on witnesses, prosecutors, court staff or the judge's family.

Jurors have been given a lesson on the underbelly of the tabloid business world, where Trump allies at the National Enquirer launched a plan to keep seamy, sometimes outrageous stories about Trump out of the public

eye by paying tens of thousands of dollars to "catch and kill" them. They watched as a porn actress, Stormy Daniels, recounted in discomfiting detail an alleged sexual encounter with Trump in a hotel room. Trump says nothing sexual happened between them.

And they sat intently in the jury box as Trump's former-lawyer-turned-foe Michel Cohen placed Trump in the middle of the scheme to buy Daniels' story to keep it from going public in the waning weeks before the 2016 presidential election. During that time, Republicans were wringing their hands in distress over the potential political fallout from the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape, where Trump bragged about grabbing women sexually without asking permission.



# Russian attacks on Ukraine power grid hit Kyiv with blackouts

AP ■ KYIV

Sustained Russian attacks on Ukraine's power grid in recent weeks have forced leaders of the war-ravaged country to institute nationwide rolling blackouts. Without adequate air defences to counter assaults and allow for repairs, though, the shortages could still worsen as need spikes in late summer and the bitter-cold winter. The Russian airstrikes targeting the grid since March have meant blackouts have even returned to the capital, Kyiv, which hadn't experienced them since the first year of the war. Among the strikes were an April barrage that damaged Kyiv's largest thermal power plant and a massive attack on May 8 that targeted power generation and transmission facilities in several regions. In all, half of Ukraine's energy system was damaged, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said. Entire apartment blocks in the capital went dark. The city's

military administration said at least 10 per cent of consumers were disconnected. For many, it is a taste of what might be in store if Ukraine doesn't find other electricity sources before winter. With no end in sight to the attacks on the power grid and without a way to adequately defend against them, there are no quick fixes to the electricity shortages, Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko explained. Ukraine is appealing to Western allies for more air defence systems and spare parts to fix its Soviet-era plants. "With each attack we lose additional power generation, so it just goes minus, minus, minus," Halushchenko said on Tuesday while standing outside a coal-fired plant in central Ukraine that was destroyed in an April 11 attack. Any efforts to repair the plant would be futile until the military can defend it from another attack. "Should we repair (power stations) just for them

(Russians) to renew strikes while we are unable to defend ourselves?" the minister asked. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's joined him on the plant visit, underscoring Ukraine's desperation to close the power gap as quickly as possible. The first major test of the grid will come in July and August, when consumption can mirror levels in the sub-freezing winter months, the minister said. By mid-May, Kyiv's residents began to feel the consequences of Russia's attacks. A cold snap drove up consumption, forcing Ukraine, the main transmission system operator, to introduce controlled blackouts throughout the country. Ukraine can't generate enough power to cover evening peaks, and the shortage is greater than the country's ability to import electricity from Poland, Slovakia and Romania. The April 11 attack on the plant destroyed generators, transformers and turbines — every

necessary part to generate electricity, said Yevhen Harkavyi, the technical director of Centerenergo, which operates the plant. Five missiles hit the facility that day, and workers were still clearing away rubble on Tuesday as snow-like tufts of poplar cotton fell through a hole in the roof. The plan for winter is to restore power generation as much as possible, said Harkavyi. How that will happen isn't clear, he conceded. "The situation is already too difficult." Ukraine is hoping to acquire parts from long-decommissioned German plants. Harkavyi said Ukrainian teams recently went to Germany to evaluate the equipment, which was taken offline because it doesn't meet European Union environmental standards. It remains to be seen how willing European allies will be to invest in Ukraine's coal-fuelled energy sector given their own green goals.

# Pak court rejects plea to disqualify Imran for concealing alleged daughter's name in 2018 nomination papers

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A Pakistani court has rejected a petition seeking the disqualification of former prime minister Imran Khan for concealing his alleged daughter Tyrian White while submitting his nomination papers for the 2018 general elections. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) took up the petition on Tuesday after a gap of almost a year, the Dawn newspaper reported. The petition alleged that the 71-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party founder had not disclosed his alleged daughter — Tyrian White — in his nomination papers for contesting the 2018 general elections. Khan's PTI party won the 2018 general elections, and the former cricketer-turned-politician served as the prime minister of Pakistan from August 2018 to April 2022. The IHC rejected the petition after noting that a three-judge bench had previously dismissed it, the



report said. Justice Tariq Mehmood Jahangiri read the opinion of the two judges given last year and ruled that the case has already been dismissed. On May 10, 2023, a three-member bench of the court

hearing the case was dissolved by IHC Chief Justice Aamer Farooq after the opinion of two of the three judges — supporting the petition's dismissal — was uploaded on the court's website. The majority judgement was

deleted from the website minutes after it was uploaded, and the IHC chief justice dissolved the bench. Khan's party welcomed the judgement, saying that the two judges had already decided the case, but the IHC chief justice "tried to keep it alive on technicalities". Senior lawyers questioned the constitution of a fresh bench when the case had been decided earlier, according to the report. The petition said that even though Khan had three children, he had mentioned only two in the papers and concealed the existence of his third child. It also alleged that Khan did not marry his alleged girlfriend Sita White, mother of Tyrian, because her father told Khan that he would not get a "penny" from his wealth if he married Sita. The PTI founder initially joined the proceedings but later backtracked after he was asked to undergo a blood test, it added.

# Vietnam's top security official confirmed as president

AP ■ BANGKOK

Vietnam's top security official To Lam was confirmed on Wednesday as the nation's new president. He oversaw police and intelligence operations over a period when rights groups say basic liberties have been systematically suppressed, and its secret service was accused of violating international law. Lam was confirmed by Vietnam's National Assembly after his predecessor resigned amid an ongoing anti-corruption campaign that has shaken the country's political establishment and business elites and has resulted in multiple top-level changes in government. Vietnam's presidency is largely ceremonial, but his new role as head of state puts the 66-year-old in a "very strong position" to become the next Communist Party general secretary, the most important political position in the country, said Nguyen Khac Giang, an analyst at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong



was elected to a third term in 2021, but at age 80, he may not seek another term after 2026. Trong is an ideologue who views corruption as the gravest threat facing the party. As Vietnam's top security official, Lam has led Trong's sweeping anti-graft campaign. Lam spent more than four decades in the Ministry of Public Security before becoming the minister in 2016. His rise took place while Vietnam's politburo lost

of six of its 18 members amid the expanding anti-graft campaign, including two former presidents and Vietnam's parliamentary head. Lam was behind many of the investigations into high-profile politicians, said Giang. Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh is seen as the other major contender to possibly succeed Trong, Giang said. The current vice-speaker of Vietnam's parliament was con-

firmed on Monday as the National Assembly speaker after his predecessor, Vuong Dinh Hue, resigned amid the anti-graft campaign. Until his resignation, Hue was also widely seen as a potential successor to Trong. This unprecedented instability in Vietnam's political system has spooked investors as the country tries to position itself as an alternative for companies looking to shift their supply chains away from China. A flood of foreign investment, especially in manufacturing of high-tech products like smartphones and computers, raised expectations it could join the "Four Asian Tigers" — Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, whose economies underwent rapid industrialization and posted high growth rates. But the scandals and uncertainty — including the death sentence for a real estate tycoon accused of embezzling nearly 3 per cent of the country's 2022 GDP — have brought with them uncertainty and bureaucratic reticence to make decisions. Economic growth slipped to 5.1 per cent last year

from 8 per cent in 2022 as exports slowed. During Lam's years heading the Public Security Ministry, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other watchdog organisations have strongly criticised Vietnam for its harassment and intimidation of critics. In 2021, courts convicted at least 32 people for posting critical opinions about the government and sentenced them to multiple years in prison, while police arrested at least 26 others on fabricated charges, according to Human Rights Watch. Under Tam's watch as Vietnam's top security boss, civil society faced further curbs, foreign aid restrictions introduced in 2021 were tightened in 2023, the country jailed climate activists, and laws were introduced to censor social media, said Ben Swanton of The 88 Project, a group that advocates for freedom of expression in Vietnam. "With To Lam's ascent to the presidency, Vietnam is now a literal police state," said Swanton, adding that the Vietnamese ruling Politburo was now domi-

nated by current and former security officials. He said he expected further intensification of repression and censorship. While Vietnam was under a COVID-19 lockdown in 2021, a video surfaced showing Turkish chef Nusret Gokce, popularly known as Salt Bae, feeding Tam a gold-encrusted steak in London. Despite efforts to censor it, the video went viral, stoking widespread anger from people enduring virus lockdowns that exacerbated economic deprivations. Meantime, a Vietnamese noodle vendor named Bui Tuan Lam, who followed the video with a parody of Salt Bae, was arrested on charges of spreading anti-state propaganda and sentenced to five years in prison. It was also under Lam's tenure as public security minister, in 2017, when German authorities say Vietnamese businessperson and former politician Trinh Xuan Thanh and a companion were abducted and dragged into a van in downtown Berlin, in what officials there called "an unprecedented and flagrant violation of German and international law".

