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Poll battle enters crucial Phase III

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With stakes being high for the BJP which had won an overwhelming majority of these seats, including all in Gujarat, Karnataka, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, in the 2019 general elections, political bigwigs Union Ministers Amit Shah, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Mansukh Mandaviya, Parshottam Rupala Congress stalwart Digvijay Singh, to NCP's (Sharad Pawar faction) Supriya Sule and Samajwadi Party's Dimple Yadav are amongst several others from ruling and Opposition side who are in the fray for the voting to be held in 93 constituencies spread over 12 States and Union Territories on Tuesday in the third phase of Lok Sabha polls.

Over 1,300 candidates, including around 120 women, are in the fray for the 93 parliamentary seats in 12 States and Union Territories. Modi and Shah will cast their votes at booths in Ahmedabad city that fall under Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat.

After the third phase of polling, more than half of India will be covered. A total 283 will be covered after the third phase of polling. According to EC, over 17.24 crore voters will cast their vote in the third phase for 93 parliamentary seats. A total of 1,041 inter-State and 275 International Border check posts are keeping strict vigil on any illicit flow of liquor, drugs,



cash and freebies. Strict surveillance has been kept at sea and air routes. With the BJP bagging Surat unopposed, 25 seats in Prime Minister Modi's home State of Gujarat will go to polls on May 7, besides 11 seats in Maharashtra, 10 seats in Uttar Pradesh, the remaining 14 of the 28 in Karnataka, seven in Chhattisgarh, five in Bihar, four each in Assam and West Bengal, and all two in Goa. The Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu (2 seats) and nine seats in Madhya Pradesh, including Betul where elections were deferred, will also go to polls on Tuesday and over 11 crore people will be eligible to vote. Campaigning for the third phase witnessed the

Constitution and reservation issue dominating the poll discourse. The stakes are significant for the BJP and its allies, which had, in 2019, won 75 of the 93 seats going to polls on Tuesday, while the INDIA Bloc parties had won only 11. Four seats had gone to the undivided Shiv Sena, two were won by independents, and one by the AIUDF. With the first two phases registering a dip in voter turnout as compared to 2019, the question is whether the third phase will buck the trend amid hot weather and heat waves in these States. After the third phase, voting will be completed in 283 out of

243 seats in the Lok Sabha. The next four phases will be on May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1. Counting of votes is on June 4. Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag-Rajouri Lok Sabha seats were also to vote in the third phase of polling. However, due to several connectivity issues, the Election Commission of India rescheduled it to May 25. During the campaign, the BJP had to face the ire of the Kshatriya community over a remark made by Rupala in Rajkot. He had claimed several rulers from the community had "roti and beti" (marriage and trade) relations with the British and other foreign invaders. **Continued on Page 2**

LG recommends NIA probe against Kejriwal

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Troubles seem to be mounting for the jailed Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal as Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena recommended National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe against the AAP chief for allegedly receiving political funding from the banned terrorist organisation 'Sikhs for Justice' to the Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday. The LG claimed that Kejriwal "has received a staggering amount of \$16 million in funding from Khalistani groups between 2014 and 2022."

The move comes a day ahead of the Supreme Court considering granting Kejriwal interim bail in view of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. The AAP chief, who is in Tihar jail, was arrested on March 21 by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with an excise policy linked money laundering case. In a letter to the Union Home secretary, the Lieutenant Governor's secretary said Saxena had received a complaint that the Kejriwal-led AAP allegedly received USD 16 million funding from extremist Khalistani groups for facilitating the release of Devendra Pal Bhullar.

"Keeping in view, the sensitivity and seriousness of the allegations levelled in the complaint, the LG has desired that the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, may consider referring the matter to the NIA for conducting comprehensive investigation into the matter," the letter to the Home



Ministry read. Bhullar, who is in Amritsar Central Jail, was convicted in connection with the killing of nine people in a bomb blast in 1993 in Delhi. He was sentenced to death by a designated TADA court on August 25, 2001 and is undergoing life imprisonment after the Supreme Court commuted his death sentence. Reacting to the development, senior AAP leader and Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj called it "yet another conspiracy against Kejriwal at the behest of BJP". "They are losing all seven seats in Delhi and are rattled by the fear of defeat in Lok Sabha polls," he claimed, adding that the LG is the agent of BJP and the party had done something similar before also in Punjab elections. The complaint was filed by World Hindu Federation's National General Secretary Ashoo Mongia. **Continued on Page 2**

STARS IN FRAY

CONSTITUENCY	CANDIDATES	PARTY
Gandhinagar	Amit Shah	BJP
	Sonal Patel	Congress
	Mohammedanish Desai	BSP
Baramati	Supriya Sule	NCP (Pawar)
	Sunetra Pawar	NCP
Guna	Jyotiraditya Scindia	BJP
	Rao Yadendra Singh	Congress
	Dhaniram Chaudhary	BSP
Rajgarh	Rodmal Nagar	BJP
	Digvijay Singh	Congress
	Dr. Rajendra Suryavanshi	BSP
Berhampore	Nirmal Kumar Saha	BJP
	Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury	Congress
	Yusuf Pathan	TMC
Vidisha	Shivraj Singh Chouhan	BJP
	Pratap Bhanu Sharma	Congress
	Kishan Lal Ladiya	BSP
Dharwad	Seema Sharma	SP
	Prahlad Joshi	BJP
	Vinod Asooti	Congress
South Goa	Pallavi Dempo	BJP
	Capt. Viriato Fernandes	Congress
	Mainpuri	Jaiveer Singh Thakur
Dimple Yadav		SP
Shiv Prasad Yadav		BSP
Dhubri	Badruddin Ajmal	AIUF
	Rakibul Hussain	Congress
	Zabed Islam	AGP



BJP's all-weather ally in Odisha faces Modi heat

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI/BERHAMPUR

Less than two months before the announcement of Lok Sabha polls, when the BJP and BJD were discussing an alliance in Odisha and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik received praise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi at public rallies, the latter asserted on Monday that the expiry date of the BJD Government in Odisha is June 4, the day when Lok Sabha and Assembly election results will be announced. Addressing his first election rally in the State, Modi said, "Odisha mein BJD ast hain, Congress past hai aur log BJP per ashwasthai hai. Sirf BJP ummido ka naya suraj ban kar ubhri hain (in Odisha, the BJD is setting sun, the Congress is battered and people are sure of BJP. And the BJP has emerged as the only ray of hope for the people)." BJD leaders expressed dismay and complete shock over the PM's 'sharp attack' on the

party, as well as Patnaik, who left no stone unturned to support the NDA in Parliament. In February this year, he sent Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw to the Rajya Sabha under the BJD quota. Patnaik also regarded the BJP with a tacit strategy, as it never aligned with the Congress-led Opposition alliance or any Third Front, which was proposed a year ago by several non-BJP parties to challenge Modi in the Lok Sabha polls. Both parties were working to forge an alliance after breaking ties 15 years ago, though they cooperated in tandem on legislative matters. In an apparent dig at Naveen Patnaik, the Prime Minister said, "Odisha needs a CM who understands Odia language and culture." "The BJP will form a double-engine Government here after the ongoing elections. The expiry date of the BJD

Government is June 4, 2024," Modi said at the Berhampur rally. When the talks were ongoing until they proved futile at the end of March, both Modi and Patnaik acknowledged each other's contributions, despite not being partners in Governments. The pact was formed in 1998, orchestrated by senior leaders Bijay Mohapatra and the BJP's stalwart strategist late Pramod Mahajan. In 1998 Patnaik was Minister of Steel and Mines in the Vajpayee Cabinet. "Naveen Patnaik always regarded the BJP as a party of late PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The alliance was successful and even when in between there were no trucks, the BJD was tacitly with BJP in every sphere and never aligned with the Opposition side," said a BJD leader also quoting Patnaik's reaction post Modi's speech. **Continued on Page 2**

Spotlight on Samajwadi Party's first family

VIRENDRA NATH BHATT ■ LUCKNOW

The stage is set for the third phase of elections in 10 Lok Sabha constituencies which will go to polls on Tuesday, with all eyes on the first family of Samajwadi Party founder Mulayam Singh Yadav who are in the electoral fray. While SP chief Akhilesh Yadav's wife Dimple is aiming to retain the Mainpuri Lok Sabha seat which she won in the bypolls following the demise of her father-in-law Mulayam, Akshaya Yadav, son of Ram Gopal Yadav, the national principal general secretary of SP, will try to reclaim the Firozabad seat, which he had won in 2014.



Besides, Aditya Yadav, the son of SP national general secretary Shivpal Singh Yadav, is making his electoral debut from the Budaun Lok Sabha seat which was represented by his cousin Dharmendra Yadav in 2014. The 10 constituencies in UP that will vote in the third phase on Tuesday are

Sambhal, Hathras (SC), Agra (SC), Fatehpur Sikri, Firozabad, Mainpuri, Budaun, Aonla and Bareilly. In the earlier two phases of elections, polling was held in 16 out of the total 80 Lok Sabha constituencies in UP.

Besides the Yadav family members, polling will be held to seal the fate of Union Minister SP Singh Baghel, UP Tourism Minister Jaiveer Singh, Minister of State for Revenue Anoop Pradhan Balmiki. Baghel, Jaiveer Singh, and Balmiki are

contesting from Agra (SC), Mainpuri, and Hathras (SC) Lok Sabha constituencies respectively. Rajveer Singh, son of former Chief Minister of UP and Bharatiya Janata Party stalwart Kalyan Singh, is looking to score a hat-trick from the Etah parliamentary constituency, which was also represented in 2009 by Kalyan Singh as a candidate of the Jan Kranti Party. In Bareilly, the main contest has narrowed down to the BJP's Chhatrapal Singh Gangwar and Praveen Singh Aron of the SP after the nomination paper of Bahujan Samaj Party candidate Master Chhotey Lal Gangwar was rejected. **Continued on Page 2**

Capital sees 67 per cent surge in wrong side driving prosecutions

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

A staggering surge of almost 67 per cent in the number of prosecutions for 'wrong side driving' was witnessed in the national Capital in 2024, during the period from January 1 to April 30, compared to the same period in the previous year. While in the earlier year, a total of 18,047 violators of traffic rules were caught by the traffic police in the city, the number saw a considerable jump, taking the total to 30,062 in 2024. A Delhi Traffic Police official said in response to the alarming increase in incidents of driving against the flow of traffic in the Capital city, the Delhi Traffic Police has launched a robust crackdown campaign to ensure road safety and discipline. "Over the past few months, there has been a noticeable surge in the number of vehicles violating traffic norms by

driving against the designated flow of traffic. This reckless behaviour not only endangers the lives of the offenders but also poses a significant threat to other road users, leading to a rise in accidents and traffic congestion," said the official. The police have intensified its measures in order to curb this dangerous practice. Special teams have been deployed across key intersections and thoroughfares to monitor traffic flow and identify violators. Strict legal action, including hefty fines and penalties, is being taken against individuals found driving against the established traffic direction," said the authorities. Further, top 10 traffic circles have been identified by the police with

Najafgarh area topping the list with 1,3289 violators. Sarita Vihar stands at the second number with 1,333 violators, followed by 1,133 in BhajanPura, 1,093 in Punjabi Bagh, 1,062 in Kalyan Puri, 1,056 in Kotwali, 1,041 in Dwarka, 998 in Sangam Vihar, 968 in Rajouri Garden and 966 in Kamla Market. "The Delhi Traffic Police has also conducted a comprehensive analysis of the top ten traffic circles with the highest number of challans issued in 2024. This study makes it possible to target enforcement operations to improve road safety and adherence to traffic regulations by identifying the areas with the highest prevalence of these types of offences," a senior police

official said. In a bid to raise awareness and make citizens understand the importance of adhering to traffic rules and regulations, the traffic police is collaborating with various stakeholders, including civic authorities and educational institutions. "Public outreach programmes, awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives are being conducted to instil a sense of responsibility and civic duty among all road users," the police said. Further, they urged citizens to prioritise safety and compliance with traffic laws while commuting on the city's roads. "It is imperative for every individual to respect traffic regulations, follow designated traffic flow directions, and contribute towards creating a safer and more orderly environment for all," the statement by the traffic police said.



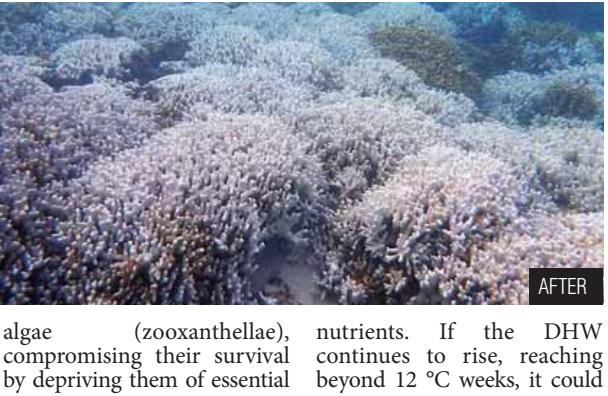
Marine heatwave scorches pristine coral reefs of Lakshadweep

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The vibrant corals of the picturesque Lakshadweep sea nestled in India's smallest union territory off the coast of Kerala are losing their sheen as it is experiencing prolonged marine heatwaves since late October 2023. These marine heat waves, characterised by extended periods of abnormally high ocean temperatures, have pushed the Degree Heating Week (DHW) indicator above

4 °C-weeks, posing a severe threat to coral health, said scientists at the ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) as they observed alarming levels of coral bleaching, indicating significant stress on marine ecosystems in the region. Coral bleaching occurs when the water temperature becomes excessively warm, causing corals to expel the microscopic algae residing within their tissues. Experts say bleached corals are not

dead but are at risk of starvation and disease. "Such heat stress levels signify a severe threat to coral health, leading to extensive bleaching where corals lose the symbiotic algae (zooxanthellae), compromising their survival by depriving them of essential nutrients. If the DHW continues to rise, reaching beyond 12 °C weeks, it could precipitate an unprecedented biodiversity crisis due to multispecies mortality," KR Sreenath, senior scientist at CMFRI, said on Monday. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), this level of DHW poses a substantial risk of coral bleaching, threatening the region's diverse marine ecosystems. Corals are living organisms that make up the reefs and provide the ecosystem for



marine life to thrive, especially fish. Coral reefs are a natural barrier, protecting these islands against the swelling of the seas, and keeping salt water out of the limited freshwater sources in the region. Shelton Padua, another senior scientist, identified the primary causes of these marine heat waves as excessive heat atmospheric transfer coupled with shifts in ocean currents, leading to unusually high water temperatures. **Continued on Page 2**