# India, China agree to cooperate in paying in local currency for imports: Maldives

PTI ■ MALE

The Maldives on Wednesday said both India and China have agreed to cooperate in efforts to pay for imports in their respective countries' currency instead of the US dollar, which is likely to help Male save almost 50 per cent of the annual USD 1.5 million imports bill from the two countries. Maldives' Economic Development Minister Mohamed Saeed said he met with the Indian High Commissioner Munu Mahawar two weeks ago, who in turn, said that New Delhi would support and cooperate in arranging for the settlement of import payments in Indian Rupee. Similarly, Saeed said, he received a letter from China's Commerce Ministry, two days ago, in which Beijing provided assurance it will cooperate in allowing the option to settle import payments in Yuan, the Chinese currency, as requested by President Mohamed Muizzu. Annually, Maldives imports goods worth USD 780 million and USD 720 million from India and China respectively, the minister had said in April when he had first announced that the Maldives was discussing with India and China if the island nation can make payments for its imports from the country in Maldivian Rufiyaa. International trade between two countries in local currency is a mutually beneficial mechanism as it helps in saving each other's foreign exchange reserves. Moreover, the move will mark a significant shift away from the dominant use of the US dollar in international transactions. In July 2023, the Government of India declared that Maldives was among the 22 countries that were permitted by the Reserve Bank of India to open Special Rupee Vostro Accounts (SRVAs) as part of efforts to promote bilateral trade in local currencies. News portal Sun.mv on

Wednesday quoted Saeed as speaking with state-run PSM Media: "Maldives imports between USD 600-700 million in commodities from both India and China, each year. Therefore, we import around USD 1.4 billion to USD 1.5 billion in commodities annually, from both markets combined." "We are negotiating with both sides to make arrangements for us so that, for example, for imports from China, the shipping company can bring the invoice and the payment can be settled by converting Maldivian Rufiyaa to their local currency through the banks, instead of US dollar," Saeed said, adding, it will save up to 50 per cent from the annual USD 1.5 million in imports from the two countries. "If we can arrange up to USD 300 million from each country, that means USD 700 million. This means we can eliminate the reliance on US dollars by that amount in the future. That will reduce the demand for dollars. And the future demand for dollars will continue to fall," Saeed was quoted as saying by Sun.mv. Saeed blamed the poor state of finances on the former administration and agreed that challenges persist as foreign countries are still skeptical about the Maldives but "it is slowly improving." The new Maldivian administration has said that the country's economic situation was "alarming", but that the government was implementing strong fiscal reforms to rectify the issue, including stopping printing money. Earlier in April, during campaigning ahead of the parliamentary polls, Saeed had said that if the ruling party was able to secure a majority in Parliament, they would be able to bring "the dollar rate back down to official market values within approximately two years." President Muizzu-led People's National Congress (PNC) secured a clear majority in the 87-member People's Majlis.

# 'Lanka's presidential election first, parliamentary polls later'

PTI ■ COLOMBO

President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Wednesday reiterated his intention to hold the next presidential election this year ahead of the parliamentary election. Sources confirmed that he told the Cabinet meeting earlier in the day that financial allocations have only been reserved so far for the conduct of the presidential poll. Despite speculation that a General Election will precede a Presidential election, Wickremesinghe informed the Cabinet that the Presidential election will be held first this year. According to the Election Act, the presidential election should happen first. The next parliamentary election is not due before August 2025. The Elections Commission earlier this month said the presidential election would be conducted at a date between September 17 and October 16. The ruling Sri Lanka People's Front, commonly known by its Sinhalese name Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP),



which has the current parliamentary majority, had pressed Wickremesinghe to hold the parliamentary election ahead of the presidential poll. Wickremesinghe, 75, is yet to announce his candidacy despite declarations by two other main opposition leaders: Sajith Premadasa the main opposition leader, and the Marxist JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake. Wickremesinghe, from the arch-rival party United National Party (UNP), succeeded SLPP-elected president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to become president for the rest of Rajapaksa's term when the lat-

ter 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. The Rajapaksa administration announced Sri Lanka's first-ever sovereign default as forex shortages caused long queues for essentials and fuel. 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.

# Pak govt forms committee to probe attack on PTI leader

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan's Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar on Wednesday said an inquiry committee has been formed to investigate an attack on a senior leader of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party a day earlier. Terming the attack as "regrettable and sad", the law minister while speaking in a Senate session today said such attacks should not happen. "The government is seriously investigating the attack on Raouf Hasan," Tarar said, according to Geo News. An FIR on charges of murder and attempted murder concerning the attack on Imran Khan's party's Information Secretary Raouf Hasan has been registered at Islamabad's Abpara police station, the Express Tribune newspaper reported. Hasan was allegedly attacked by a group of around four apparently transgender persons in the capital. It drew strong condemnation from his party, however, it remains unclear why the politician was attacked.

# UK lawmaker returns to work as 'bionic MP' after losing his hands and feet to sepsis

London (AP): Britain's fractious politicians shared a rare moment of unity on Wednesday, when a Conservative lawmaker returned to work six months after sepsis put him in a coma and forced the amputation of his hands and feet. As Conservative legislator Craig Mackinlay walked unaided into the House of Commons before the weekly Prime Minister's Questions session, government and opposition lawmakers alike rose in a standing ovation. "As you know, we don't allow clapping," Speaker Lindsay Hoyle said as Mackinlay's wife and 4-year-old daughter watching from the public gallery. "But this is an exception." Mackinlay, 57, said he wants to be known as "the bionic MP." He plans to campaign for greater awareness of the signs of sepsis, and for Britain's state-funded National

Health Service, which treated him and saved his life, to offer better treatment and prosthetics to people who have lost more than one limb. Addressing his fellow lawmakers in the Commons chamber, Mackinlay thanked Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Hoyle for visiting him while he was in hospital. Referring to the speaker's formal black tailcoat, he joked that "the rest of the hospital thought I must be dreadfully ill, because they said that guy's got the funeral director in already." He asked Sunak to ensure the health service would "embed recognition of early signs of sepsis." "If we can stop somebody ending up like this, I would say that is a job well done," Mackinlay said. He also called on health ministers to ensure the "provision of appropriate prosthetics."

# Chinese journalist released from prison after 4 years

AP ■ BANGKOK

Zhang Zhan was released from prison after serving four years for charges related to reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, according to a video statement she released Tuesday, eight days after her sentence ended. Zhang was sentenced to four years in prison on charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," a vaguely defined charge often used in political cases, and served her full term. Yet, on the day of her release, her former lawyers could not reach her or her family. Shanghai police had paid visits to activists and her former lawyers in the



days leading up to her release. In a short video, Zhang said she was taken by police to her brother Zhang Ju's home on May 13, the day she finished her sentence. "I want to thank everyone for their help and concern," she said in a soft voice, standing in what

appeared to be a hallway of an apartment building. The video was posted by Jane Wang, an overseas activist who launched the Free Zhang Zhan campaign in the United Kingdom and is in contact with one of Zhang's former lawyers. However, Wang said in a state-

ment that Zhang still has limited freedom. They became concerned that Zhang would be kept under further control by police even if she was no longer in prison. The United States Department of State also issued a statement of concern over Zhang's status in the days after she was due to be released. Ren Quanniu represented Zhang before being stripped of his license in February 2021. He said he confirmed the video was true by speaking with Zhang's family. During her detention at Shanghai's Women Prison, Zhang staged a hunger strike and was hospitalised at one point in 2021. Zhang's family,

who could often only speak to her by phone, faced police pressure during her incarceration, and her parents refused to speak to news outlets. Zhang was among a handful of citizen journalists who travelled to the central Chinese city of Wuhan after the government put it under total lockdown in February 2020, in the early days of the pandemic. She walked around the city to document public life as fears grew about the novel coronavirus. Others spent time in jail for documenting the early days of the pandemic, including Fang Bin, who published videos of overcrowded hospitals and bodies

during the outbreak. Fang was sentenced to three years in prison and released in April 2023. Chen Qiushi, another citizen journalist, disappeared in February 2020 while filming in Wuhan. Chen resurfaced in September 2021 on a friend's live video feed on YouTube, saying he had suffered from depression. He did not provide details about his disappearance. The coronavirus remains a sensitive topic in China. In the first week of May, the Chinese scientist who first published a sequence of the COVID-19 virus protested authorities barring him from his lab, after years of demotions and setbacks.

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Rate Contract for Supply of 4G based 1-Ph Smart Meter			
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Tender Enquiry No.	Previously Published Date	Revised Due Date & Time of Bid Submission/ Date & time of opening of bids	
TPDDL/ENGG/ENQ/200001669/24-25	30.04.2024	27.05.2024 at 1500 Hrs/ 27.05.2024 at 1530 Hrs	
Rate Contract for Supply of DT Meter Kit Without Wiring Harness			
Complete tender and corrigendum document is available on our website <a href="http://www.tatapower-dtl.com">www.tatapower-dtl.com</a> → Vendor Zone → Tender / Corrigendum Documents			
Contracts - 011-66112222			



# Markets climb on buying in Reliance, Infosys



**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
Equity benchmark indices ended with gains on Wednesday amid buying in blue-chips Reliance Industries and Infosys amid mixed cues from global markets. The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 267.75 points or 0.36 per cent to settle at 74,221.06. During the day, it jumped 354.48 points or 0.47 per cent to 74,307.79. Similarly, the NSE Nifty advanced 68.75 points or 0.31 per cent to finish at 22,597.80. "Despite mixed global market sentiments ahead of the US Fed minutes, Indian markets exhibited a subtle positive trend. Investors are optimistic about stable Q4 earnings and easing election jitters that had previously increased volatility. "Interest in the FMCG sector has risen due to the potential for an early onset of monsoon. Nevertheless, markets may underperform in the short term as they wait for the election outcome, with FIIs staying on the sidelines,"

Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. Among the Sensex firms, Hindustan Unilever, Reliance Industries, Infosys, Asian Paints, ITC and UltraTech Cement were the major gainers. State Bank of India, JSW Steel, Axis Bank, ICICI Bank, Tata Steel and Tata Motors were among the laggards. In Asian markets, Shanghai settled in the positive territory while Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong ended lower. European markets were trading lower. Wall Street ended in the green on Tuesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.84 per cent to USD 82.18 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,874.54 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark declined 52.63 points or 0.07 per cent to settle at 73,953.31 on Tuesday. The Nifty, however, ended higher by 27.05 points or 0.12 per cent to 22,529.05.

# Rupee rises 3 paise to close at 83.28 against US dollar

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**

The rupee appreciated by 3 paise to settle at 83.28 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday amid softening crude oil prices. Forex traders said the local unit consolidated in a narrow range weighed down by foreign fund outflows. At the interbank foreign exchange, the domestic unit opened at 83.29 and moved in the range of 83.22 and 83.29 against the greenback during the session. The local unit finally settled at 83.28 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a rise of 3

paise from its previous close. The Indian rupee gained on positive domestic markets and a decline in crude oil prices. However, mixed to positive US Dollar and FII outflows capped sharp gains, said Anuj Choudhary — Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias as the US Dollar may recover from lower levels if the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting minutes are hawkish," Choudhary said. FII outflows may also weigh on the rupee. However, a



positive tone in the domestic markets and weakness in crude oil prices may support the rupee at lower levels, Choudhary added. Investors may remain cautious ahead of PMI data from the US this week. USDINR spot price is

expected to trade in a range of Rs 83 to Rs 83.55, Choudhary added. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, advanced 0.09 per cent to 104.75, as most Fed officials warned of cutting interest rates too early and need more data to cut rates. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, slipped 0.69 per cent to USD 82.31 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex advanced 267.75 points, or 0.36 per cent, to settle at 74,221.06 points, and Nifty

rose 68.75 points, or 0.31 per cent, to close at 22,597.80 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Tuesday, as they offloaded shares worth Rs 1,874.54 crore, according to exchange data. On the macroeconomic front, according to an article in the RBI's May Bulletin released on Tuesday, India is likely to grow by 7.5 per cent in the first quarter of the current financial year, driven by rising aggregate demand and non-food spending in the rural economy.

# Mahindra Finance gets IRDAI nod to sell insurance products as corporate agent

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Mahindra & Mahindra Financial Services on Wednesday said it has received corporate agency licence from insurance regulator IRDAI, which will enable it to sell life and general insurance policies offered by various insurers. The registration shall be valid from May 21, 2024 to May 20, 2027, Mahindra Finance said in a regulatory filing. The registration as 'Corporate Agent (Composite)' will enable the company to undertake supplemental business activity of soliciting and procuring insurance business in the areas of life, health and general insurance — both group and individual, it said. The process would augment the company's existing sources of revenue and profits as it would deploy its common infrastructure of branch network and feet on street. Mahindra Finance Managing Director & CEO Raul Rebello said, "This diversification will open new revenue models for us while delivering personalized services to customers across Mahindra Finance's 1360+ branches, thereby enhancing their experience." The corporate agency licence will enable Mahindra Finance to solicit, procure and carry on the business of selling, distribution, advertising, marketing of all kinds of insurance products/ services, including life insurance, health insurance, and general insurance, on behalf of various insurance companies as a corporate agent as permitted by IRDAI, it said.

# Suzlon bags new orders of 402 MW wind energy from Juniper Green Energy

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Renewable energy solutions provider Suzlon Group on Wednesday said it has bagged new orders for the development of 402 MW wind energy projects from Juniper Green Energy. Suzlon will install a total of 134 wind turbine generators (WTGs) with a Hybrid Lattice Tubular (HLT) tower and a rated capacity of 3 MW for both projects at the Suzlon proposed site at Fatehgarh in Rajasthan, a company statement said. As part of the agreement, Suzlon will supply the wind turbines and execute the project including foundation, erection, and commissioning. Suzlon will also undertake comprehensive operations and maintenance services post-commissioning. "Juniper Green Energy has been a long-term, repeat



customer for us, and we are delighted to partner with them again. This order helps us expand our footprint in Rajasthan," Girish Tanti, Vice Chairman, Suzlon Group, said in the statement. The electricity generated from these projects will help realise the vision of the Rajasthan government to serve the people of the state with green energy, he added. The generated power will be provided under FDRE (Firm and Dispatchable Renewable Energy) Hybrid and Merchant projects. Projects of this size can provide electricity to 3.31 lakh households and curb 13.07 lakh tonnes of CO2 emissions per year.