Maharashtra readies to witness ripple effect of Sena, NCP splits

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The ripple effect of a political tsunami caused by the dramatic splits witnessed in the Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in June 2022 and July 2023 respectively — which spawned two new breakaway parties in the state — will be felt for the first time, as eleven constituencies go to polls in the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra on Tuesday. The third phase of LS polling is very crucial, considering that at stake are seven politically influential seats in sugar-rich western Maharashtra — Baramati, Solapur, Madha, Sangli, Satara, Satara, Kolhapur and Hatkanangale, two seats in coastal Konkan region — Raigad and Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg, and two seats from Marathwada — Osmanabad and Latur. The mother of all electoral battles in Maharashtra is being waged between the prominent members of the Pawar family

-- Sharad Pawar's daughter and three-time MP Supriya Sule and his estranged nephew and deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's wife Sunetra Pawar -- in Baramati Lok Sabha constituency. This is the first-ever occasion in the Maharashtra political history that the two members of the Pawar family are pitted against each other in an election. Two sons of iconic Maratha warrior Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj -- Shrimant Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj and Shrimant Chhatrapati Udayanraje Bhosale -- are trying their luck in Kolhapur and Satara constituencies respectively. Senior BJP leader, former chief minister and current Union Minister Narayan Rane, who is seeking election to the Lok Sabha for the first time from Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg, and veteran Congress leader and former Union Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde's daughter Praniti Shinde (Solapur) are two other prominent con-



tenders in the third phase of polling. That the third phase of Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra is of vital importance can be evidenced from the fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has addressed as many as seven rallies -- in Pune, Solapur, Madha, Satara, Kolhapur, Osmanabad (Dharashiv) and Latur -- and reached out voters in all the poll-bound constituencies in western Maharashtra and neighbouring Marathwada. Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Uttar

Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath campaigned for the BJP in Sangli, Solapur and Kolhapur. Chief minister Eknath Shinde of the Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar of the NCP, two breakaway outfits and allies of the BJP, have also campaigned extensively in the poll-bound constituencies. From the Opposition side, Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi have addressed rallies in Pune and Latur respectively. Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray, who is leading the

rebellion within the NCP which saw Ajit Pawar walked out a majority of the party MLAs and joined the Eknath Shinde Sena-BJP government on July 2, 2023. Owing to the split in both the Sena and NCP and subsequent formation of new break-away outfits headed by Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar, the parent parties have suffered badly so much so that the Uddhav Thackeray-headed Sena and Sharad Pawar-led NCP have lost party's name as well as their symbols. It remains to be seen how both the parent parties and their offshoots will fare in the elections. From among all the 11 poll-bound constituencies, an unprecedented electoral battle is going on in NCP chief Sharad Pawar's home turf of Baramati. Though the contest is Supriya Sule of the NCP (Sharad Pawar) and Sunetra Pawar of the NCP (Ajit Pawar), it has become a battle of prestige between the uncle and the estranged nephew.

Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) from the front, has addressed rallies in all the eleven poll-bound constituencies, while NCP chief Sharad Pawar -- who wields considerable influence among the people in western Maharashtra, has covered a majority of the poll-bound constituencies. The BJP has maximum stakes in the third phase of polling as it is contesting six out of the 11 poll-bound seats, while the NCP (Ajit Pawar) has fielded candidates in three constituencies and the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena is in the fray in two seats. From the Opposition MVA side, the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena is contesting a maximum of five seats, while the NCP (Sharad Pawar) and Congress have put up candidates in three constituencies each. This is the first major elections being held after the vertical split in the Shiv Sena, which has thrown up a new Shiv Sena headed by chief minister Eknath Shinde, and

EC warns parties against misuse of AI to create deepfakes

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid rising number of manipulated or deepfake videos taking a centre stage in the Lok Sabha elections 2024, the Election Commission (EC) warned the political parties against misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI) based tools to create deep fakes that distort information or propagate misinformation and directed the political parties to remove the video clips and other content "within 3 hours of coming to their notice", emphasising the need to uphold the integrity of the electoral process. Recently, a political slugfest erupted over a doctored video of Home Minister Amit Shah and notices were served to 17 persons, including Telangana Chief Minister and Congress leader Revanth Reddy. Arun Reddy, who handled 'Spirit of Congress' X account, was arrested in connection with

Amit Shah's doctored video case. Besides, Shah, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Bollywood actors Aamir Khan, Ajay Devgan, Kajol, Rashmika Mandana and Ranveer Singh posted on certain social media handles were taken down and criminal complaints were filed. Additionally, EC wrote to political parties detailing the provisions of laws against misuse of such tools and said, "In view of the existing legal provisions, amongst other directions, the parties have been specifically directed to refrain from publishing and circulating deep fake audios/videos, disseminate any misinformation or information which is patently false, untrue or misleading in nature, to refrain from posting derogatory content towards women, to abstain from using children in campaigns, to avoid depicting violence or harm to animals."

One killed in bomb blast in Hooghly day before Phase III polling

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

A teenager died and his two friends injured on Monday after a bomb they mistook as ball exploded at Pandua in Hooghly district of Bengal triggering war of words between the rival political outfits. The incident occurred a day ahead of the State going to the third phase of polling in four minority-dominated seats of North and South Malda, Jangipur and Murshidabad. Three boys suffered grievous injuries when the bomb exploded but one of them passed away at the Chinsurah Imambarah Hospital, police said adding one person had been arrested in connection with the blast. The conditions of the other two injured persons was also said to be critical. Even as intense war of words ensued between sitting BJP MP Locket Chatterjee and the Trinamool Congress with the former staging a dharna at Chinsurah demanding the arrest of the culprits and alleging that the "TMC is readying its bombs to scare away the votes," State Trinamool Congress vice president Jaiprakash Majumdar said it was a BJP ploy to disturb the rally of his party's general secretary Abhishek Banerjee who was to address a meeting in



Hooghly on Tuesday. Bombs were also recovered by the security forces at Jangipur and Sagarpara in Murshidabad district where two parliamentary constituencies were going to polls on Tuesday. The bomb squad of the state police defused the socket bombs that were kept in a field at Jangipur. At Sagarpara in Jalangi block the police defused another bag full of crude bombs likely to have been kept for use in the elections, sources said. Meanwhile, the Election Commission had arranged for a massive security bandobast for the third phase of polling in four constituencies in two districts of Bengal. While about 7.3 million voters were likely to exercise their franchise — in 7,360 polling

stations — in these four constituencies where the main electoral issues are going to be unemployment, migrant labour, sagging bidi industry, infiltration, Ganga erosion and Citizenship Amendment Act sources said. Demographically Malda and Murshidabad are the two districts where the Muslim population is in majority. While Malda has about 57 per cent Muslim population, Murshidabad has about 68 per cent of minority voters. If Murshidabad district headquarters Behrampur — from where Adhir Chowdhury and Yusuf Pathan are contesting — which is not going to polls in this round is taken out then the number of Muslim voters could go up to 72 per cent.

Mass resignation in Kargil NC unit over diktat to back INC pick

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The Kargil unit of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference Monday tendered mass resignation from the primary membership of the party after the party high command issued a diktat to them to support the official candidate of the Indian National Congress from the Ladakh Parliamentary segment. The Kargil Unit of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference and the Congress had unanimously supported the candidature of Independent candidate Haji Haneefa Jan much to the chagrin of the party high command. On Monday, Party President Dr Farooq Abdullah directed the Kargil unit of the party to support the INDIA bloc candidate - T Namgyal in the Lok Sabha election for the Ladakh seat. Dr Abdullah also told his colleagues that failure to follow this directive would be seen as a serious breach of party discipline. Reacting swiftly, Additional General Secretary Ladakh Qamar Ali Akhooon conveyed the unit's decision to party



president Farooq Abdullah in a letter. In his letter addressed to the Party President Dr Farooq Abdullah, Qamar Ali Akhooon wrote, "In the interest of the Ladakh region as a whole and to secure the future of our region, the Ladakh Democratic Alliance has unilaterally decided to project a joint candidate namely Mohd Haneefa Jan as an Independent candidate for the forthcoming Lok Sabha election supported by all the political and religious institutions unanimously coming across the party/religious affiliations". He further wrote, "The party high command is pressurizing us both telephonically as well as social media to support the official candidate of INC from Ladakh which is unacceptable to us including J&k NC and INC unit Kargil".

Poonch terror attack: ₹20 lakh bounty placed on two Pakistan terrorists

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Security forces combing the thickly forested belt of Surankote in Poonch for the last three days on released sketches of two suspected Pakistani terrorists, believed to be behind the attack on the Indian Air Force (IAF) vehicles, on Saturday. One IAF personnel hailing from Madhya Pradesh sacrificed his life while four others received multiple bullet injuries. The security forces while circulating these sketches also declared a reward of Rs 20 lakh for those providing information on these two terrorists. As per the latest intelligence assessment Sajjid Jutt, a dreaded terrorist operating from Pakistan and PoJK, may have masterminded the terror attack ahead of voting for Parliamentary elections in the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency. According to the poster released in the frontier districts of Rajouri and Poonch by the local officers, "A group of two to three terrorists were behind the attack on the IAF convoy near Shahstiar area in Surankote on Saturday. Anyone who will give fruitful and reliable infor-

mation about the whereabouts of these terrorists leading to their arrest will be rewarded and identity will be kept secret." The officials have also provided four mobile numbers on which people can contact and share information. The numbers are — 9541051982, 8082294375, 9541051982, and 8082294375. Meanwhile, a joint team of security forces continued massive search operations in Surankote and Mendhar for the third consecutive day chasing these hiding terrorists. The army has pressed elite para commandos to hunt down these terrorists. Sniffer dogs are also embedded with the teams of foot soldiers conducting cordon and search operations in the area. The Army is also maintaining aerial reconnaissance with the help of drone cameras. So far the team of investigators have gathered inputs about some of the over-ground workers (OGW) who may have provided food and shelter to these terrorists before the attack took place. The sketches were prepared based on the inputs shared by some of these OGWs.

10 schools in Ahmedabad receive hoax bomb threats

PNS ■ AHMEDABAD

On the eve of Lok Sabha elections in Ahmedabad, as many as 10 schools received an email on Monday threatening bomb blasts, though a police statement said this was a hoax as searches failed to unearth anything suspicious. After being alerted, police as well as bomb detection and disposal squad, dog squad and Crime Branch teams reached these schools and conducted a thorough search, a statement by Ahmedabad City Crime Branch informed. "No explosives were found during the search operation. Our teams are patrolling these areas and technical surveillance has also been initiated about the sender of the email. We appeal to people not to panic and to stay away from rumours. This threat was a hoax," the statement said. Ignore this email (sent to schools) and exercise your voting rights tomorrow without any fear, it asked citizens. The schools that received the threat email included DPS and Anand Niketan in Bopal, Udgam School on SG Highway, Calorx School in Ghatlodia, Kendriya Vidyalaya at Chandkheda and Army Cantonment on Airport Road.

BJP's all-weather ally in Odisha...

From Page 1 "BJP and Modi are day dreaming to capture Odisha, how foolish," the leader quoted their CM which later went viral late evening. Responding to Modi's claim, senior BJD leader and Naveen Patnaik's close aide VK Pandian said, "Patnaik would take oath as the Chief Minister of Odisha for the sixth consecutive time between 11.30 am and 1.30 pm on June 9." BJD-BJP alliance saw success in two Assembly elections and three Lok Sabha polls in Odisha. The partnership, forged in February 1998, enjoyed a strong foundation, with both parties successfully contesting Lok Sabha elections in 1998, 1999, and 2004, as well as Assembly elections in 2000 and 2004. The strategic

importance of Odisha, with its 21 Lok Sabha seats and 147 assembly seats, is not lost on either party. In the 2019 elections, BJD and BJP secured 12 and eight parliamentary constituencies and 112 and 23 Assembly constituencies, respectively. The alliance could not materialise this year because for the Assembly elections which is being held simultaneously with the Lok Sabha, BJD was pushing for a larger share of seats, proposing to contest 105 out of the 147 available seats, leaving the BJP with 42 seats. Simultaneously, in the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP expected to secure a significant portion of the seats. Of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in Odisha pressed for 13-14. Once considered the BJP's most reli

Poll battle enters crucial ...

From Page 1 The current phase is important for Mulaym Singh Yadav's family, with Dimple Yadav aiming to retain the Mainpuri Lok Sabha seat. Akshaya Yadav, son of Ram Gopal Yadav, is contesting from Firozabad, and Aditya Yadav is making his electoral debut from the Budaun Lok

Sabha seat. In Madhya Pradesh where the spotlight is on the high-stakes battle in Baramati, where Sharad Pawar's daughter Supriya Sule is pitted against Sunetra Pawar, wife of the veteran leader's estranged nephew and Maharashtra deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar.

he was in the Congress. In Maharashtra, the spotlight is on the high-stakes battle in Baramati, where Sharad Pawar's daughter Supriya Sule is pitted against Sunetra Pawar, wife of the veteran leader's estranged nephew and Maharashtra deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar.

Spotlight on Samajwadi Party's...

From Page 1 In the third phase, the Bharatiya Janata Party has given tickets to five new faces — Chhatrapal Gangwar from Bareilly, Durvijay Singh Shukla from Budaun, Anoop Pradhan Balmiki from Hathras (SC), Vishwadeep Singh from Firozabad, and Jayveer Singh from Mainpuri

Lok Sabha seat. The first four replaced Santosh Gangwar, Sanghamitra Maurya, Rajveer Singh Diler, and Chandrasen Jadaun. Jayveer Singh is the sole candidate in this phase who replaced a losing candidate from BJP. The saffron party retained the winning candidates from Etah, Agra (SC), Aonla, and

Fatehpur Sikri. It also gave a ticket to Parameshwar Lal Saini from Sambhal Lok Sabha seat. The Congress has fielded one candidate — Ramnath Singh Sikarwar from Fatehpur Sikri — while its INDIA Bloc ally, the Samajwadi Party, has fielded candidates in the remaining nine seats in this phase.

Marine heatwave scorches pristine coral reefs...

From Page 1 He explained that since October 27, 2023, the Lakshadweep Sea, spanning from 8.0 to 12.0 N latitude and 71.0 to 75.0 E longitude, has been experiencing these conditions, with temperatures consistently registering rises greater than 1°C above the norm. Viewing that the health of marine ecosystems is integral to the livelihoods of coastal

communities, influencing tourism and fisheries sectors, Sreenath said the ongoing marine heat waves are likely to cause significant economic losses for the inhabitants who are mostly dependent on the earnings from the sea whether it is a fish or allied community or the tourists sector. The heatwaves also threaten other critical marine habitats, including sea-grass meadows. Similar to corals, sea-grass

meadows are experiencing detrimental impacts due to the heat waves such as impaired photosynthesis, reduced growth, and hindered reproductive functions. Lakshadweep came into the limelight earlier this year with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit. Lakshadweep's island's sea vibrant corals have always been a huge draw to the tourists. "The degradation of these

ecosystems can lead to the collapse of local marine food webs, affecting a wide range of marine species, from fish communities to marine mammals like dugongs and dolphins," Sreenath warned. The waters of the archipelago, though, are spread over 400,000 square kilometres and are rich in marine life and resources. But the CMFRI observation has come as an alarm to the authorities.