# Paper, paperboard imports up 34 per cent in FY24: IPMA

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Imports of paper and paperboard in the country rose by 34 per cent to 19.3 lakh tonnes in 2023-24, driven by higher shipments from ASEAN countries, an industry association said on Wednesday. The Indian Paper Manufacturers Association (IPMA) in a statement said that the increasing imports of these products are hurting the domestic industry. Paper and paperboard imports, as per the commerce ministry data, were 14.3 lakh tonnes in the financial year ended on March 31, 2023, the IPMA said. "ASEAN has come to account for the largest chunk in the paper import pie in the country accounting for 27 per cent share. Paper imports from ASEAN, which enter the country at zero import duty under the ASEAN-India free



trade agreement, doubled to 5.1 lakh tonnes during the year from 2.7 lakh tonnes in FY23," the association said citing commerce ministry data. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a 10-member bloc. The members include Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. In value terms, paper imports

doubled to Rs 13,248 crore in FY24 from Rs 6,140 crore in FY21, the body said. "The unprecedented imports of paper and paperboard pose a significant threat to India's Make-in-India initiative Aatmanirbhar Bharat," IPMA said. The major paper grades which are coming from these nations include printing paper, coated paper, and paperboard. IPMA said that this surge comes despite substantial investments by the domestic industry in recent years to upgrade technology, improve product quality, and enhance agro / farm forestry practices. "These investments are now at risk due to the influx of duty-free imports," it claimed. IPMA has urged the government to increase the basic customs duty (BCD) on the import of paper and paperboard from 10 per cent to 25 per cent.

# Housing prices near peak level, nominal growth seen in coming years, says C&W India head

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Growth in housing prices is expected to be nominal in short to medium term after rising sharply over the last two years due to surge in demand post the COVID pandemic, according to Cushman & Wakefield India head Anshul Jain. In a video interview with PTI, Jain, the Chief Executive India & South East Asia and APAC Tenant Representation, Cushman & Wakefield, said the housing demand would continue to be strong in view of high economic growth and a growing desire to own homes among consumers especially, young population. "Housing demand in India



was quite muted from 2013-2014, all the way to 2019. The prices were stagnant. There was a wave at that point in time, where people, particularly youngsters did not want to own anything. We were talking about Uberisation of the residential sector where people wanted to rent and did not want to sort of

make a commitment," Jain said. However, he noted that the COVID pandemic changed that mindset. "People realised the stability of having their own house. Plus people wanted larger houses, and combining that with one of the lowest interest rate regimes India had seen for a

while really spurred the demand for housing," he said. Jain noted that housing sales and prices went up driven by end-user demand. "Seeing the prices going up, the investors came into the market. So, a combination of that became a perfect cocktail, for a very strong demand post COVID from a housing perspective," Jain observed. Going forward, he said there would be nominal growth in prices. "... Clearly there has been a very significant price rise in the last two years. But if you normalize that, over about 10 odd years, 2013-2014 to now, I think the price rise has still been strong, but not abnormal.

# India exports over 45,000 tonnes onion after lifting ban



**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

India has exported more than 45,000 tonnes of onion since the ban on outbound shipments was lifted early this month, a top government official said on Wednesday. These exports provided relief to farmers after curbs were imposed to keep domestic supplies steady ahead of general elections. The world's biggest vegetable exporter banned exports of the bulb last December and then extended it in March, after a rise in prices triggered by sluggish production. "Since the ban was lifted, more than 45,000 tonnes of onions have been exported, mostly to the Middle East and Bangladesh," Nidhi Khare, Secretary of the Consumer Affairs Ministry, told PTI. To keep onion prices affordable during the election

period, the government on May 4 lifted the ban but imposed a minimum export price (MEP) of USD 550 per tonne. Khare said the forecast of a good monsoon this year will ensure better sowing of kharif (summer) crops, including onion from June onwards. State-owned agencies have started procuring onions from the recent rabi (winter) harvest to build a targeted 5,00,000-tonne buffer stock for the current year, she added. The country's onion production is expected to fall 16 per cent from a year earlier to 25.47 million tonnes in the 2023-24 crop year due to lower output in key growing regions like Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, according to the Agriculture Ministry's first estimates.

# Paytm net loss widens to ₹550 crore in Q4

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Fintech firm One97 Communications, which owns the Paytm brand, on Wednesday said its loss in the fourth quarter of the financial year 2023-24 has widened to Rs 550 crore following the ban imposed by the RBI on transactions related to its payments bank. The company had posted a loss of Rs 167.5 crore in the same period a year ago, the company said in a regulatory filing. "Our fourth quarter FY24 results were impacted by temporary disruption on account of UPI transition etc. And permanent disruption because of the PPBL embargo. Paytm reported a revenue of Rs 2,267 crore, a modest decline of 3 per cent Y-o-Y (year-on-year). Our contribution margin was 57 per cent including UPI incentives, and 51 per cent excluding UPI incentives," Paytm said in a statement. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) barred Paytm Payments Bank Limited (PPBL) from accepting deposits, credit transactions or top-ups in any customer accounts, wallets, and FASTags, keeping in view the interest of customers, including merchants from March 15 onwards. "PPBL products like the Paytm wallet and FASTag were distributed by Paytm. Due to the current embargo on these products, we anticipate the steady state annualised direct impact on EBITDA to be around Rs 500 crore, as previously disclosed. Most of this impact will be in the first quarter as these products were operational during most part of the fourth quarter of FY24," the statement said. The company during the reported quarter wrote off Rs 227 crore investment for a 39 per cent stake in PPBL following future uncertainties associated with the bank's business operations including the uncertainty of any other regulatory development etc. "PPBL, the management, on a prudent basis, has determined that the value of the company's investment in PPBL is impaired and, accordingly, has recorded an



impairment provision of Rs 2,271 crore, representing the carrying value of its investment in PPBL and disclosed the same as impairment of investment in associate," the company said in an audit note. Paytm Founder and CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma holds 51 per cent in PPBL. The company for the first time posted operational profit before Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) cost for the full year. "FY24 has been a landmark year for the company as we achieved our first full year of EBITDA before ESOP profitability (since IPO) of Rs 559 crore. We demonstrated strong revenue momentum (up 25 per cent) and continued our disciplined focus on profitability (EBITDA before ESOP margin up by 8 per cent), in spite of regulatory action on our associate entity, Paytm Payment Bank Ltd," Sharma said in a letter to shareholders. The revenue from operations of Paytm declined by 2.8 per cent to Rs 2,267.1 crore during the reported quarter from Rs 2,464.6 crore in the corresponding quarter of the financial year (FY) 2023. Paytm said that there were temporary disruptions in operating metrics like Monthly Transacting Users (MTU), merchant base, and Gross Merchandise Value (GMV) during February and March. "This is expected to have an incremental EBITDA impact of Rs 100-150 crore, in the first quarter of FY25 and should start recovering from the second quarter as we are seeing stabilisation or growth in consumer and merchant base metrics from April/May," the statement said.

# NHPC organises Shramdaan programme under Swachhata Pakhwada 2024

**PNS ■ NEW DELHI**

NHPC organised a Shramdaan programme for cleanliness campaign under 'Swachhata Pakhwada 2024' on 21st May 2024. RP Goyal, CMD, NHPC, Shri Uttam Lal, Director (Personnel), NHPC and RK Chaudhary, Director (Technical & Projects), NHPC, senior NHPC officers and employees performed Shramdaan by running a cleanliness drive in Mughal Bridge over Budhia Wala Nala (a monument), in Faridabad. During the Shramdaan programme local people also took part



enthusiastically along with the NHPC employees. NHPC is observing 'Swachhata Pakhwada 2024' at its Corporate Office and all its Regional Offices, Projects and Power Stations across the country from 16th May to 31st May 2024 as per guidelines issued by the Government of India. During this Pakhwada, NHPC is organising various activities as cleanliness awareness programmes, tree/ sapling plantation, skit presentation, cleaning kit/ sanitary pad distribution, awareness programmes on hygiene, drawing and painting competitions etc. across all its locations.

# NTPC secures third rank at ATD BEST Award 2024

New Delhi: NTPC has achieved an impressive milestone by securing the 3rd rank globally at the ATD BEST Award 2024, the highest ranking among all Indian companies. Notably, NTPC is the only PSU to have received this prestigious award seven times in the past eight years. The accolade was accepted by Rachana Singh Bhal, CGM (Strategic HR & Talent Management), at a distinguished ceremony held in New Orleans, USA, on May 21. PNS

# Government needs to further expand scheme to make India global drone hub, says report

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The government needs to expand the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme and develop an ecosystem to realise the goal of making India a global drone hub, a report said. An incentive of Rs 120 crore spread over three financial years was provided for Indian manufacturers of drone and drone components under the PLI Scheme notified on September 30, 2021. As per the Ministry of Civil Aviation projections, the Indian drone manufacturing industry is expected to reach Rs 900 crore by 2025 from just Rs 60 crore in 2020-21, according to a study conducted by Nexgen Exhibitions. It also noted that the Indian drone market is expected to grow at 22.15 per cent CAGR



(compounded annual growth rate) during the 2024-30 period. With innovation and expansion of its application portfolio, India has the potential of becoming the global drone hub by 2030, it stated. The study highlighted that the key to realising India's vision lies in boosting the domestic drone ecosystem. Other major factors are the expansion of the PLI scheme, government procurement, and pushing the Make in India initiative, it stated. The application of drones is already proven in the fields of

Border Surveillance, Rescue Disaster Management, and COVID management etc. The drone services industry's operations in logistics, data processing, and traffic management etc are far bigger in scale and will outshine the other related sectors very soon, the report highlighted on Tuesday. Around 250 drones and unmanned systems manufacturers, anti-drone radar, guns and jammers innovators, component, wires, motors, sensors, CCTV suppliers, software developers for drones and unmanned systems, drones as service providing companies, GPS and Geospatial solutions providers participated in the survey. Institutes developing drones, defence research labs manufacturing drones, and aerospace companies like flight

control, and simulator developers were also part of the survey. The survey was conducted across 10 states - Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The survey also reached out to foreign companies from the Middle East, Europe, the UK, the US and Australia. Drone International Expo 2024, which will be held on July 4-5, is a premium expo for drones unmanned systems (land and water), counter drones, LiDAR geospatial, artificial intelligence and air taxi. It is one of Asia's biggest drone sector platforms for buyers, industry representatives and stakeholders from across the board to connect.

# POWERGRID wins prestigious award for third time



Gurugram: Power Grid Corporation of India Limited (POWERGRID), a Maharatna CPSE under Ministry of Power, Government of India, has been conferred the prestigious ATD BEST Award 2024 for strategic approach to talent development driving business results. The award was conferred by the world's leading Learning and Development (L&D) body, Association of Talent Development (ATD), USA. PNS



# Sindhu sails to Malaysia Masters second round

**PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR**  
Returning from a break, two-time Olympic medallist P V Sindhu progressed to the women's singles second round with a straight-game win over Scotland's Kirsty Gilmour at the Malaysia Masters Super 500 badminton tournament here on Wednesday.  
World No. 15 Sindhu, who had skipped the Uber Cup and Thailand Open, notched up a 21-17 21-16 win over Gilmour, who is ranked 22nd, in the opening-round match that lasted 46 minutes.  
The fifth-seeded Indian, who last won a title in 2022 Singapore Open, will next face Korea's Sim Yu Jin.  
In mixed doubles, B Sumeeth Reddy and N Sikki Reddy, world No. 53, also advanced to the second round after outlasting Hong Kong qualifiers Lui Chun Wai and Fu Chi Yan 21-15 12-21 21-17 in 47 minutes.  
The husband-wife duo will have the task of taming the top



seeds Chen Tang Jie and Toh Ee Wei of Malaysia next.  
For Sindhu, it was her third win over Gilmour, a two-time medallist in the Commonwealth Games.  
The 28-year-old Sindhu was quick to open up a 7-1 lead but Gilmour managed to claw back at 14-14 and 15-15. The Indian, however, dashed her hopes of a challenge as she grabbed six of the next eight points to take the first game.  
After the change of sides, Sindhu was more ruthless as she didn't allow her opponent to make any comeback after once again gaining an early 3-0 lead. Sindhu was 11-6 at the break and kept moving ahead to grab eight match points. To her credit, Gilmour saved four match points before Sindhu sealed the match comfortably.  
Sindhu, a former world champion, has endured a series of narrow losses ever since returning from a knee injury early this year. She is eyeing a good show here to boost her confidence ahead of the Paris Olympics.



## Archery World Cup Stage 2

### Compound women team in final, men miss bronze medal

**PTI ■ YECHEON (SOUTH KOREA)**  
World number one Indian women's compound team stormed into the final of the archery World Cup Stage II but the men's team will return empty-handed from the tournament after losing the bronze medal clash to Australia here Wednesday.  
The trio of Jyothi Surekha Vennam, Parneet Kaur and Aditi Swami, that had clinched gold medal in World Cup Stage I in Shanghai last month, knocked out world number four USA 233-229 in the semi-final.  
India will now clash with world number seven Turkey in the gold medal clash on Saturday. Turkey had stunned top-seed and local favourites South Korea 234-233 in the other semi-final.  
It was an overall easy sailing for the Indian women's team, which got a bye into the quarters after finishing second in the qualifying round. They eliminated Italy 236-234 in the last-eight.  
The world number one men's team of Priyansh, Prathamesh Fuge and veteran Abhishek Verma, who had slipped to fourth in the qualifying round on Tuesday, lost to lowly-ranked Australia 133-133 (10-10\*) in a shoot-off.  
The Aussies, who are world ranked 21st, took the Indian trio by surprise starting with a 59, dropping just one point.  
The Aussies team of Bailey Wildman, Brandon Hawes and Jonathon Milne continued its fine run and overcame a one-point deficit after the second round to make it 233-all after the regulation four ended.  
The two teams were 30-all in the ensuing shoot-off but the Aussies edged out the inconsistent Indians by shooting two Xs (arrows closer to centre) to secure the bronze medal.  
Having started their campaign with an easy 235-212 win over lowly-ranked Vietnam, India overcame tough competition from Denmark and top seed USA, winning both the matches in shoot-off.  
Meanwhile, the veteran duo of Tarundeep Rai and Deepika Kumari finished fourth and sixth in their respective qualifiers as recurve competition got underway.  
The 2010 Asian Games silver medalist Rai shot 681 points for a sixth spot in rankings, while Dhiraj Bommadevara narrowly missed a top-10 finish on X (closer to centre) count after five archers shot 678 with the Indian finishing 11th.  
The Army duo's solid finish ensured Indian recurve men's team No 2 seeding in their title defence. India and top-seeded South Korea will begin their campaign at the opposite ends of the draw.  
Indian men's team shocked the world champions South Korea for the first time in a World Cup to take the gold in Stage I of the event in Shanghai last month.  
Deepika missed the top-three finish in the rankings by just one point, shooting 677 as the Korean duo of Lim Sihyeon (685), Jeon Hunyoung (680) and Li Jiaman (678) took the 1-2-3 seedings.  
The other Indians however fell way short with Bhajan Kaur (653 points) and Ankita Bhakat (646) were the next best Indians at lowly 34th and 49th places respectively. As a result, the women's team seedings could not be better than six. Rai and Deepika combined to get a cumulative 1358 points for the second spot behind South Korea in the recurve mixed team category.



### Concussion replacements added for Copa America under the pink substitution pass system

**AP ■ LUQUE (PARAGUAY)**  
Coaches at next month's Copa America will be able to make a 6th and extra substitution in cases of suspected head trauma or concussion.  
South American soccer's governing body CONMEBOL announced the decision Tuesday, making it valid for all its competitions once the Copa America starts in the United States on June 20.  
CONMEBOL issued a statement saying coaches will need to notify the referee or the 4th match official of the concussion replacement through a pink substitution pass. A similar method was implemented in Major League Soccer in 2021 as part of a FIFA pilot program.  
The player who leaves the pitch under those conditions will have to go to the locker rooms or a hospital for assessment.  
"The substitution for concussion will take place regardless of the number of substitutions until the moment it happens," CONMEBOL said. "When the concussion substitution takes place, the opposing team will automatically be allowed to make an additional substitution."  
Team doctors who detect a suspected concussion or head trauma on the pitch will have up to 24 hours to send a medical report to CONMEBOL, the South American body said.