Furthermore, the heat waves also endanger critical marine habitats like sea-grass meadows, impairing photosynthesis, growth, and reproductive functions. The degradation of these ecosystems can disrupt local marine food webs, impacting a wide range of species, from fish communities to marine mammals like dugongs and dolphins. To address these challenges,

CMFRI is actively researching ecological changes affecting coral reefs and has initiated a national project to investigate coral reef resilience. By integrating advanced climatic modeling, deep-learning, and ecological research, the institute aims to develop resilience-based management strategies to ensure the long-term sustainability of coral reef ecosystems.

LG recommends NIA probe against...

From Page 1 "I am directed to forward a complaint dated 01.04.2024 (in original) received from Ashoo Mongia National General Secretary (World Hindu Federation India), along with printout of posts on platform 'X' (erstwhile Twitter), made by Dr Munish Kumar Raizada, former worker of Aam Aadmi Party, referred to in the enclosed letter and a pen drive as received," the letter stated. The LG further said "the complainant has requested for a comprehensive enquiry into the allegations regarding funding of Aam Aadmi Party by Extremist group Justice

for Sikhs". The complaint is made against a Chief Minister and relates to political funding received from a banned terrorist organisation, the letter stated. Claiming that Kejriwal received millions in funding for facilitating the release of Bhullar, the letter stated, "The complainant was referred to the contents of a video (in enclosed pen drive), purportedly featuring Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, (Khalistani terrorist and founder of banned organisation Sikhs For Justice), wherein he has alleged that AAP-led by

Arvind Kejriwal has received a staggering amount of \$16 million in funding from Khalistani groups between 2014 and 2022." "It has also been alleged that a clandestine meeting occurred in 2014 between Kejriwal and pro-Khalistani Sikhs at Gurdwara Richmond Hills, New York. During the said meeting, Kejriwal purportedly promised to facilitate release of Devender Pal Bhullar, in return for substantial financial backing from Khalistani factions to Aam Aadmi Party," the LG claimed. Troubles seem to be mounting for the jailed Delhi

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal as Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena recommended National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe against the AAP chief for allegedly receiving political funding from the banned terrorist organisation 'Sikhs for Justice' to the Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday. The LG claimed that Kejriwal "has received a staggering amount of \$16 million in funding from Khalistani groups between 2014 and 2022." The move comes a day ahead of the Supreme Court considering granting Kejriwal

interim bail in view of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. The AAP chief, who is in Tihar jail, was arrested on March 21 by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with an excise policy linked money laundering case. In a letter to the Union Home secretary, the Lieutenant Governor's secretariat said Saxena had received a complaint that the Kejriwal-led AAP allegedly received USD 16 million funding from extremist Khalistani groups for facilitating the release of Devendra Pal Bhullar. "Keeping in view, the

sensitivity and seriousness of the allegations levelled in the complaint, the LG has desired that the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, may consider referring the matter to the NIA for conducting comprehensive investigation into the matter," the letter to the Home Ministry read. Bhullar, who is in Amritsar Central Jail, was convicted in connection with the killing of nine people in a bomb blast in 1993 in Delhi. He was sentenced to death by a designated TADA court on August 25, 2001 and is undergoing life imprisonment after the

Supreme Court commuted his death sentence. Reacting to the development, senior AAP leader and Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj called it "yet another conspiracy against Kejriwal at the behest of BJP". "They are losing all seven seats in Delhi and are rattled by the fear of defeat in Lok Sabha polls," he claimed, adding that the LG is the agent of BJP and the party had done something similar before also in Punjab elections. The complaint was filed by World Hindu Federation's National General Secretary Ashoo Mongia.

"I am directed to forward a complaint dated 01.04.2024 (in original) received from Ashoo Mongia National General Secretary (World Hindu Federation India), along with printout of posts on platform 'X' (erstwhile Twitter), made by Dr Munish Kumar Raizada, former worker of Aam Aadmi Party, referred to in the enclosed letter and a pen drive as received," the letter stated. The LG further said "the complainant has requested for a comprehensive enquiry into the allegations regarding funding of Aam Aadmi Party by Extremist group Justice for Sikhs".

Congress candidate Kanhaiya files nomination for North East Delhi seat

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Chanting "hathi Ghodha paalki, jai kanhaiya lal ki", supporters of INDIA Bloc brought former JNU student leader and Congress candidate for the North East Delhi Lok Sabha constituency, Kanhaiya Kumar on their shoulders to file his nomination on Monday while fluttering party flags of AAP, Congress and CPI (M) on Monday morning to present a joint Opposition against BJP in the national Capital. Kanhaiya filed his nomination at the District Magistrate's office in Nand Nagri in the presence of former Delhi minister Dr Narendra Nath, Delhi Environment Minister and AAP Delhi convener Gopal Rai and legal advisor KC Mittal. Prior to filing his nomination, he shared a series of photos on social media, depicting him alongside leaders from diverse religious backgrounds. One image captured him taking

part in a 'hawan' and Sarvdharam prayers. "Today, before filing my nomination, Gurus of all religions presented me with the Preamble of the Constitution and prayed for me and blessed me. This is our India. This is our Constitution. 'Sarva Dharma Sam Bhaav'. I will sacrifice my life to protect this India and its Constitution," he said on X. After filing his nomination, he held a road show as supporters from various political factions, including AAP, Congress, and CPIM, gathered in droves to show their unwavering support for Kumar's candidacy. Police forces were deployed at the procession to avoid any mishap. The student leader turned politician held a unique e-rickshaw rally where he stood in the vehicle while carrying the preamble of the constitution along with him. Scores of party workers of both AAP and Congress chanted slogans like "Congress zindabad", "Kanhaiya zind-



abad", "India jeetega" and "Rahul Gandhi zindabad" in the rally. A supporter Sandeep Mishra also blew conch while carrying a poster that stated "kaurav vs Kanhaiya, voto ka Mahabharat". Supporters and party workers gathered in large numbers, with a sizable supporter of the Muslim population, in the area outside the Congress office in the constituency. Many workers sported their party scarves while also wearing t-shirts with Kanhaiya's face on it. Monday was the last day to file nominations for the Lok Sabha polls in Delhi, which votes on May 25. Twenty-four people have filed papers in Northeast Delhi, the highest in the city so far. BJP has Manoj Tiwari, Bhojpuri singer and its two-term MP as its candidate once again from here. It is a large constituency with many migrants from UP and Bihar. Kanhaiya contested unsuccessfully from the Begusarai

seat in Bihar in 2019 Lok Sabha elections from the CPI party. Talking to the CPI (M) workers, who weren't seen in the procession of either AAP or Congress, said that they are campaigning for the INDIA alliance candidate by going door-to-door. The AAP workers, at the rally, claimed that even at grassroot level supporters of their party will vote to bring the INDIA alliance. Pictures of jailed Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal were also carried by the AAP workers in the rally while chanting 'Arvind Kejriwal zindabad' and 'Aam Aadmi Party Zindabad'. Small children were also part of the procession and when asked for the reason to be enthusiastically fluttering Congress flags, of height more than theirs, they replied innocently, "Kanhaiya will do what Modi couldn't. I have met him and he is very nice." Further, the North east Delhi seat candidate took to X (formerly Twitter) following filing

his nomination and said, "Today I filed my nomination as North East Delhi Lok Sabha candidate of INDIA Alliance. During this, Aam Aadmi Party's Delhi State President Gopal Rai, MLA Sanjeev Jha, Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee President Devendra Yadav, former Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee President Anil Chaudhary and former MLA Narendra Nath were present. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the friends who came in thousands for the nomination rally. Your support and blessings are our real strength. On this basis we will fight and win against every negative force to make North East Delhi better." Kanhaiya had obtained a graduate degree in Geography, and then went on to obtain a doctorate in African Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2019. His autobiography, Bihar to Tihar: My Political Journey, was published in October 2016.

BJP releases list of 40 star campaigners

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva released the list of the 40 star campaigners for the party in the national Capital on Monday which includes names of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and BJP national president JP Nadda along with other heavy weights ahead of the Lok Sabha 2024 elections slated to be held on May 25. Notably, cricketer Gautam Gambhir, who recently parted his ways from the BJP, citing that he wanted to focus on his commitments, is also included in the party's list of star campaigners. Arvinder Singh Lovely, who recently left the Congress and joined BJP, will also campaign for the party. BJP President Jagat Prakash Nadda will also hold road shows and rallies in the city to strengthen the saffron party's prospects in the city. Several Union Ministers including Nitin Gadkari, Piyush Goyal, Hardeep Singh Puri, Smriti Irani and Arjun Ram Meghwal are also included in the list of star campaigners. Further, Chief Ministers of various states will also be taking part in the processions and campaigns by BJP. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma are also included in the list.



By naming a diverse group of campaigners, the BJP aimed to leverage the popularity and influence of these leaders to bolster its electoral prospects in Delhi. Each campaigner brings unique strengths and appeal, contributing to the party's outreach efforts in the region. With a mix of national and regional figures, the BJP's campaign strategy aims to resonate with voters on various fronts, addressing local issues while also highlighting the party's national agenda under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. The list encompasses various senior BJP leaders as part of the campaign in Delhi where AAP and Congress have come together under the INDIA alliance to present a joint opposition against the saffron party. Deputy Chief Ministers of various states are also included in the list shared to the EC. Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari and Prem Chand Bairwa, Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini and Bihar Deputy

Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary have also made their names in the list. Along with that, Rajya Sabha MP Arun Singh, Punjab BJP leader and National General Secretary Tarun Chugh, Rajya Sabha MP and National General Secretary Dushyant Kumar Gautam, Delhi elections in-charge Om Prakash Dhankar, National Secretary and Delhi's Deputy in-charge Dr Alka Gurjar, BJP leader Manjinder Singh Sirsa, National Chief Spokesperson Anil Baluni and party Delhi President Virendra Sachdeva are also included in the list of star campaigners. MP Hema Malini, Tamil Nadu's BJP President K. Annamalai, former Union Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi and former MoS Vijay Goel are also star campaigners. Further, two-time MP Manoj Tiwari, Harsh Vardhan, Meenakshi Lekhi, Parvish Verma and Gautam Gambhir, BJP candidate for South Delhi Ramesh Bihuri, Delhi MLA Vijender Gupta and Vice Chairman of New Delhi Municipal Council Satish Upadhyay.

AAP teachers body requests DU VC to remove political leaders photos from website

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party teachers' body, AADTA, has written to Delhi University Vice-Chancellor Yogesh Singh requesting him to take down the photographs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other political leaders from the varsity's website stating it violates the UGC's directives to enforce Model Code of Conduct in view of the Lok Sabha elections. The official websites of several colleges, including the Hansraj College and Non Collegiate Women's Education Board (NCWEB), display photographs of political figures. Asked for a comment on violation of the UGC's directives, chairman M. Jagadesh Kumar said "Following a letter received by the Ministry of Education from the ECI, emphasising the need to adhere to electoral guidelines, the UGC has written to all higher education institutions (HEIs) with a request to strictly follow the guidelines of the ECI as issued from time to time. All HEIs must adhere to the ECI guidelines on the Model Code of Conduct." There was no immediate response from the Delhi University Vice-Chancellor's office. The University Grants Commission (UGC) in a letter dated May 1 to the vice-chancellor and principals of different colleges asked them to immediately take down the photos and references of the ministers, politicians and political parties from the institute's website abiding by the Election Commission's order. Citing the UGC's letter while also terming it as written in a



"reluctant" and "late mode", the teachers' body wrote, "We draw your attention towards the violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) even after the UGC letter to the VCs and principals dated May 1, 2024. "This aforementioned letter was written by the UGC reluctantly in 'better late than never' mode as it forwarded the Election Commission of India's (ECI) directive to enforce the MCC (which came in force on March 16) after the duration of one and half months." The Academics for Action and Development Teachers' Association (AADTA) said that despite the directive of the UGC, the Delhi University's website still replete with the photographs of the prime minister and ministers, especially under Glimpses, DU Centenary, Viksit Bharat Ambassador Nari Shakti Conclave sections. "The websites of some colleges are also displaying such photographs violating the MCC. So, we request you to take such photographs and references out in compliance with the MCC without any further delay," the teachers' body added. The teachers' body further

demanded to cancel the 'Run for Viksit Bharat' event while stating the phrase is part of the political branding of the ruling BJP led Central government. Citing instances from the saffron party's manifesto where the phrase 'Viksit Bharat' has been used as part of its poll campaign, the Academic for Action and Development Teachers' Association (AADTA) wrote, "This Hindi phrase has been used at least 13 times in English version of the BJP manifesto 2024, thus indicating its political specificity." "On page 6 of the BJP manifesto, BJP president appeals to 'vote and support to build Viksit Bharat'. On the next page of the party manifesto, chairperson of the BJP manifesto committee talks about "our Viksit Bharat Campaign" and attributes importance and significance of this manifesto document lies in 'defining the vision of Viksit Bharat'." "Further on page 40, BJP manifesto contains, "We will build upon this foundation in the next five years to launch our country on the path to Viksit Bharat by 2047," the letter read. The teachers' body said the 'Viksit Bharat Run' is in violation of the ECI directive, which states that 'during the election period for partisan coverage of political news and publicity regarding achievements with a view to furthering the prospects of the party in power shall be scrupulously avoided'. "We request you to apply the MCC in case of the scheduled run and cancel it urgently in order to uphold the impartial image of our 100-years old university," it said.

BJP candidate from Chandni Chowk holds roadshow in Tri Nagar

ABHI SINGHAL ■ NEW DELHI



BJP candidate from Chandni Chowk Praveen Khandelwal held a road show in Tri Nagar area to connect voters for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in the national capital. Supporters and workers of the BJP were carrying party's flags and raising slogans for Khandelwal. Before his road show, he went to a local temple and offered prayers. The roadshow started from Kanhaiya Nagar Metro Station and ended at Dhandhan Satguru Ashram in Tri Nagar. The roadshow was followed by a bike rally in the Tri Nagar area. Meenu Goyal, Sitting MCD Councillor from Tri Nagar, former Delhi Mayor Ravinder Gupta, Ravi Hans the MCD Councillor from Kohat and Neeraj Gupta, MCD Councillor from Saraswati Vihar, also accompanied Khandelwal in his road show and public meeting. Congress candidate Jai Prakash Aggrawal is contesting here against Khandelwal. Khandelwal, known for his role as the founder and gener-

al secretary of the Confederation of All India Trades (CAIT) and as a prominent businessman based in Delhi, is set to engage with constituents in the upcoming election. While addressing the public meeting Khandelwal said, "The Prime Minister Narendra Modi has handed this responsibility of the Lok Sabha seat to a very small worker like me and I understand the importance of this responsibility." He further added that the prime minister has asked him to work harder specially for the people who are in pain and work in a way so that every person in his area is happy. Praising Meenu Goyal for the work she has done in Tri Nagar area Khandelwal said, "pese ki vajah se koi bhi development ka kaam rukne nahi dunga" (I will not let the development work stop due to money problems). Khandelwal said, "The successful tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of 10 years is our asset, which every BJP worker will propagate. Modi's leadership guarantees progress and prosperity for all."

Home Secretary reviews situation in wake of hoax e mails

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla on Monday reviewed situation in the wake of hoax emails received by some schools in the national capital last week and emphasised the need to enhance security, CCTV cameras and regular monitoring of emails in the schools. Bhalla also asked the Delhi Police and schools to have close coordination for an effective response mechanism so that misinformation does not create any unnecessary panic. "Home Secretary reviews the situation in wake of hoax emails received by some schools in Delhi last week. He stressed the need to prepare detailed protocol and SOPs to handle any such situation in future," a home ministry spokesperson said. "Home Secretary also emphasized the need to enhance security, CCTV cameras and regular monitoring of emails in the schools," the spokesperson said. The meeting was attended by Delhi Chief Secretary and Delhi Police Commissioner. Earlier, the Delhi High Court on Monday asked the city police to give details of the steps taken to ensure safe evacuation

of school children in case of a bomb threat with least dependency on parents and without causing any panic. The high court directed the Delhi Police and the Delhi government to file affidavits giving data on the number of schools in each zone, the nodal authority in each zone which will be responsible for taking action in case of receipt of a threat, the time required for taking action on receipt of a bomb threat, and the number of mock drills that have been conducted under supervision of police and other departments. Justice Subramonium Prasad said though police have filed a status report listing the standard operating procedure (SOP) for bomb detection and disposal squads and the guidelines to deal with bomb threats in schools, they have not submitted data on several key aspects. The affidavits, to be filed by the city police and the government, shall include "the action taken to ensure least dependence on parents, who would be working at far away places, for evacuating children from the schools since the primary responsibility for evacuating will be on the schools and on the authorities".

Raaj Kumar Anand files nomination for New Delhi seat

Ranjan Dimri



Former Delhi Minister Raaj Kumar Anand, who quit from both the Delhi Cabinet and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) a month ago, filed his nomination for the New Delhi seat on Monday after he officially joined the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) on Sunday. Party workers were seen fluttering BSP flags to support his candidature from the BSP party in the national capital. On the day of his nomination filing, AAP leader Somnath Bharti, who has been fielded as a joint AAP and INDIA alliance candidate from the New Delhi seat, said that his former party colleague Raaj Kumar Anand joined BSP

due to fears of ED. "Today I learned an interesting thing, if you want to escape ED, then your first choice is BJP and now the second choice is BSP. Kanshi Ram's party, BSP, which had set out to uplift Dalits is now working as the B-team of BJP," he said. Last month, the Patel Nagar MLA resigned from the Delhi cabinet, after he claimed that there is inadequate representation of Dalits within the party and the Kejriwal government is 'anti-dalit'. "The public is being misled, they should understand this and support our BSP party," said the BSP candidate replying to Bharti's claim. Further, he added that he doesn't understand the reason for Bharti

being so serious about him leaving the AAP. After joining the BSP, Anand said, "I offer tributes to Baba Saheb Ambedkar. I feel that I have come back to my party." Monday was the last day for filing nominations for the sixth phase of the Lok Sabha elections on May 25. BJP's Bansuri Swaraj and AAP's Somnath Bharti have already submitted their nominations from the constituency. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) had conducted searches at locations linked to him in November last year in relation to a suspected money laundering case related to alleged evasion of Customs duty and hawala payments to China.

Action recommended against DDA for illegal construction, felling 750 trees

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee has recommended action against the Delhi Development Authority over illegal construction and felling of around 750 trees in the ridge area in south Delhi in violation of the top court's directions and without approval from the Centre. According to a report submitted to the apex court, the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) stated that in December last year, the DDA allotted land with ridge-like morphological features for the construction of an approach road from the main Chhatrapur road to SAARC University, Central Armed Police Forces Institute of Medical Sciences, and other establishments. This was done in violation of the provisions of the Van (Sanrakshan) Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980. The CEC said 222 trees have been felled in a non-forest area without permission under the Delhi Protection of Trees Act, 1994, for the construction of the road, and 523 trees have been felled in the area having "morphological features" without the approval of the central



government under the Van (Sanrakshan) Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980, and Supreme Court directives. The committee investigated the matter after a complainant claimed that local authorities did not act against the illegal construction of the road due to the involvement of the land mafia and senior officers of the Delhi government in it. The Delhi Ridge is a rocky outcrop of the Aravalli Ranges stretching from Delhi University in the north to the south and beyond. Extending over 7,777 hectares, it consists of Northern Ridge (87 hectares), Central Ridge (864 hectares), South Central Ridge (626 hectares), and Southern Ridge (6,200 hectares). In 1994, the city government

notified Delhi Ridge as a reserved forest, commonly referred to as the 'Notified Ridge Area'. Morphological ridge refers to that part of the ridge area "which has ridge-like features but is not a notified forest". Permission from the Ridge Management Board, headed by the Delhi chief secretary, and approval from the Supreme Court through the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) are required to carry out any construction in the Delhi Ridge and morphological ridge areas. Delhi Ridge serves as the green lungs for the city and acts as a buffer against rising pollution levels. The pressures of rapid urbanization in Delhi have, over the years, threatened and adversely affected the forests in the ridge areas.

Opposition echoing voice of Pakistan: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Monday highlighted a series of statements made by INDIA Bloc leaders that it said were against the nation's interest, as the ruling party accused the Opposition of echoing the voice of Pakistan and asked people to be wary of such "traitors".

BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi cited Maharashtra Congress leader Vijay Wadettiwar's allegation that an RSS-affiliated police officer and not terrorist Ajmal Kasab killed the then anti-terrorism squad chief Hemant Karkare and former Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi's claim that the attack on IAF personnel in Jammu and Kashmir was a poll stunt to slam the party.

He cited five other instances, including Pakistani leader Chaudhry Fawad Hussain's criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and praise of Rahul Gandhi, and Farooq Abdullah's reference to Pakistan having nuclear weapons, to allege that these INDIA Bloc leaders are echoing the neighbouring country's stand.

What the National Conference leader has said is very "astounding, revealing and shocking" as so far only a few Pakistani leaders considered reckless or radicalised religious leaders have made such comments, he claimed.

Replying to a question related to Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir, the former J-K chief minister



had said that Pakistan is not wearing bangles and has nuclear weapons. Such remarks are also an insult to women, the BJP leader said. Noting that Congress leader Shashi Tharoor has written a column in a Bangladeshi newspaper slamming Modi while analysing the ongoing Lok Sabha elections, Rajya Sabha MP Trivedi said while elections are being in India he is building public opinion in another country.

The Congress leader has also referred to the Valley as India-administered-Kashmir, he alleged.

One INDIA Bloc leader is giving "cover fire" to Pakistan on Mumbai terror attack, another is speaking about its nuclear weapon while somebody is describing the martyrdom of a soldier as a poll stunt, he said. Modi had said the Congress manifesto carried Muslim League's imprints, he noted, adding that every work spoken by its leaders echoed Pakistan's stand. The Left parties want the country's nuclear stockpiles removed, he said.

All these development are not merely a coincidence but a deliberate and dangerous experiment, Trivedi said. "In whose hands these leaders are playing," he asked, telling people to be wary of "traitors" hiding within the country. Various kinds of powers outside are attempting to halt the rise of a proud and confident India, he said.

At the press conference, the BJP leader also took a swipe at Rahul Gandhi over the recovery of a huge amount of cash from the house of a domestic help allegedly linked to the secretary of Jharkhand Minister and Congress leader Alamgir Alam.

He said Rahul Gandhi speaks about doing an economic survey and dividing the country's wealth and the Enforcement Directorate's raid has shown the way assets are being divided in Jharkhand when so much of money, between Rs 20 crore and 30 crore, is with the help of a minister's PA.

After looking at so much amount of money, nothing is left to explain, he added.

VCs, scholars slam Rahul for varsity appointment claims

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As many as 181 academicians, including Vice Chancellors (VC) and former VCs, have accused Congress leader Rahul Gandhi of spreading "falsehood" regarding the appointment process for university heads and sought lawful action against him.

In an open letter, they said the Congress leader has alleged that vice chancellors are appointed solely on the basis of affiliation with some organisation rather than merit as they slammed his claims.

The process by which VCs are selected is characterised by stringent and transparent rigorous procedure grounded in the values of meritocracy, scholarly distinction and integrity, they claimed.

Jawaharlal University Vice Chancellor Santishree Dhulipudi Pandit, Delhi University VC Yogesh Singh and AICTE Chairman T G Sitharam are among the academicians who have signed onto the letter.

The selection has been completely based on academic and administrative prowess and with a vision to take universities ahead, they said. Though they did not quote Rahul Gandhi's specific claims, the Congress leader has in the past alleged that affiliations with the Hindutva organisation RSS is often the guiding factor in appointments to academia.

Among the signatories to the letter are Vinay Pathak, VC, CSJM University, Kanpur, Bhagwati Prakash Sharma, Chancellor, Pacific University,



Udaipur, N C Gautam, former VC, Mahatma Gandhi Gramodaya Vishwavidyalaya, Chitrakoot, Alok Chakkarval, VC, Guru Ghasidas Central University, Bilaspur and Vinay Kapoor, former VC, BR Ambedkar National Law University, Sonapat. Universities in India have undergone a significant transition as evident in their ascent in global rankings, prominent accreditations, world class research and innovations, curriculum facelift narrowing the industry academia gap and higher placement prospects reaffirming their commitment to academic quality and societal relevance, they asserted.

They said, "The array of academic disciplines and professional experiences represented amongst us stands as evidence of the unbiased and inclusive nature of the selection procedure." It reflects their dedication to cultivating an atmosphere that values and promotes diversity, encourages inde-

pendent thinking, and supports scholastic achievement, they said.

"Rahul Gandhi has resorted to falsehood and has defamed the Office of the Vice Chancellors at large with the intent to derive political mileage out of it.

It is, therefore, earnestly prayed that appropriate action be taken against him forthwith in accordance with law," they said.

The academics said in their letter that as guardians of knowledge and administrators of academia, they maintain an unwavering commitment to maintaining the utmost levels of governance integrity, ethical behaviour, and institutional integrity.

Urging everyone involved to exercise discernment in distinguishing fact from fiction, to abstain from spreading unfounded rumours, they called for dialogue that is well-informed, constructive, and supportive of their shared goal of creating a dynamic and inclusive educational environment.

FIR against Nadda, Malviya in Karnataka over social media post

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/BENGALURU

An FIR has been registered against BJP president JP Nadda, the party's IT cell head Amit Malviya and Karnataka unit chief BY Vijayendra in connection with a social media post allegedly intimidating members of SC and ST community not to vote for a particular candidate, police said on Monday.

On the other hand Congress alleged that professionals working for its social media department are being "harassed" and "intimidated" by police at the behest of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

The action on BJP leaders was taken following a complaint lodged by the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) with the Election Commission and police on Sunday alleging violation of model code of conduct, they said. They were booked under the sections of Representation of People Act and section 505 (2) (Statements creating or promoting enmity, hatred or ill-will between classes) of the Indian Penal Code, a senior police officer said.

In the complaint, the KPCC cited a video uploaded on the social media platform 'X' by the official account of Karnataka State BJP which, it alleged, is operated by Malviya, on instructions of Nadda, Vijayendra and Social Media incharge — Karnataka BJP, on May 4.

"The said video posted on social media featured animat-



ed characters of (Congress leader) Rahul Gandhi and (Chief Minister) Siddaramaiah. In the clip, the SC, ST and OBC community are portrayed as "eggs" in a nest and it also suggested Rahul Gandhi planting a big egg labelled as Muslim community. It is projected as though funds are being fed to the chick depicting the Muslim community, which then kicks out SC, ST and OBC communities," it alleged.

Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinete alleged that people of the Congress' social media team are being "harassed". The opposition party's assertion came days after the Delhi Police's Special Cell arrested a national coordinator of the Congress' social media team for allegedly uploading and circulating online a doctored video of Shah.

"Professionals are being intimidated at the behest of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. These professionals are the people who chose the ideology of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Bose and stood with the Congress.

The BJP is scaring those who chose truth and justice and rejected your false worship," Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinete said.

Rapid infrastructure development aiding destination weddings in India: Ministry

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Union Tourism Ministry on Sunday said the rapid infrastructure development happening across the country, especially improvement in accessibility due to number of airports getting doubled in last few years besides improvement in digital and physical connectivity are aiding destination weddings across the world.

Speaking during the inauguration of First Wed in India expo at Rambagh Palace in Jaipur, Manisha Saxena (IAS) Director General, Ministry of Tourism, said along with cultural aspects of India the holistic development is a boon for destination wedding which also is a booster to the economy as well as employment.

An initiative of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, the 'Wed in India' expo is being organised jointly with Department of Tourism, Government of Rajasthan and



Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) alongside the Great India Travel. It is also supported by Hotel and Restaurant Association of Rajasthan (HRAR), Indian Heritage Hotels Association (IHHA) and Rajasthan Association of Tour Operators (RATO).

"With its unique blend of natural beauty and cultural traditions which can actually invoke magic in weddings, Rajasthan along with Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Haryana,

Kerala, and Goa are favourite destination for Wed-in-India. The Northeast is also fast emerging as a preferred destination especially the tea gardens of Assam, Darjeeling, Siliguri, Mizoram, and Manipur," Saxena added.

Citing the experience of one of the G20 Tourism Group meetings held in Goa during India's G20 Presidency, Saxena said, "We catered to all the ministerial delegates in a 500-years old house which keeps its 200 years old cutlery. India has several such kinds

of assets. We, in the Ministry of Tourism, are in process of documenting this repository of assets both tangible and intangible."

Delivering her address in the inaugural session, Gayatri Rathore, IAS, Principal Secretary, Department of Tourism, Government of Rajasthan said, "Department of Tourism, Government of Rajasthan is delighted to hold first ever 'Wed in India' expo. Rajasthan has long been a preferred destination for celebrity weddings due to its luxurious and opulent settings. The state's magnificent palaces forts and havelis converted into luxury heritage hotels provide a regal backdrop for extravagant celebrations.