### Brazil's Vasco da Gama and 777 Partners in legal battle for control of soccer club

**AP ■ SAO PAULO**  
Brazil's Vasco da Gama and 777 Partners are intensifying their legal battle after the American company went to court Tuesday to reclaim its rights over the top-flight soccer club.  
Last week, a Rio de Janeiro judge preemptively removed 777 Partners from Vasco's soccer department's administration after a series of complaints from the club. Brazilian law allows foreign entities to buy the rights to soccer sections of multi-sport clubs, in an operation known as SAF.  
The preliminary ruling is yet to be confirmed, but the American group stepped up the fight in court and accused the club of not making image rights payments to its players on Monday, as scheduled.  
"It was the first time that wages or image rights payments have been delayed since we took over 18 months ago," 777 said in a statement Tuesday. "The injunction that momentarily pushes us out of the command of Vasco's SAF stopped us from making a bridge payment, as we did last year in the same period of the year, when soccer revenues are lower."  
Image rights are part of the payment for footballers.  
Vasco executives have said the payment of wages is up to date for all players.  
The tug of war in Brazil adds to the pressure on the Miami-based company, which has recently faced setbacks in court over its ownership of Belgium's Standard Liege plus other financial problems.  
A court in Liege last week ruled in favor of Standard's former owner Bruno Venanzi and shareholders of the company holding the club's stadium. They claimed 777 had defaulted on a payment.  
The legal woes for the 777 add to its period of financial turmoil. The Miami-based investment company has also seen its airline in Australia grounded in recent weeks. It also faces a fraud lawsuit in New York.  
777's other clubs include Genoa in Italy's top tier and Hertha Berlin in Germany's second division.



### Playing Carlsen in his home turf not a challenge for me: Praggnanandhaa

**PTI ■ STAVANGER (NORWAY)**  
Having beaten Magnus Carlsen several times in the last couple of years, young Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa feels he will be under no pressure when he takes on the multiple-time world champion in his home turf during the Norway Chess tournament, which gets underway here on May 27.  
Praggnanandhaa last beat the 33-year-old Carlsen in the Superbet rapid and blitz tournament, a part of the Grand Chess Tour, in Warsaw earlier this month.  
"I don't think playing Magnus in his home turf is a challenge for me. Usually, it matters to the player playing in his home but it won't matter so much for me," said Praggnanandhaa, who will also have his sister R. Vaishali playing the Norway Chess Women's Tournament for the first time.  
The 11-day tournament will see a very strong field including the likes of world champion Ding Liren and Hikaru Nakamura besides home favourite Carlsen.  
Reflecting on his contest with Carlsen at last year's FIDE World Cup where Praggnanandhaa gave the Norwegian a tough challenge, the Indian GM said the experience here would help him in future competitions.  
"I always enjoy a good challenge. After the World Cup last year, this will be my first classical game with him. I am quite excited to play him and equally excited to play the others. No doubt the experience here will help me in future tournaments," said Praggnanandhaa in a Norway Chess release.  
"I am very happy and excited to play in Norway Chess. The field is extremely strong. This is perhaps the strongest field I have played and I see this as an opportunity and a challenge to give my best."  
"I am also looking forward to play in this time control which I have not played anywhere else," added the 18-year-old.  
The tournament will be played in a double round-robin format with a time control of 120 minutes.  
The teenaged Indian GM also expressed happiness with the growth of chess worldwide.  
"It is a busy schedule this year. After the Norway Chess, we move to Budapest for the Chess Olympiad and I will also be playing the Global Chess League later this year. It is really good to have such an exciting league which I think will definitely help grow the game. "As a chess fan, I'm happy to see this league grow. For now, my focus is on Norway Chess and I am physically and mentally well-prepared to do my best there."  
With sister Vaishali competing in the women's category, Praggnanandhaa said he will also be tracking her progress in the tournament.  
"I am happy to see an exclusive women's tournament being introduced in Norway Chess. It is a very good initiative because there are not many tournaments for women. This will encourage other organizations to come up with women's tournaments too."



**AP ■ PARIS**  
Vanessa Peltier got up at dawn and traveled 500 kilometers (310 miles) to Paris from the Creuse region of central France just so she could watch Rafael Nadal practice on Tuesday.  
Along with thousands of other fans, she lined up outside the main court to catch a glimpse of the Spanish champion at what's expected to be his final appearance at the French Open, a tournament he's won a record 14 times.  
"I woke up at 6 a.m. And drove from the middle of France to be here," said Peltier, 50. "Nadal has always had my support, and the support of France."  
The line stretched for 200 meters (yards) as fans queued up for Nadal's second day of practice at Roland Garros. Morgan Chevallier said he waited for 45 minutes to get inside the tennis stadium.  
"I could not pass on this opportunity. He is almost bigger than the tournament itself," he said.  
The 37-year-old Nadal was sidelined with injuries for nearly all of last year and much of this season. His loss in the third round of the Italian Open two weeks ago left questions about his fitness. He hasn't yet said whether he's ready for the clay-court tournament.  
The fans know this may be their last chance to see him at Roland Garros.  
"I skipped work for Nadal," said Sergiu Popa, 26.  
Nadal started with low-intensity ball exchanges before playing two sets against his sparring partner for the day, Sebastian Korda of the United States. The crowd erupted in cheers and chants of "Rafa, Rafa" after the Spaniard hit a winning shot.  
Outside the court, fans took photos in front of the Nadal statue at the entry gate and lined up to pose with a life-size cardboard cutout of

## Thousands of fans come to see Nadal practice ahead of the French Open

him, with a hole where they could put their own faces.  
"This way I can imagine what it's like to have the same biceps as him," joked Philippe Charvet as his friend took his picture.  
In the Roland Garros gift shop, an entire section is dedicated to Nadal merchandise. Frédéric Caubert and his son Gaspar elbowed their way to buy a hat with Nadal's signature for 28 euros (\$30).  
"It's not cheap, but it will be a nice memory once Nadal leaves us," Caubert said. "It's like he is part of our family. When he's gone, family dinners won't feel the same," he said with a smile.

## Emma Hayes' first roster as coach of the US women team includes two first time call ups

**AP ■ NEW YORK**  
Coach Emma Hayes has selected her first roster for the United States ahead of a pair of friendlies as she prepares to lead the women's national team at the Paris Olympics.  
Hayes, named U.S. Coach last November, finished her final season as coach of Chelsea on Saturday, winning the team's fifth straight Women's Super League Title with a 6-0 rout of Manchester United.  
Her first U.S. Roster announced Tuesday includes two National Women's Soccer League players called up to the national team for the first time, Chicago Red Stars defender Sam Staab and Washington Spirit midfielder Hal Hershfelt. A notable omission from the roster is veteran goalkeeper Alyssa Naeyer, who injured her left thigh while playing in a match for the Chicago Red Stars on May 12.  
The team will play South Korea on June 1 in Commerce City, Colorado, before a rematch on June 4 in St. Paul, Minnesota.  
The 23-player roster is Hayes' last chance to look at players before she names an 18-player roster for the Olympics. The United States will play a pair of sendoff matches in July.  
"I expect complete commitment from everyone to absorb very quickly the things that I value as the most important so that we can compete this summer. I know they are a highly coachable group and