Rajasthan's world-class hospitality, traditional cuisines and vibrant entertainment create unforgettable experiences for the couples and their guests. "Setting the tone of the expo, Chetan Vohra, Chair, FICCI Wedding Tourism Taskforce & Managing Director, Wedding

Line said, "Hospitality runs in the veins of every Indian and we were raised with one belief, to open our hearts and our homes to every guest as if they were God - something we call 'Atithi Deva Bhavo'.

The 'Wed in India' summit is a testament to our commitment in making this dream a reality." Dr. Jyotsna Suri, Past President, FICCI & CMD, Lalit Suri Hospitality Group said, "This expo is going to be a long way towards making it international. Besides Rajasthan, India has a lot of enticing wedding destinations which are equally beautiful and appealing."

Policymakers, key players from the tourism and hospitality industry and tour operators from over 50 countries are participating in the 'Wed in India' expo. Representatives of Tourism Boards from various states, including Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, too are participating alongside stalwarts from India's tourism, travel, and hospitality sectors.

Congress targets Modi Government over Chinese transgressions

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Monday targeted the Modi Government on the issue of Chinese transgressions, and asked whether it has "surrendered" thousands of square kilometres in Depsang and Demchok to China or is it still trying to return to the status quo ante before May 5, 2020.

On the fourth anniversary of the clashes between Indian and Chinese troops at Pangong Tso in eastern Ladakh that culminated in the fatal engagement in Galwan on June 15, 2020 in which 20 soldiers were killed, the Congress also asked the Prime Minister when he will take responsibility for the "abysmal failure" of his China policy.

"Has anyone been held accountable for India's biggest strategic and intelligence lapse in several decades," AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh asked in a post on X.



Posing questions to the Prime Minister, he asked, "Do you still believe your 19 June 2020 statement, made after 20 of our soldiers gave their lives in Galwan, that 'Na koi hamari seema mein ghus aaya hai, na hi koi ghusa hua hai' (No one has entered India nor has anyone occupied any post)". "Has your government surrendered to Chinese control over thousands of square kilometres in Depsang and Demchok for the foreseeable future or are you still trying to return to the status quo ante before 5 May 2020," he

asked. Taking on Modi, he charged that, "The PM's clean chit to China four days later when he said 'Na koi hamari seema mein ghus aaya hai, na hi koi ghusa hua hai' was a profound insult to our fallen soldiers and became the legitimisation of Chinese control over 2,000 square kilometres of land in eastern Ladakh."

Despite 21 rounds of military talks over four years, the situation remains unfavourable. Le's Superintendant of Police has clearly shown that our troops were unable to reach 26 out of 65 patrolling points that they could access prior to May 5, 2020, Ramesh claimed. China's aggressive build up and intrusions are not restricted to Ladakh, he said, adding that along Arunachal Pradesh, the Chinese continue to build forces and infrastructure that pose a direct threat to India's Siliguri Corridor, which connects northeast India with the rest of the country.

Baghel, Gehlot appointed AICC senior observers for Raebareli, Amethi constituencies

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/RAEBARELI

Congress on Monday appointed former Chief Ministers Bhupesh Baghel and Ashok Gehlot as AICC senior observers for Rae Bareli and Amethi Parliamentary constituencies, respectively. Party leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra reached Uttar Pradesh to spearhead the campaign in Rae Bareli and Amethi, and camp in these Parliamentary constituencies from Monday to ensure the party's victory in the two high-profile seats.

She met party workers in Raebareli to bolster Rahul Gandhi's campaign from the family bastion. Rahul is pitted against BJP leader Dinesh Pratap Singh from Rae Bareli. Rae Bareli and Amethi will go to vote in the fifth phase of election on May 20. Priyanka Gandhi will be holding hundreds of 'nukkad sabhas', meetings and door-to-door campaign programmes, the sources said. "The centre will be Rae Bareli where she will be stationed at a guest house. From booth management to outreach, everything would be handled by her," the



source said. Strong foundations that Feroze Gandhi laid in Rae Bareli were later nurtured and strengthened by his wife and former prime minister Indira Gandhi, who won the seat in 1967, 1971 and 1980, followed by friends and members of the Gandhi family. In Amethi, a non-Gandhi family member is in the fray after 25 years to take on incumbent BJP MP Smriti Irani. Irani had defeated Rahul Gandhi by more than 55,000 votes in 2019 in Amethi, while in Rae Bareli Sonia Gandhi defeated BJP's Dinesh Pratap Singh by more than 1,67,000 votes. Sharma was the key person who had looked after the two prestigious constituencies and been a representative of the Gandhis in the two key seats.

Coast Guard detains Iranian fishing vessel with six Indians

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) detained an Iranian fishing vessel, with six Indian crew, west of Bepore off the coast of Kerala late Sunday, Defence Ministry said here on Monday adding the swift sea-air coordinated operation involved the ships and aircraft of the ICG.

After intercepting the boat, an ICG team boarded the vessel and thoroughly investigated it to check the involvement of any anti-national activity. Initial investigation revealed that the owner of the boat was an Iranian sponsor who had contracted these Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu, and issued them Iranian Visas for fishing off the Iran coast. The crew alleged that the sponsor ill-treated and deprived them of basic living conditions, passports confiscating their passports. The crew said that they had decided to escape from Iran to India using the same boat. The detained vessel was safely brought to Kochi on Monday for further investigation.

NTA dismisses reports of NEET-UG question paper leak

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Even as the National Testing Agency (NTA) on Monday dismissed reports of a question paper leak in the NEET-UG medical entrance exam as "completely baseless and without any ground" on Monday, the main Opposition Congress party criticised the BJP-led Centre over the incident, denouncing it as a betrayal of students' aspirations and an indication of the government's incompetence. Taking the Government to task on the issue, the Congress on Monday said this trend has been going on for the last 10 years and that is why unemployment and corruption in jobs are the biggest issues of this election.

This criticism came in response to the NTA's assurance that every question paper had been properly managed and that images circulating on social media were unrelated to the actual exam paper.

"It has been ascertained from NTA's security protocols and Standard Operating Procedures that the social media posts pointing towards any paper leak are completely baseless and without any ground.

"To put rumours to rest, it is also stated that every single



question paper has been accounted for," said Sadhana Parashar, Senior Director, NTA. She added that no external person or agency can access the centres once the examination starts. "After the gates of the examination centres are closed, no one from outside is permitted access inside the halls, which are under CCTV surveillance."

However, taking the NTA clarification with a pinch of salt, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi said the news of the NEET exam

paper leak is a "betrayal" of the dreams of more than 23 lakh students and their families.

In a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi said, "Be it the students who dream of getting admission in college after passing 12th or the promising youth who are struggling for government jobs, the Modi government has become a curse for everyone."

"The youth and their family, who have been paying the price of the BJP government's incompetence for the last 10 years with the destruction of

their future, have now understood that there is a difference between speaking and running the government," he said.

Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra took the X platform to criticize the government. "Once again there are reports of a NEET paper leak. The future of 24 lakh youth of the country was again at stake. This trend, which has been going on with crores of promising youth for the last 10 years, is showing no sign of stopping. Will the Prime Minister of the country say anything about this?" she said.

Noting that a law against paper leaks was passed in Parliament, the Congress general secretary asked where that law is and why it is not applicable. Congress general secretary, in-charge communications, Jairam Ramesh, said news of NEET paper leak has come to light in Bihar. "Apart from this, there have also been complaints from Rajasthan about wrong sets of question papers of NEET exam being distributed at the examination centres," he said. "In the last 7 years, more than 70 papers have been leaked. Due to this, the future of more than 2 crore candidates has been ruined. Despite there being laws regarding

paper leaks in many states, papers are being leaked," he said.

Citing some examples, Ramesh said 3.75 lakh candidates had participated in the teacher recruitment examination in Bihar on March 15 but within a few days, the exam had to be cancelled due to paper leak. "60 lakh candidates took part in the UP Police examination on February 17 and 18 February. On February 24, the Yogi government had to cancel the examination due to paper leak," he said. Ramesh pointed out that one of the five 'Yuva Nyay' guarantees is 'Paper Leak Se Mukti'.

"Our laws will ensure the highest standards of honesty and fairness at every stage of the examination process -- from paper setting, printing, transportation, administration and inspection -- for paper-based and computer-based examinations," he said. The entrance exam was conducted on Sunday at 4,750 centres in 571 cities including 14 cities abroad. The NTA had on Sunday claimed that the distribution of wrong question papers at an exam centre in Rajasthan led to some candidates walking out with the papers. The agency had denied any leak of the question paper.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Holding up the mirror

The roots of Khalistani extremism in Canada run deep; S Jaishankar just made it public

In a recent critique of the Trudeau administration, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar accused Canada of granting visas to individuals linked to organised crime, despite warnings from New Delhi, while also legitimising extremism, separatism, and advocates of violence under the guise of free speech. Regarding the escalation of pro-Khalistani activities in Canada and the recent arrest of three individuals in connection with the killing of India-designated terrorist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Jaishankar remarked that certain individuals have organized politically, influencing politicians to believe they hold sway over community support, thus carving out a space for themselves in the politics of democratic nations. This has been the Indian answer to Canadian charges of killing a Canadian Sikh on its soil. S Jaishankar has effectively retorted to the Canadian charges by saying that the Canada government gives visas to dubious people from India despite the Indian government's warnings. The roots of Khalistani separatism gained significant traction in the 1980s culminating in violence and the tragic events of Operation Blue Star and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The wounds inflicted during this period continue to fester, providing fertile ground for extremist ideologies to thrive, particularly among Sikh diaspora communities. Canada, with its sizable Sikh population, became a hub for Khalistani activists and sympathisers, offering refuge to those fleeing persecution in India while inadvertently providing a platform for the propagation of separatist ideologies.



The liberal immigration policies and multicultural ethos of Canada provided a conducive environment for the Khalistani movement to gain momentum, with several prominent figures finding sanctuary and support within its borders. However, the issue transcends mere ideological sympathies and delves into the realm of organised crime and terrorism. Over the years, there have been numerous instances of Khalistani elements in Canada being implicated in activities ranging from fundraising for militant outfits to carrying out targeted attacks against perceived enemies of the movement. India has repeatedly raised concerns about Canada's perceived leniency towards individuals with ties to Khalistani extremism. Minister for External Affairs, S Jaishankar's criticism reflects India's growing unease over the role of certain segments within the Canadian establishment in enabling and even legitimizing Khalistani activities. He has done the right thing in showing the mirror to the Canadian government which had accused India of a Sikh Canadian on its soil. Canada, on its part, has taken some steps to address these concerns but the fact is Canada's Govt has been largely sympathetic to such elements. Only a couple of days back Khalistani slogans were raised in the presence of Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau. Canada must strike a delicate balance between upholding its commitment to freedom of speech and association while preventing its territory from being used as a staging ground for violence and terrorism.

PICTALK



Polling officials travel via a boat to reach their respective polling booths, a day before the voting, in Kamrup

Dynamic contours of electoral politics



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

In a nation where election season seems perennial, the traditional distinction between campaign fervour and governance blurs into a continuous political landscape

The election season is here. The reaction to the statement could well be that election season is now almost there around the year. There are some elections in some parts of the country going on constantly. In short, almost every season has become an election season. It would be tempting to ask oneself if this is a good thing or a bad thing. It's normal to be judgmental in matters which appear to be significant. However, it would not matter which way the judgment goes because the judgment would not affect the actual run of the situation.

That may be another matter. However, the present election fever is unique in its type because it affects every part of the country and is not confined to a small region or another. The concern of the day is national rather than regional, as it often is. This makes the issues of national significance to figure out a choice in the fray. National issues could come up in many areas, such as defence, taxation, education and interstate movements. The special entry provisions that govern certain regions of the country, or indeed the kind of inter-regional transportation structure, including waterways, as it affects human movement, trade, or commerce. The list enumerated itself is loud and can be added to. However, it makes a basic point. The issues in this election are issues that cut across states, have pan-India bearings, or affect the identity of citizens in the country. All this adds to the exclusivity of the election. Conceptually, what has been set in the preceding few lines is correct. But operationally, there are many other shades and colours. A dominant theme affecting these elections seems to be religion, whereas worship is always a private thing. In India, methods of worship have often served as a method of aggregation of identity. This is a particularly unique gift of the way independence was achieved in this country. No country in the world in the post-colonial era was ever partitioned based on religion, as India was, as a prerequisite for independence. How this helped anyone or any



cause is not quite clear. If the basis of partition was religion, there was something strange about one country proclaiming its identity to be one religion and another country emphatically proposing that it would not have any religious identity. That, however, was the choice of August, 14 and 15, 1947, by the two countries that brought into existence freedom, or more technically, the withdrawal of colonial rule. The British were particular in pointing out that they were giving back power from where they had taken it when they started the rule of then-united India. The rest has to say is history. But post August 15, 1947, saw an experience throughout the subcontinent that was unique and has been termed by some historians as the 'unification of India'. There was a British India and a princely India. The British India territories would have elected government, yet the princely India would have their choice of secession to India or Pakistan. The rest, as they say, is history. Barring Multan, North West Frontier territory, Jammu and Kashmir, Junagarh and Hyderabad, the merger issues were largely smooth and without too much contention. Even the territories named above had a choice exercised sooner than what seemed most like-



THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN ELECTORAL PROMISES, THE ISSUES THAT WIN VOTES AND HOW THE ELECTED PARTY ACTUALLY GOVERNS AND IMPLEMENTS THEIR AGENDA ONCE IN POWER LEADS TO MANY UNEXPECTED AND PERPLEXING OUTCOMES

ly possible. The result was the emergence of a unified India and a unified Pakistan. Jammu and Kashmir remained the only state in which a deliberate contention was kept alive. Indeed, there was no contentious issue if the terms of the Freedom Act were followed, but in one way or another, the matter continues to evoke emotions, in a unique way, in several people. It is not just religion at play, there are several factors, including geopolitical ones. It is also possible not to recognize how the matter has been made increasingly complex by an unnecessary play of force, some of whom have no locus standee at all in the case. One would have thought that elections held at a national level, so often, so regularly and so fairly across the length and breadth of the country, would have rendered the whole issue of controversy in Jammu and Kashmir needless. Alas, that is not the case. Elections have a certain pattern in this country: give and take a few arguments here and there. However, choices have to be exercised and the numerical outcome of those choices determines how the country is governed. So the question arises as to what the net findings of the propositions thrown up as electoral issues are. In many states, local

issues seem to be inclined to determine the balloting that would take place for national representation. This appears to be the case, especially in Karnataka, Bihar, Manipur and some other states. The essence of the matter is that choices have to be exercised and the arguments of the choices need only to be communicable in terms of the strength that the community appears to endorse in the legislature. It is worth remembering that, at the end of the day, once the election results are announced, there is no accountability for the correlation between how choices made on issues during elections will be exercised when the party concerned, which wins the election, administers the issue. It may well be said that elections as a process still await better mellowing and maturing to make them an internally consistent one. At the moment, it is satisfying to note that by and large, the process of exercising choices, its panning out in the legislature and its administrative implementation are increasingly becoming worthwhile efforts and, a coherent method of administering, sensibly, a large country, such as India. (The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAFFRON: A BLOSSOMING OPPORTUNITY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Saffron cultivation: Replicate Poonch's success story," published on May 4, this is my response. The story of saffron cultivation in Poonch, Jammu and Kashmir, is not just about agriculture; it's a narrative of resilience and transformation. Ajaz Ahmad's journey exemplifies a shift from traditional farming to embracing the potential of saffron. His vision of Poonch becoming a saffron hub reflects the region's evolving agricultural landscape. However, challenges loom large. Environmental shifts, like erratic rainfall and untimely snowfall, threaten saffron production in Kashmir. Such concerns emphasise the need for sustainable farming practices and governmental support, not just in terms of subsidies but also in ensuring security and mitigating wildlife threats. Yet, amidst these challenges, saffron's allure persists. Its medicinal properties and premium market value make it a lucrative venture for farmers. With initiatives like the National Saffron Mission, there's hope for revitalising saffron cultivation and uplifting Kashmir's socio-economic fabric. As saffron blooms in Poonch, it signifies not just a crop but a promise of prosperity for the region.

Virat Chatterjee | Pune

PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND HOPE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Narendra Modi introduces India to its Ashtalakshmis," published on May 4, this is my response. Reading about the political landscape and developmental challenges across India, especially in the neglected North East, evokes a mix of emotions. From the perpetual promises of politicians during election seasons to the persistent issues of floods, droughts and insurgencies, it's a reminder of the complex tapestry of our nation's journey. The failure to address fundamental issues like water scarcity and regional development highlights systemic shortcomings that transcend party lines. However, amidst these challenges, there's

Call for transparency



Apropos the news article, "Covishield's Shield in Question," published on May 5, this is my response. The unfolding saga surrounding the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine underscores a pressing need for transparency and accountability in vaccine distribution and oversight. Alex Mitchell's harrowing experience, alongside numerous others, sheds light on the gravity of poten-

tial side effects and the imperative of informed consent. As legal battles loom against pharmaceutical giants, questions mount regarding regulatory diligence and corporate responsibility. The admission of rare but severe side effects prompts reflection on the balance between vaccine benefits and risks. The petition, led by advocate Vishal Tiwari, encapsulates the public's demand for rigorous scrutiny and redress mechanisms. Calls for expert medical panels and a vaccine damage payment system underscore a quest for justice and safeguarding public health. Amidst the cacophony of voices, from grieving parents to sceptical netizens, one message resonates: transparency breeds trust. As the global vaccination campaign continues, robust surveillance, thorough investigation and proactive communication remain indispensable in navigating the complexities of vaccine safety.

Arnab Reddy | Hyderabad

a glimmer of hope. The efforts made by the current government, particularly in the North East, show a commitment to inclusive growth and infrastructure development. Modi's North East Story sheds light on the transformative changes underway, offering a narrative of progress and resilience. It's heartening to see dynamic leaders and policymakers taking proactive steps to uplift these regions while preserving their unique cultural heritage. The book's portrayal of the North East's beauty and potential serves as an invitation for all Indians to engage with and support the holistic development of these often-overlooked states.

Ishika Verma | Jaipur

BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Leveraging NCERT textbooks for CUET," published on May 4, this is my response. The Common University Entrance Test (CUET) stands as a significant milestone for students aspiring to secure undergraduate admissions in India. Amidst the rigorous preparation for CUET 2024, lever-

aging NCERT textbooks emerges as a strategic move. These textbooks, integral to classrooms nationwide, offer more than just academic aid. They serve as a robust foundation, aligning seamlessly with CUET syllabi and offering structured content presentations. From basic principles to advanced concepts, NCERT textbooks provide a roadmap. Their clarity, supplemented by visuals and practice exercises, enhances comprehension and problem-solving skills. Moreover, their standardised content ensures equitable access to quality education, levelling the playing field for CUET aspirants. To optimise CUET preparation, students should adopt a subject-wise study approach, leverage visual aids, prioritise practice and revision and supplement with additional resources. By harnessing the potential of NCERT textbooks, students can bolster their confidence and maximise success in the CUET 2024 Exam.

Sanya Khanna | Chandigarh

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

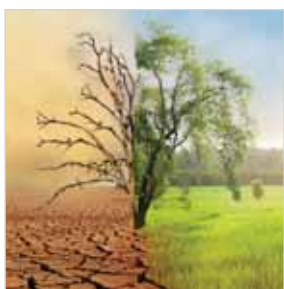
Climate startups: Innovative climate crisis warriors

Startups, pivotal in the shift to a net-zero future, can revitalise economies and communities while providing innovative solutions



SAIRAM SUBRAMANIAN

Deus ex machina is a technique often deployed by writers to solve a seemingly hopeless situation by external, magical and often unimaginable intervention. It is debatable if Deus ex machina exists in real life, nonetheless, Startups being creatures with innovation, disruption and problem-solving in their DNA can offer faster, creative and localised solutions, for the increasingly hopeless real-world crisis of Climate Change.



Be it a startup supplying an animal feed supplement that can cut down bovine emissions significantly, another one using Biotech and robotics technologies for developing GMO seeds and seaweeds that act as powerful carbon sinks, a climate tech company developing agro-forestry at a global scale or simpler everyday solutions that aim to greenify consumer finance or track individual efforts to reduce emissions, they can consolidate as a powerful force against climate change. World Economic Forum estimates that startups create value, nearly on par with the GDP of a G7 economy and the

OECD suggests that young firms create almost half of the new jobs, suggesting their burgeoning economic power and potential to create impact at scale.

The race to net zero is propelled by energy and technology transition which on one hand is an opportunity for startups and a threat to local economies and livelihoods on the other. Take the case of coal being phased out; this might result in the currently bustling mining centres turning into silent junkyards. The modern world's triumphs in Silicon Valley or a Shanghai SEZ may guide the establishment of new climate innovation hubs. Brain port Eindhoven in the Netherlands is one such example showcasing the transition from conventional industries to futur-

istic setups. The questions on the proliferation of such a model 'Can' be addressed by a few suggestions of 'How': Blended Finance for Climate Innovation Hubs Practical experience suggests that 'Impact Capital' often expects social impact plus commercial returns. For startups social impact then becomes an additional responsibility and not an opportunity to improve margins or a business avenue to seriously pursue climate-positive opportunities over the long term. Blended finance can incentivise climate startups to agglomerate within the Climate Innovation Hubs. Monetising Sustainability — Startups should have opportunities to monetise their efforts on reducing emissions, either in the form of reduced taxes and lower cost of capital or claim premiums for climate-positive brand value. Reputation Capital — Unless climate-positive efforts are rewarded by markets in the form of valuations or additional capital or brand value, climate-positive behaviour will continue to be talk and no walk. Research &

Development (R&D) Support — While large corporations have reserves that can be deployed for R & D, startups have only access to highly demanding capital that usually funds sales for growth and rarely for investments for innovations (unless the startup is incubated in a technical university). While the existing carbon economy still grapples with the issues of just transition, the political economy of climate change signals shifts in geo-political equilibrium and technological leapfrogging in climate solutions is yet to emerge, startups as business organisations are only going to achieve greater proportions of power, prosperity and influence in the world. With focused support from policymakers, development finance institutions and international researchers, the global startup ecosystem can be geared up to take on threats of climate change head-on. Who knows we may have a Deus ex machina in the real world of climate change. The writer is a Chevening Scholar and an International Development expert; views are personal



FIRST COLUMN RETHINKING ECONOMIC GROWTH

Excessive consumerism contradicts our spiritual values ingrained in our heritage



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

The US economy is very often seen as the engine of the world economy, and that is why any sign of slowdown in the US raises serious concerns about harmful spillovers to the other economies. Any keen student of current economics would know well that the economic policies of America, especially during the last few years, have not worked well. In fact, the defeat of the most powerful leaders in the presidential elections that were held in the past few decades is attributed mainly to the failure of their economic policies which created many problems for the country. However, most people do not realise that the economic problems faced there, emanate not merely from wrong policies, adopted recently.

Their roots are hidden in some wrong economic, political and cultural concepts and the models built on them over a period of time. For example, the mounting unemployment and the huge foreign debts are not the phenomena that have sprung up overnight and the phenomenon of estimated 11.5% Americans, living in poverty, also has not arisen in the short period of only one or two years. The roots of their sad economic state go at least to as far a period as the end of the World War-II when they adopted a very lavish life-style and an utterly consumeristic attitude and built their economy on militarism, giant industries, transactional and multi-national business corporations, import of raw materials at cheaper rates from the undeveloped countries and export of their goods to such nations and economic capture of foreign markets through their multinational corporations. In short, they thrived on the basis of this economic system as long as other industrial nations did not come up strongly to stand up to them or the weaker nations did not stand up against



their economic exploitation or injustice. Nevertheless, their economic system was not, based on some morally sound and enduring economic principles. As mentioned earlier, it was based on commercialism, competition, consumerism and exploitation of weaker nations and on hot or cold war with an adversary nation, or on considering their nation as the strong military-man of the world, ready for hot or cold war. Now, when some other industrial nations have grown stronger, they cannot compete with them and have, therefore, to close down or to retrench workers as was done recently by many industrial giants. Also, now when there is no war—hot or cold—they are forced by economic reasons to sell their military hardware as they recently sold fighter jets to many Asian countries in order to keep the workers in employment. Their country has had either the ills of recession, or inflation, or heavy taxation, or it had to resort to deficit budgets, foreign debts, protectionist policies, etc. to keep the economy going. It would have, therefore, been appropriate if developing nations like India had learnt some lessons from the failures of the so-called developed models of economy and had, instead, kept in mind their own national ethos and ancient heritage which suggests that a right system of economy is one which is based on social justice, and on economising rather than borrowing and deficit-financing. We should also keep in mind our own national situation which necessitates national and regional self-sufficiency and affords opportunities of full employment to its citizens and promotes balance between rural and urban economy, equitable distribution of income and wealth and prevention of the growth of very wide disparities in income and wealth. We must remember that unbridled consumerism and commercialism and also large-scale borrowing are against the value-system which is embedded in our spiritual heritage and will, sooner or later, lead us to grave economic crisis. So, let us all learn to lead a life of simplicity and frugality and be honest and just to all.

(Writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

Reimagining Tagore's educational philosophy



RAJDEEP PATHAK

Rabindranath Tagore, the polymathic Nobel Laureate from Bengal, is celebrated not only for his literary brilliance but also for his visionary ideas on education

Rabindranath Tagore (May 7, 1861 to August 7, 1941), the polymathic Nobel Laureate from Bengal, is renowned not only for his literary brilliance but also for his progressive ideas on education. His philosophy of education, rooted in the principles of creativity, freedom, and humanism, continues to resonate with contemporary educational discourse. In today's rapidly changing world, where traditional educational paradigms are being challenged and redefined, Tagore's insights offer valuable perspectives for reimagining education in a manner that fosters holistic development and meaningful engagement with the world.

At the heart of Tagore's educational philosophy is the belief in the innate creativity and potential of every individual. He envisioned education as a process of nurturing this inherent creativity rather than imposing predetermined knowledge. In his seminal work, "Siksha: Herok Ek Jibon" (Education: A Continuum of Life), Tagore emphasized the importance of cultivating curiosity, imagination, and critical thinking skills in learners. He advocated for an education system that encourages students to explore, question, and construct their understanding of the world, rather than passively receiving information.

Further, central to Tagore's philosophy of education is the concept of "Shantiniketan," or the abode of peace - and later Sriniketan - which he established as an experimental educational institution in rural Bengal. Shantiniketan epitomized Tagore's holistic educational philosophy, integrating intellectual, artistic, and spiritual facets of human life. Education transcended traditional confines, embracing nature, arts, and community involvement. Tagore emphasized fostering reverence for nature, aesthetic sensibility, and interconnectedness with all life. He advocated for intellectual development through imagination, free thought, and perpetual curiosity. This personalized approach prioritized holistic growth, including physical development through exercises, yoga, and sports, echoing Tagore's belief: "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence."

According to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, "A teacher can never truly teach, unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp, unless it continues to burn its own flame". In his essay 'Ashram Shiksha' (Ashram's Teaching), Tagore extolled the virtues of patience in teaching, advocating that only those imbued with affection for their students deserve the mantle of a teacher. He rejected authoritarian teaching methods, viewing them as indicative of governance inadequacy. K M O'Connell (University of Toronto, Canada) had written that Rabindranath Tagore stands with the pioneering educators, like, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, and Dewey Malcolm Knowles, who have striven to create non-authoritarian learning systems appropriate to the surroundings.

Furthermore, Tagore's educational philosophy emphasizes fostering a love for humanity and advancing universal brotherhood through recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and promoting empathy across cultures. Central to his approach is establishing harmony



HIS NOTION OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION EMPHASISES LINKING NATURE, SOCIETY, AND LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES. HE ADVOCATES FOR LEARNING IN NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS TO NOURISH BODY AND SOUL, PRIORITISE CREATIVITY, AND ENGAGE CRITICALLY WITH TRADITIONAL VALUES AND BELIEFS

between individuals, nature, and the divine. Tagore advocates for freedom in education to unlock individuals' inherent potential and stresses the significance of moral and spiritual development alongside academic learning. His vision aims at cultivating well-rounded individuals capable of selfless service and social integration, ultimately contributing to a conscientious and harmonious society.

In today's context, characterized by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and environmental challenges, Tagore's emphasis on holistic education is more relevant than ever. The prevailing thought on standardized testing and rote memorization (read learning) often stifles creativity and critical thinking, leaving students ill-prepared for the complexities of the modern world. Tagore's philosophy, instead, calls for a shift towards a more student-centered, inquiry-based approach to learning that empowers learners to navigate uncertainty, think critically, and adapt to change. This sentiment resonates in Sunil Banga's (Lancaster University Management School) analysis - in his paper "The global relevance of Tagore's cosmopolitan educational philosophy for social justice in a post-Westphalian world" published in Journal of Philosophy of Education (August 2023, Oxford) - which underscores Tagore's cosmopolitan approach to education as a potent instrument for social justice and equity in today's

world. Banga highlights Tagore's commitment to societal transformation through education, evident in his advocacy for women's empowerment, condemnation of oppression, and advocacy for India's independence (read freedom). Despite emerging from the colonial era, Tagore's philosophy remains pertinent, particularly his emphasis on education as a catalyst for moral and social development, aiming towards societal harmony and integration to address contemporary global challenges.