"I'm looking forward to challenging them," Hayes said in a statement. "It's time to go to work. I can't wait to meet the fans and it's really time to get behind the team as we get closer to putting a roster together for the Olympics."  
Hayes is expected to announce her Olympic roster in late June.  
Former coach Vlatko Andonovski resigned from the U.S. Team following last year's disappointing finish in the Women's World Cup. Twila Kilgore led the team in the interim while Hayes finished the season with Chelsea. Kilgore, who went 10-1 with the team, will now serve as an assistant coach under Hayes.  
Captain Lindsey Horan, among five players from European teams on the roster, will join training camp after her club, Lyon, faces Barcelona for the Champions League title on Saturday.  
Alex Morgan and Jaedyn Shaw were included on the squad despite missing recent matches with the San Diego Wave because of injuries. Lynn Williams, who was left off the team that played in the SheBelieves Cup, was not on

the latest roster.  
Crystal Dunn, who has played mostly at outside back for the national team in recent years, was listed by Hayes as a forward.  
Hayes also added three training players to the roster: Olivia Moultrie of the Portland Thorns and Croix Bethune and Kate Wiesner, who both play for the Washington Spirit.  
The players are due to report to camp in Colorado on Monday.  
The U.S. Roster by position with club affiliation:  
**GOALKEEPERS:** Jane Campbell (Houston Dash), Aubrey Kingsbury (Washington Spirit), Casey Murphy (North Carolina Courage).  
**DEFENDERS:** Tiarna Davidson (NJ/NY Gotham), Emily Fox (Arsenal), Naomi Girma (San Diego Wave), Casey Krueger (Washington Spirit), Jenna Nighswonger (NJ/NY Gotham), Emily Sonnett (NJ/NY Gotham), Sam Staab (Chicago Red Stars).  
**MIDFIELDER:** Korbin Albert (Paris Saint-Germain), Sam Coffey (Portland Thorns), Hal Hershfelt (Washington Spirit), Lindsey Horan (Lyon), Rose Lavelle (NJ/NY Gotham), Lily Yohannes (Ajax).  
**FORWARDS:** Crystal Dunn (NJ/NY Gotham), Catarina Macario (Chelsea), Alex Morgan (San Diego Wave), Trinity Rodman (Washington Spirit), Jaedyn Shaw (San Diego Wave), Sophia Smith (Portland Thorns), Mallory Swanson (Chicago Red Stars).





# It's hard to leave ailing mother in hospital but KKR is family too, says Gurbaz

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Afghanistan wicketkeeper-batter Rahmanullah Gurbaz has revealed that he made the difficult choice of leaving his ailing mother in hospital when his IPL franchise Kolkata Knight Riders sought his services ahead of the playoff clash against Sunrisers Hyderabad here as the team is also his "family".

Gurbaz, in his maiden game of the season, played a vital role in KKR's win over SRH by taking two vital catches and giving his side a blazing start with a 14-ball 23 on Tuesday. He replaced Englishman Phil Salt at the top and hit the ground running to help the two-time champions enter the IPL final with their comfortable eight-wicket victory here on Tuesday.

"As a cricketer, you (should) know, what to do. (In) League cricket, only a few players can play. If there is opportunity for you, you should do best. If there's no

opportunity for you, you should be prepared, well prepared for the opportunity," Gurbaz told the media here after the match.

"My mom is still sick. I went (back) there and the call from here was (that) Phil Salt was leaving. They called and they messaged me that 'Gurbaz, we need you, and what is your feedback for us?'," he revealed.

"I said, 'yes, I will come'. My mom is still in hospital, and I'm always talking to her, but this is also my family. I should manage both of that, my mom and my KKR family. It's hard, it's tough, but still, I need to manage it," he added.

SRH skipper Pat Cummins' decision to bat first backfired. Gurbaz said KKR had planned to bowl first had they won the toss.

"We all (had) decided that we should go and we should bowl first, because in this kind of moment, and team likes Sunrisers that have a strong batting side and you should know what (is) the total and then you go for it," he said.



"We bowled really well, actually. (To get a) team likes Sunrisers all out on 160, that was bowling effort. And then once we come to the batting end, we also not just try to, we should win the circle (powerplay)."

"(In) my mind was (the) only (thought) that I should win the circle, because sometime in low total like this, you need to have a good circle, otherwise, match can be difficult in the end."

Gurbaz said it was the best he had seen KKR pacer Mitchell Starc bowl after the left-arm pacer took three wickets in the powerplay to set up the game for his side.

"He was just unbelievable. The way he bowled today, he's one of the best, he has a lot of experience, he knows how to manage the big games. I saw him today totally different than other games," he said.

Gurbaz said Afghanistan players are preparing well for the T20 World Cup next month. He said

franchise cricket is something that comes second and doing well for their country is always their priority.

"It's all about hard work. It doesn't mean that you come from Afghanistan, you come from India, you come from Australia, whatever. It's all about hard work, I think. If you work hard, if you know what to do, and it's help you in every situation."

"Afghanistan is not the same Afghanistan. We know what to do and how can we represent our country. Everything is good for cricket there, and we played really well, the last World Cup, and from the last six-seven years, Afghanistan is doing great," he said.

"Our mindset (is) not (just) to play for league cricket, our mindset is always to do something better for our country, and then come the leagues. If you do good for your country, all leagues will pick you, and that's the point that we play all the leagues," he added.



## Till I play Tests, I will limit franchise appearances to only two events a year: Travis Head

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Travis Head might have taken this year's IPL by storm but Test cricket remains his top priority and till the time he is playing the format, the Australian big-hitter would like to limit his participation in T20 leagues to just two events per year.

Head, who has enjoyed an incredible last 10 months, has been a nemesis for India with centuries in both the World Test Championship and the ODI World Cup finals. Currently, he has blazed to 533 runs for Sunrisers Hyderabad, forging a fabulous opening partnership with uncapped Indian Abhishek Sharma.

Needless to say he is sought after and asked how he plans to manage the lucrative T20 offers with his commitment for the 'Baggy Green', Head said it's a no brainer.

"This has been the first year in IPL for me in quite a while (since 2017). I would put all my eggs in Test basket for the moment, I will continue to do that," Head told PTI during an exclusive interview organised by Prime Video ahead of their upcoming docu-series, 'The Test Season 3', featuring the Australian team's tour of England last year.

"After Tests, I will pick formats, and see in which different ways I am available for selection." T20 events have mushroomed across the world with some like West Indies' Andre Russell and Sunil Narine appearing in multiple events, adding up to more than five a year.

Having had a great run for the 'Orange Army' this season, Head is keen on coming back to IPL next year too.

"At this stage, I would like to be back here in IPL next year. Like I will play Major League Cricket (MLC in USA) this year right after the World T20 but next year might just look a lot different.

"Each year, you prioritise what you can and can't do. Next year, Test cricket is around, we tour the West Indies and probably I will not feature in many other franchises," the 30-year-old was categorical.

"Look, in few years when I am finished with Test cricket, then probably there will be few more opportunities to play a bit more franchise cricket. But at this time, I would try to limit it to a couple of franchise may be, and (focus on) Test cricket." The last 10 months have been very hectic for Head starting with the WTC final, followed by the Ashes and then the World Cup where he came in during the second half after recovering from a hand injury.

Right now, more than two months of IPL will be followed by World T20 in the Americas. But the southpaw doesn't want to make a big deal about workload management.

"I will be home in a couple of days' time once we are done with IPL. Be home for two-three days and make the trip to the West Indies with family and start all over again."

"Look, we are very fortunate to do what we do and I am not going to do it forever. So try and make the most of it as we can, we are lucky that we are well looked after."

He then tried to put things in perspective.

"I know in a few years, I can retire and do nothing. I will have plenty of time to look back and wish I was back on tour, I would like to be in the moment, keep batting through and stay in the moment, enjoying the moment."

**CRACKING THE 'INDIA CODE':** The performance that Head has delivered over the past few months, he believes that the seeds of it were sown early in 2023 when he came with the Test team, a hard-fought series that Australia lost 1-2.

"I think a lot of that has come from the Test tour last year, spending time here and working on things and also being a bit older, understanding my game and its blueprint and how you want to go about it and being content and my family being around, all those things," he explained.

"In IPL, I have evolved continuously while getting better but I still have some work to do," he seemed confident. His national team skipper Pat Cummins has been his SRH skipper and he says they have developed a chemistry where both know what to expect of each other.

"We are just close friends and just enjoy each other's company. Not too much game stuff and over time when you build relationships, he now knows how I will go about it (my job)...," he said.

"...If I need anything, I talk to him but he lets me do what I need to in order to perform. He backs me."

SRH lost the first qualifier on Tuesday to Kolkata Knight Riders but will have another shot at qualifying for finals in the second qualifier in Chennai on May 24.

Asked if a documentary like the 'The Test Season 3' can be intrusive and possibly catch players when they are at their most vulnerable and want to privately get over a low phase, Head,

## I could not have made better choices: Former RCB owner Mallya on Kohli

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former Royal Challengers Bengaluru owner Vijay Mallya on Wednesday said he couldn't have made a better choice when he bid for Virat Kohli in the inaugural IPL auction as he lauded the superstar batter for his brilliant run in the ongoing season.

RCB have made a tremendous comeback after losing seven out of their first eight games to qualify for the playoffs with six straight victories, riding on Kohli's sublime form which

has so far fetched him 708 runs from 14 innings.

RCB will face Rajasthan Royals in the Eliminator on Wednesday night.

"When I bid for the RCB franchise and I bid for Virat, my inner instinct told me that I could not have made better choices," Mallya, who currently lives in the United Kingdom and is trying to avoid extradition to India, wrote on 'X'. "My inner instinct tells me that RCB have the best chance to go for the IPL Trophy. Onward and upward. Best of luck."

Kohli was bought by RCB for USD



30,000 ahead of the 2008 IPL following his title-winning run with India's U19 World Cup.

RCB, however, hasn't been able to lift the trophy despite reaching the final thrice — in 2009, 2011 and 2016.

Mallya is accused in a bank loan default matter of over Rs 9,000 crore involving his defunct Kingfisher Airlines.

He has been living in the United Kingdom since March 2016. The same year he had to forego his ownership of RCB due to the legal proceedings against him.

## Sunrisers Hyderabad batting approach was puzzling: Gavaskar

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Legendary Sunil Gavaskar has questioned the "puzzling" batting approach of Sunrisers Hyderabad during the powerplay in the first IPL Qualifier, suggesting their reckless strategy may have cost them the match against Kolkata Knight Riders.

Having cleaned up his fellow Australian Travis Head with a peach of a delivery with his second ball, Mitchell Starc blew away the SRH top-order in his opening spell of 3-0-22-3.

SRH lost four wickets inside the powerplay to be dismissed for a paltry 159, a target KKR shot down in 13.4 overs to storm into the Sunday's summit clash in Chennai.

"It was a terrific performance, no question. Such an impressive display with both the bat and the ball. They took four wickets in the power play,



and that's where the Sunrisers were pushed onto the back foot, really on the ropes. They couldn't recover from that," the former Indian captain told Star Sports Cricket Live.

"There was a partnership of sorts, but to me, the approach of the SRH batters in those first six overs was puzzling."

With Vaibhav Arora dismissing the in-form

Abhishek Sharma in the next over, SRH's explosive opening pair were out for 13 runs.

Gavaskar said after losing two key wickets, SRH's batters should have played more

cautiously. Instead, they continued to play aggressively, which led to further losses and ultimately cost them the match.

"When you've lost two wickets and the two who have been scoring runs for you, a certain amount of caution is required. Sure, don't miss out on scoring opportunities, but don't look to throw your bat at everything. That's what we saw."

"They lost those four wickets, and losing four top batters means you can't really expect numbers five, six, seven, eight, and nine to get you to 200. So, that is where they may have lost it. But full credit to Kolkata for the way they attacked and took advantage of that pitch as well," Gavaskar said.

The former India opener was all praise for Venkatesh Iyer and emphasised his value as a versatile player, a top left-handed batter and a capable medium-pace bowler, even if

he hasn't bowled much recently.

Venkatesh struck a 28-ball 51 not out in an unbroken partnership with his skipper Shreyas Iyer (58 not out; 24b) to seal their eight-wicket win with 38 balls to spare.

"He's been a very good player for such a long time. His first season, a couple of seasons ago, was outstanding. Then, as it happens to everybody, the second season is harder because opponents have a better idea of how to bowl to you," Gavaskar said.

"But Venkatesh is the kind of cricketer you want in your team. He's a top batter, a left-handed batter, and he can bowl medium pace. We haven't seen him bowl much recently, but he's a very good medium-pace bowler. He might not always pick up wickets, but he can bowl those few overs that can make a significant difference," he added.

### OTHER SPORTS

## Khilari defends gold at World Para Athletics, India surpasses best ever tally



PTI ■ KOBE (JAPAN)

India's Sachin Sarjerao Khilari defended his gold medal in the men's shot put F46 category with an Asian record at the World Para Athletics Championships as the country surpassed its best-ever haul in the global competition here on Wednesday.

India, now have 11 medals, five of them gold. They bettered their previous best tally of 10 (3 gold, 4 silver and 3 bronze) in the 2023 edition in Paris.

Sachin heaved the iron ball to a distance of 16.30 metres, bettering his own Asian record of 16.21 metres set during the World Para Athletics Championship in

Paris last year. The F46 category in para athletics events is for those with moderately affected movement in one or both arms or the absence of limbs. These athletes have to transmit power from hips and legs into the throw.

In the case of Sachin, who hails from Karagani village in Maharashtra's Sangli district, he suffered a mishap during his school days leading to disability in his left hand.

The stocky 34-year-old lost his muscles from the elbow due to gangrene and despite multiple surgeries, his arm never recovered.

On Tuesday, India had reaped a rich haul

of five medals to swell its tally to 10 (4 gold, 4 silver, 2 bronze). China is currently leading the medals tally followed by Brazil.

The Hangzhou Asian Games gold-medallist thrower told PTI that he was confident of taking the top podium spot.

"I was expecting the gold here and I am happy. I have also qualified for Paris Olympics and hope to win gold there also," Sachin said from Kobe.

With three more days still to go, India are in with a chance of winning a few more medals including gold and head coach Satyanarayan said he was quite optimistic.

"We are expecting two more gold medals and hoping to touch the 17-medal mark," said Satyanarayan.

On Tuesday, Reigning Paralympics champion Sumit Antil had defended his F64 javelin throw world title, while Thangavelu Mariyappan and Ekta Bhanu also grabbed gold medals in their respective events as India jumped to third place in the World Para Athletics Championships here.

Antil, who had won gold medals in the Tokyo Paralympics and 2023 World Para Athletics Championships, sent his spear to a distance of 69.50m to stand on top of the podium.

The 25-year-old Haryana athlete thus continued his global domination in the F64 javelin event. He is the current world record holder also, courtesy his massive 73.29m throw while winning gold in the Para Asian Games in Hangzhou, China last year.

He also holds the World Para Athletics Championships record of 70.83m which he had produced while winning the gold in the last edition in Paris in 2023.

Compatriot Sandeep won the bronze medal in the same event with a throw of 60.41m. Sri Lanka's Dulan Kodithuwakku took the silver with a throw of 66.49m.



## Hina, Kanika strike as India juniors beat Dutch hockey club 2-0

PTI ■ BREDA (NETHERLANDS)

Hina Bano and Kanika Siwach scored a goal each as the Indian junior women's hockey team began their tour of Europe with a 2-0 win against Netherlands club Bredase Hockey Vereniging Push here.

After a goalless first half on Tuesday, which saw both sides testing each others' strengths, India broke the deadlock with Hina scoring off a penalty corner after three failed attempts with the set-pieces in

the second quarter.

Bredase Hockey Vereniging pushed aggressively for the equaliser but success eluded them despite the hosts earning three PCs in the third quarter.

Kanika Siwach found the back of the net to double India's lead in the fourth quarter following which the defenders did well to ward off several spirited attacks from the opponents in the last few minutes.

The Indian junior team will play their next match against Belgium in Breda, Netherlands later on Wednesday.