Moreover, Tagore's emphasis on the integration of arts, music, and literature into the curriculum offers a counterbalance to the narrow focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education prevalent in many educational systems today. Arts play a crucial role in fostering creativity, empathy, and emotional intelligence, which are essential for navigating the complexities of human relationships and societal challenges.

Sunil Banga underscores Tagore's educational paradigm as an early advocate of global interconnectedness. Tagore posited that education's primary objective was the attainment of self-realization, which he termed 'Atma Shakti,' wherein individuals harmonize with nature and society. Drawing from Hindu literature, Tagore envisions a 'universal man' embodying faith in universalism and humanity. He further advocates for personality development through arts and music, leading to a transcendent understanding of human nature. He contends that humans, upon achieving self-realization, unite with 'God' or 'Manav Brahma,' thereby becoming the 'complete man' and 'soul.'

Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy underscores the integral role of education in fos-

tering connections between individuals and humanity while promoting holistic development.

In essence, at the heart of Tagore's vision of cosmopolitan education is the idea of freedom - freedom to engage critically with traditional values and beliefs; and freedom to imagine citizenship in a globalized world, that enables an exploration and negotiation of multiple allegiances in sympathy with others. His notion of freedom in education emphasizes linking nature, society, and learners' experiences. He advocates for learning in natural environments to nourish body and soul, prioritize creativity, and engage critically with traditional values and beliefs.

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of education provides a compelling framework for reimagining education in the 21st century. His emphasis on creativity, freedom, holistic development, and social engagement offers valuable insights for addressing the multifaceted challenges of today's world.

By embracing Tagore's vision, educators can create learning environments that empower students to become compassionate, critical thinkers capable of shaping a more just, sustainable, and humane society and boosting student's morale.

On the occasion of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's 163rd Birth Anniversary, we may well reflect on his philosophy advocating for an education that transcends mere impartation of knowledge, rather instills a profound harmony with all existence. Revisiting Tagore's principles may serve as a guiding light for Indian educational institutions in this globalised age.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

Vision for India: A State-led roadmap for effective governance

Amid India's socio-economic shift, Karthik Muralidharan's new book shines as a guide for the nation's trajectory

It was during the mid-1960s that I had a first-hand experience with Kochi, popularly known as the Queen of the Arabian Sea. Other than Kochi Port, the small aerodrome and the star hotel of yore years Sea Lord and Malabar, there was nothing attractive about the city. Scavengers carrying night soil collected from homes and hotels on their heads were the first sight that welcomed people during the daybreak. Some discernible changes are there in Kochi and other cities in the State. Scavengers are gone and their places have been taken over by cycle rickshaws with the hoarding "For cleaning septic tanks, please contact us...". In the hinterland, farmers wearing loin-cloths plough their farmland with bullocks



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

despite India being one of the largest manufacturers of tractors of all kinds. The mention of the word farmer brings to mind the images of loin-clothed men beating their bullocks to force them to plough the fields. You go to Madurai in Tamil Nadu, which the DMK touts as a role model of Dravidian development. What welcomes you to the small towns and villages are thoroughfares and

ring roads being used as public comfort stations by the residents. Dravidian leaders do not like the idea of Swachh Bharat and insist that their followers use roads, rivers and beaches as public toilets.

It is in these contexts that a book for the economic and social development of India has hit the shelves. Karthik Muralidharan, renowned economist and Tata Chancellor's Professor of Economics at the University of California, San Diego, has authored a book "Accelerating India's Development - A State-led Roadmap for Effective Governance"; a blueprint for the Comprehensive Development of India. Productivity, competitiveness, the number of jobs created and the skill of the labour force are

some of the most important ingredients of the economic growth of a country. It is for the Central and State Governments to generate enabling conditions for speedy economic and social development, according to Muralidharan.

The author says that land, labour, capital, policies on taxation, bankruptcy, environmental regulation and promoting competition are the enabling services that ensure speedy economic and social development. Muralidharan, who has no love lost for the Modi Government at the Centre, says the present Central Government is always ahead in resolving issues that retard economic progress. "India's public discourse on growth

mainly focusses on Central Government actions to promote it, though many of the key issues above are in the domain of State Governments. It is critical to analyze and improve the effectiveness of State level actions for boosting productivity and job quality. State-led initiative and innovations followed by rapid replication of successful ones can play a key role in accelerating both growth and development in India," writes Muralidharan in the chapter "Jobs, Productivity and Economic Growth".

What makes the book interesting is Muralidharan's call for improving job quality rather than job quantity. It is not the number of jobs created but the quality of jobs that determines the welfare of the people, says

Muralidharan. "A job is not just a source of income. It also provides identity, dignity and social engagement. With over 95 per cent of India's population relying primarily on labour income for sustenance, improving job quality will directly improve the welfare of hundreds of millions of Indians," says the economist. This is an open call to finish once-and-for-ever jobs like scavenging, ploughing the land with bullocks and other mean works. The earlier we introduce Artificial Intelligence and robots for such jobs, the better. Instead of using this technology to deceive the public with deep fake videos and political rivals, it would be better if we use this technology to uplift the status of jobs. Millions of Indians are reliant

on casual wage labour for sustenance. An average income earner supports 2.7 dependents. "This is why improving living standards in India depends critically on improving worker productivity and creating more high-quality jobs to generate higher, more reliable incomes," Muralidharan writes. The skill development programme initiated by the present government should be invigorated and made compulsory for students and school dropouts.

The Agniveer scheme is an innovation that inspires the mind. One need not go to engineering colleges or medical colleges to emerge as a skilled professional in high-quality jobs. There is a severe shortage of electricians,

plumbers and mechanics with expertise in household jobs. Even as the central and State governments can increase the number of medical colleges, no stone should be left unturned in increasing the number of ITIs and technical schools. Equal priority should be given to increasing the agricultural productivity in which India lags behind China Vietnam etc. The situation is favourable to India. Skill development, Agniveer and increase in agriculture productivity should be implemented with full vigour. There is hope for India to become the world leader by 2047.

(The writer is special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

Israeli army tells Palestinians to evacuate parts of Rafah

AP ■ JERUSALEM

The Israeli army ordered some 100,000 Palestinians on Monday to begin evacuating from the southern city of Rafah, signalling that a long-promised ground invasion there could be imminent and further complicating efforts to broker a cease-fire in Gaza.

The looming operation in the city — where more than 1 million Palestinians are sheltering and a high number of deaths is feared — has raised global alarm and Israeli's closest allies have warned against it. On Monday, the United Nations agency serving Palestinian refugees said it would not comply with the evacuation order.

Israel has described Rafah as the last significant Hamas stronghold after some seven months of war, and has repeatedly said the invasion is necessary to defeat the Islamic militant group, which unleashed the current conflict with an attack on Israel on October 7.

But Hamas and key mediator Qatar have warned that invading Rafah — along the border with Egypt — could derail efforts by international mediators to broker a cease-fire. Lt. Col. Nadav Shoshani, an army spokesman, said some 100,000 people were being ordered to move to a nearby Israel-declared humanitarian zone called Muwasi — a makeshift camp of tents where along the coast hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have sought safety and live in squalid conditions.

Shoshani said Israel was preparing a "limited scope operation" and would not say whether this was the beginning of a broader invasion of the city. Israel never formally announced the launch of its current ground invasion in Gaza.

Smoke could be seen rising from Rafah Monday afternoon, although the cause was unclear.

Tensions escalated Sunday when Hamas fired rockets at Israeli troops positioned on the border with Gaza near Israel's main crossing for delivering badly needed humanitarian aid, killing four soldiers. Israel shuttered the crossing — but

Columbia University cancels commencement amid ongoing protests

New York (AP): Columbia University is cancelling its large university-wide commencement ceremony amid ongoing pro-Palestinian protests but will hold smaller school-based ceremonies this week and next, the university announced Monday.

"Based on feedback from our students, we have decided to focus attention on our Class Days and school-level graduation ceremonies, where students are honoured individually alongside their peers, and to forego the university-wide ceremony that is scheduled for May 15," officials at the Ivy League school in upper Manhattan said in a statement.

Noting that the past few weeks have been "incredibly difficult" for the community, the school said in its announcement that it made the decision after discussions with students. "Our students emphasised that these smaller-scale, school-based celebrations are most meaningful to them and their families,"

Shoshani said it would not affect how much aid enters Gaza as others are working.

He would not say whether the upcoming operation was a response to that attack. Meanwhile, Israeli airstrikes on Rafah killed 22 people, including children and two infants, according to a hospital.

Shoshani said Israel published a map of the evacuation area, and that orders were being issued through air-dropped leaflets, text messages and radio broadcasts. He said Israel has expanded humanitarian aid into Muwasi, including field hospitals, tents, food and water.

Israel's army said on the social media platform X that it would act with "extreme force" against militants, and urged the population to evacuate immediately for their safety.

officials said. "They are eager to cross the stage to applause and family pride and hear from their school's invited guest speakers."

A father of five, Alzaanin works for an international aid group and fled to Rafah from Beit Hanoun in the north at the start of the war. He said people are concerned since Palestinians have said they were fired at during previous evacuations. Israel denies shooting at civilians.

Alzaanin said he has packed his documents and bags but will wait 24 hours to see what others do before relocating. He said he has a friend in Khan Younis whom he hopes can pitch a tent for his family.

The U.N. agency that has helped millions of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank for decades, known as UNRWA, warned Monday of devastating consequences of a Rafah offensive, including more civilian suffering and deaths. Juliette Touma, communications director for the agency, which has thousands of employees in the city, said it has not evacuated and has no plans to do so.

Egypt's Rafah crossing, a main transfer point for aid going into Gaza, lies in the evacuation zone. The crossing remained open on Monday after the Israeli order.

The war was sparked by an unprecedented Oct. 7 raid into southern Israel in which Hamas and other militants killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250 hostages.

The ensuing conflict has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials. The tally does not distinguish between civilians and combatants, but officials say at least two-thirds of the dead are children and women. It has left a swath of destruction in Gaza, and around 80% of the territory's population has fled to other parts of the besieged coastal enclave.

pled.

Palestinians in Rafah said people gathered to discuss their options after receiving the flyers.

"So many people here are displaced and now they have to move again, but no one will stay here it's not safe," Nidal Alzaanin told The Associated Press by phone.

Jan Egeland, secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, condemned the "forced, unlawful" evacuation order and the idea that people should go to Muwasi.

"The area is already overstretched and devoid of vital services," Egeland said.

About 1.4 million Palestinians — more than half of Gaza's population — are jammed into Rafah and its surroundings. Most of them fled their homes elsewhere in the territory to escape Israel's onslaught and now face another wrenching move or the danger of staying under a new assault.

They live in densely packed tent camps, overflowing U.N. shelters or crowded apartments, and are dependent on international aid for food, with sanitation systems and medical facilities infrastructure crippled.

UK facing 'disaster' of hung Parliament, warns Sunak after local election debacle

PTI ■ LONDON

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak warned on Monday that an analysis of the local election results shows the country is headed for a hung Parliament led by the Opposition Labour Party, which "would be a disaster for Britain".

The 43-year-old British Indian leader told 'The Times' in the wake of a debacle for the governing Conservative Party, who lost hundreds of local council seats and key majorities across England in results over the weekend, that he was bitterly disappointed but determined to fight back.

He sought to paint a less bleak picture for party rebels, demanding a change of political course to win back voters in time for a general election, expected later this year.

"These results suggest we are heading for a hung parliament with Labour as the largest party," Sunak told the newspaper.



"[Labour Leader] Keir Starmer propped up in Downing Street by the SNP [Scottish National Party], Liberal Democrats and the Greens would be a disaster for Britain. The country doesn't need more political horse-trading, but action. We are the only party with a plan to deliver on the priorities of the people," he insisted.

He went on to acknowledge the frustration of the voters because of a tough few years due to a

cost-of-living crisis and soaring household bills, which had made them less inclined to vote for Tory councillors and mayors in the polls last Thursday.

"I know the last few years have been tough, and I understand why people are frustrated. Losing good Conservative councillors and a mayor as fantastic as Andy Street who has done so much good for the West Midlands is of course bitterly disappointing. But I am determined to show people that we are delivering for them, and standing up for our values," he said.

After the final votes were counted on Sunday, the Tories had lost control of 10 councils and more than 470 council seats. They also lost 10 Police and Crime Commissioners, with most of the gains made by Labour and the Lib Dems who pushed the Tories to the third position. In an apparent message for the rebellious voices from the Conservative backbenches, being led by former home sec-

retary Suella Braverman who has demanded the Prime Minister move on from "managerialism" and show strong leadership, Sunak added: "There's work to do and more progress to be made and I am determined that we will come together as a party and show the British people we are delivering for them." Sunak's comments on a hung Parliament reflect analysis by leading psephologist Professor Michael Thrasher for 'Sky News', which suggested Labour would win 294 seats at a general election, short of the 326 for a majority.

The projection, which some other polling experts have dismissed, used the local election results to project a nationwide estimate of vote share at a general election.

It assumes everyone would vote the same way at a general election as in last week's local elections when smaller parties and Independent candidates tend to do better in local elections.

UN nuclear watchdog chief travels to Iran as its monitoring remains hampered

AP ■ JERUSALEM

The head of the United Nations' atomic watchdog travelled Monday to Iran, where his agency faces increasing difficulty in monitoring the Islamic Republic's rapidly advancing nuclear program as tensions remain high in the wider Middle East over the Israel-Hamas war.

Rafael Mariano Grossi already has warned Tehran has enough uranium enriched to near-weapons-grade levels to make "several" nuclear bombs if it chose to do so. He has acknowledged the agency can't guarantee that none of Iran's centrifuges may have been peeled away for clandestine enrichment. Those challenges now find themselves entangled in attacks between Israel and Iran, with the city of Isfahan apparently coming under Israeli fire in recent weeks despite it being surrounded by sensitive nuclear sites. Grossi is likely to attend an Iranian nuclear conference there while

on his two-day trip to Iran.

"Problems will not disappear," Grossi told an International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors' meeting in March. "They will only get worse. So, we need to address this in a serious way."

In Tehran, Grossi and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian shook hands in front of journalists before going into a meeting. Authorities offered no immediate comment on their discussions.

Grossi will travel to Isfahan on Tuesday before heading back to Vienna, where he plans to give an update to journalists. Tensions have grown between Iran and the IAEA since then-President Donald Trump in 2018 unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers. Since then, Iran has abandoned all limits the deal put on its programme and enriches uranium to 60% purity — near weapons-grade levels of 90%.

IAEA surveillance cameras have been disrupted, while Iran has barred some of the agency's most experienced inspectors.

Meanwhile, Iranian officials have increasingly threatened they could pursue atomic weapons.

"For us, making the atomic bomb is easier than not building atomic bomb," said Mahmoud Reza Aghamiri, the chancellor of Tehran Shahid Beheshti University and a specialist in nuclear physics. Iranian media quoted Aghamiri acknowledging Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had previously said making an atomic bomb is forbidden.

"But if his fatwa and viewpoint is changed, we have ability to build atomic bomb, too," Aghamiri added.

Aghamiri's comments follow a drumroll of others by Iranian lawmakers, those in its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard and a former head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran suggesting Tehran could

build the bomb.

Iranian diplomats for years have pointed to Khamenei's preachings as a binding fatwa, or religious edict, that Iran wouldn't build an atomic bomb.

We do not need nuclear bombs. We have no intention of using a nuclear bomb," Khamenei said in a November 2006 speech, according to a transcript from his office. "We do not claim to dominate the world, like the Americans, we do not want to dominate the world by force and need a nuclear bomb. Our nuclear bomb and explosive power is our faith." But such edicts aren't written in stone. Khamenei's predecessor, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued fatwas that revised his own earlier pronouncements after he took power following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. And anyone who would follow the 85-year-old Khamenei as the country's supreme leader could make his own fatwas revising those previously issued.

EU's executive decides to end legal standoff with Poland

Brussels (AP): The European Union's executive decided on Monday to end its 6-year dispute with member state Poland, saying Prime Minister Donald Tusk has initiated the necessary changes to reverse what the bloc called the previous government's backsliding on democratic principles. The EU's decision to withdraw its case over rule of law complaints follows one in February to start releasing billions of euros that it had frozen in the dispute.

"Today, marks a new chapter for Poland," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, calling the breakthrough the result of the country's determined reform efforts. "The ongoing restoration of the rule of law in Poland is great for the Polish people and for our union as a whole."

Trump fined \$1,000 for gag order violation in hush money case

AP ■ NEW YORK

The judge presiding over Donald Trump's hush money trial has fined him \$1,000 for violating his gag order and sternly warned the former president that additional violation could result in jail time. The fine marks the second sanction for Trump for inflammatory comments about witnesses since the start of the trial last month. He was fined \$9,000 last week for nine violations. Judge Juan M Merchan warned Monday that additional gag order violations could potentially result in jail time, though he said that was "the last thing I want to do".

Prosecutors in Trump's hush money trial are moving deeper into his orbit following an inside-the-room account about the former president's reaction to a politically damaging recording that surfaced in the final weeks of the 2016 campaign. Hope Hicks, a for-



mer White House official and for years a top aide, is by far the closest Trump associate to have taken the witness stand in the Manhattan trial.

Her testimony Friday was designed to give jurors an insider's view of a chaotic and pivotal stretch in the campaign, when a 2005 recording showing Trump talking about grabbing women without their permission was made public and when he and his allies sought to prevent the release of

other potentially embarrassing stories. That effort, prosecutors say, included hush money payments to a porn actor and Playboy model who both have said they had sexual encounters with Trump before he entered politics.

"I had a good sense to believe this was going to be a massive story and that it was going to dominate the news cycle for the next several days," Hicks said of the "Access Hollywood" recording, first revealed in an October 2016 Washington Post story. "This was a damaging development."

The trial enters its third week of testimony Monday with prosecutors building toward their star witness, Michael Cohen, Trump's former lawyer and personal fixer who pleaded guilty to federal charges related to the hush money payments. Cohen is expected to undergo a bruising cross-examination from defense attorneys seeking to

undermine his credibility with jurors. Trump faces 34 felony counts of falsifying business records in connection with payments made to stifle potentially embarrassing stories. Prosecutors say Trump's company, the Trump Organization, reimbursed Cohen for payments to porn actor Stormy Daniels and gave Cohen bonuses and extra payments. Prosecutors allege that those transactions were falsely logged in company records as legal expenses. Trump has pleaded not guilty and denied sexual encounters with any of the women, as well as any wrongdoing. So far, jurors have heard from witnesses including a tabloid magazine publisher and Trump friend who bought the rights to several sordid tales about Trump to prevent them from coming out and a Los Angeles lawyer who negotiated hush money deals on behalf of both Daniels and Playboy model Karen McDougal.

US, Philippine forces stage combat drills near strategic channel off southern Taiwan

AP ■ ITBAYAT

US Marines and their Filipino counterparts darted out of Black Hawk helicopters during combat drills Monday in the Philippines' northernmost island town along the strategic Bashi Channel off southern Taiwan — a flashpoint in the military rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

The show of allied battle readiness in Itbayat in Batanes province is part of annual military exercises that started last month, dubbed Balikatan, Tagalog for "shoulder-to-shoulder," and involving more than 16,000 American and Philippine military personnel.

This year's exercises by the longtime treaty allies — the largest yet — are meant to deter possible aggression. They come against the backdrop of China's increasingly assertive actions in the disputed South China Sea, where Chinese and Philippine coast guards and accompanying ships have had several increasingly tense faceoffs since last year.

More than 250 French and Australian forces are also participating, along with observers from several allied and security partner nations, led by Japan and European nations. The drills, which began April 22, end later this week.

In Monday's mock battle scenario, American and Philippine forces took positions at the airfield, ringed by low-lying hills, as three Army CH-47 Chinook helicopters landed to deliver combat supplies.

Renaissance and counter-reconnaissance drills were also planned in the far-flung region. The Associated Press was among a small group of journalists invited to attend the maneuvers. "We are absolutely battle-ready and that's what

we train for day in and day out," Marine Maj. Robert Patterson said. "It's important to enhance inter-operability with our Filipino counterparts."

Washington and Manila say the drills are not directed at any country and are crucial for improving the response to emergencies in the Philippines, one of the world's most disaster-prone countries.

However, this year's drills focus on territorial defense and are being staged mainly in two of the most sensitive fault lines in the regional rivalry between China and the United States: the disputed South China Sea and the Bashi Channel.

The critical waterway between Taiwan and the Philippines, an important trade conduit laden with international undersea cables, has been closely watched and guarded by Chinese and American forces. China considers Taiwan a part of its territory, to be annexed by force if necessary.

In a telephone call last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed to President Joe Biden that Beijing will not tolerate separatist activities by Taiwan's independence forces, as well as "exterior indulgence and support," an apparent reference to Washington's support for the island.

Biden raised concerns about China's actions in the South China Sea, including efforts to impede the Philippines, which Washington is treaty-obligated to defend, from resupplying its forces on the fiercely disputed Second Thomas Shoal.

Derek Grossman, a senior defense analyst at RAND Corporation, said the message of deterrence was Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s decision to allow U.S. forces indefinitely access to

Activists in B'desh march through universities

AP ■ DHAKA

Thousands of activists in Bangladesh backed by the ruling party's student wing marched through universities around the country Monday to demand an end to the Israel-Hamas war and the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

Activists of the Bangladesh Chhatra League marched through the campus of the prestigious Dhaka University chanting anti-Israel slogans, carrying Bangladeshi and Palestinian flags and spreading banners saying "Free Palestine, Stop Genocide." Many other students also joined the rally, organizers said. Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority nation of nearly 170 million people, maintains no diplomatic relations with Israel and has called for an independent Palestinian state.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, of the ruling Awami League, has slammed Israel over what she has alleged is genocide committed by its government. The student group said it organized the demonstrations in solidarity with protests in the United States and because of growing rage against the Israeli military action in Gaza. It called for action "against atrocities, massacres and ongoing human rights violations". Student leaders cited Israel over what they described as brutal and indiscriminate attacks that killed women and children and damaged hospitals.

Meanwhile the children of Gaza aren't getting enough food and water, said Tamir Hasan Shaikat, an organizer. "We have never seen attacks on hospitals in any war, but we have seen that in Gaza," he said.

Other protesters said they joined the demonstrations to send a message to the world that they were against any oppression.

Sunita Williams set to fly into space for third time

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Indian-origin astronaut Sunita Williams is ready to fly into space for the third time on Tuesday as the pilot aboard Boeing's Starliner spacecraft in its first crewed test flight. Boeing's Starliner will blast off from the International Space Station from Cape Canaveral in Florida.

Starliner will carry Williams, 58, and Butch Wilmore to the International Space Station, marking what could be a momentous and long-awaited victory for the beleaguered Boeing programme.

The scheduled lift-off is set for 22:34 local time on Monday (8:04 am IST on Tuesday) "We are all here because we are all ready. Our friends and family have heard about it and they're happy and proud that we are



part of the process to fix it all," the BBC quoted Williams as saying. The mission has been delayed for several years because of setbacks in the spacecraft's development.

If it is successful, it will become the second private firm able to provide crew transport to and from the ISS, alongside Elon Musk's SpaceX. Such a scenario — with both SpaceX's Crew

Dragon and Starliner flying regularly — is one for which the US space agency NASA has long waited. "Design and development is hard — particularly with a human space vehicle," said Mark Nappi, vice president and Starliner programme manager at Boeing, during a Thursday news briefing. "There's a number of things that were surprises along the way that we had to overcome. ... It certainly made the team very, very strong. I'm very proud of how they've overcome every single issue that we've encountered and gotten us to this point," Nappi said.

"This is history in the making," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said of the upcoming Starliner mission during a March 22 news conference. "We're now in the golden era of space exploration."

This is Boeing's second flight to the International Space Station

and third Starliner flight test overall, following a second Orbital Flight Test, the uncrewed mission also known as OFT-2, in May 2022. Boeing also completed pad abort demonstration in November 2019, according to NASA. As the final flight test for Starliner, NASA's Boeing crew flight test will validate the transportation system, including the launch pad, rocket, spacecraft, in-orbit operational capabilities, and return to Earth with astronauts aboard, it said.

SpaceX and Boeing developed their respective vehicles under NASA's Commercial Crew Programme, a partnership with private industry contractors. From the outset, the space agency aimed to have both companies operating at once. The Crew Dragon and Starliner spacecraft would each serve as a backup to the other, giving astronauts the option to keep fly-

ing, even if technical issues or other setbacks grounded one spacecraft.

Williams received her commission as an Ensign in the United States Navy from the United States Naval Academy in May 1987. Williams was selected as an astronaut by NASA in 1998 and is a veteran of two space missions, Expeditions 14/15 and 32/33. She served as a flight engineer on Expedition 32 and then commander of Expedition 33. During her first spaceflight, Expedition 14/15, Williams was launched with the crew of STS-116 on December 9, 2006, docking with the International Space Station on December 11, 2006. While onboard, she established a world record for females with four spacewalks totalling 29 hours and 17 minutes. Astronaut Peggy Whitson subsequently broke the record in 2008 with a total of five spacewalks.

WESTERN OFFICIALS' INVOLVEMENT IN UKRAINE

Russia announces nuclear drills

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russia said Monday it plans to hold drills simulating the use of battlefield nuclear weapons amid rising tensions following comments by senior Western officials about the possibility of deeper involvement in the war in Ukraine.

The announcement came on the eve of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inauguration to a fifth term in office and in a week when Moscow on Thursday will celebrate Victory Day, its most important secular holiday, marking its defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. The drills are a response to "provocative statements and threats of certain Western officials regarding the Russian Federation," the Defence Ministry said in a statement. It was the first time Russia has publicly announced drills involving tactical nuclear weapons, although its strategic nuclear forces regularly hold exercises. Tactical nuclear weapons include air bombs, warheads for short-range missiles and artillery munitions and are meant for use on a battlefield. They are less powerful than the strategic weapons — massive warheads that arm intercontinental ballistic missiles and are intended to obliterate entire cities.

The Russian announcement was a warning to Ukraine's Western allies about becoming more deeply engaged in the 2-year-old war, where the Kremlin's forces have gained an upper hand amid Ukraine's shortage of manpower and weapons. Some of Ukraine's Western partners have previously expressed concern that the conflict could spill beyond Ukraine into a war between NATO and Russia. French President Emmanuel Macron repeated last week that he doesn't exclude sending troops to Ukraine, and UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron said Kyiv's forces will be able to use British long-range weapons to strike targets inside Russia. Some other NATO countries providing weapons to Kyiv have balked at that possibility.



The Kremlin branded those comments as dangerous, heightening tension between Russia and NATO. The war already has placed significant strain on relations between Moscow and the West.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday that Macron's recent statement and other remarks by British and US officials had prompted the nuclear drills.

"It's a new round of escalation," Peskov said, referring to what the Kremlin regarded as provocative statements. "It's unprecedented and requires special attention and special measures."

Russia's Foreign Ministry summoned both the French and British ambassadors. Sweden's Foreign Minister Tobias Billström said the nuclear exercises "contribute to increasing instability."

"In the current security situation, Russia's actions may be considered particularly irresponsible and reckless," Billström told Swedish news agency TT. Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy head of Russia's Security Council that's chaired by Putin, said in his typically hawkish fashion that the comments by Macron and Cameron risked pushing the nuclear-armed world toward a "global catastrophe."

It wasn't the first time Europe's military support for Ukraine has prompted nuclear saber-rattling. In March 2023, after the UK's decision to provide Ukraine with armor-piercing shells containing depleted uranium, Putin said he intends to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Ukraine neighbor Belarus.

The ministry said the exercise is intended to "increase the readiness of non-strategic nuclear forces to fulfill combat tasks" and will be held on Putin's orders. The maneuvers will involve missile units of the Southern Military District along with the air force and the navy, it said.

The Russian announcement stirred little reaction in Ukraine, where the spokesman for the Military Intelligence agency, Andrii Yusov, said on national television: "Nuclear blackmail is a usual practice of Putin's regime; it does not constitute major news."

Western officials have blamed Russia for threatening a wider war through provocative acts. NATO countries said last week they are deeply concerned by a campaign of hybrid activities on the military alliance's soil, accusing Moscow of being behind them and saying they represent a security threat.

Macron sets trade, Ukraine as top priority

AP ■ PARIS

China's President Xi Jinping arrived at the French presidential palace on Monday for a two-day state visit that is expected to focus both on trade disputes and diplomatic efforts to convince Beijing to use its influence to move Russia toward ending the war in Ukraine.

In Paris, Xi first joined a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen meant to address broader EU concerns.

Macron said in his introductory remarks the meeting would first address trade issues and how to ensure "fair competition", then the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

"We are at a turning point in our history" as the Europe-China relationship is faced with challenges, Macron said. The talks are aimed at sharing "both our shared positions and our concerns, to try to overcome them, because the future of our continent will very clearly also depend on our ability to develop balanced relations with China," he said.

Macron, a strong advocate of

Europe's economic sovereignty, wants to raise French concerns about a Chinese antidumping investigation into cognac and other European brandy, and tensions over French cosmetics and other sectors.

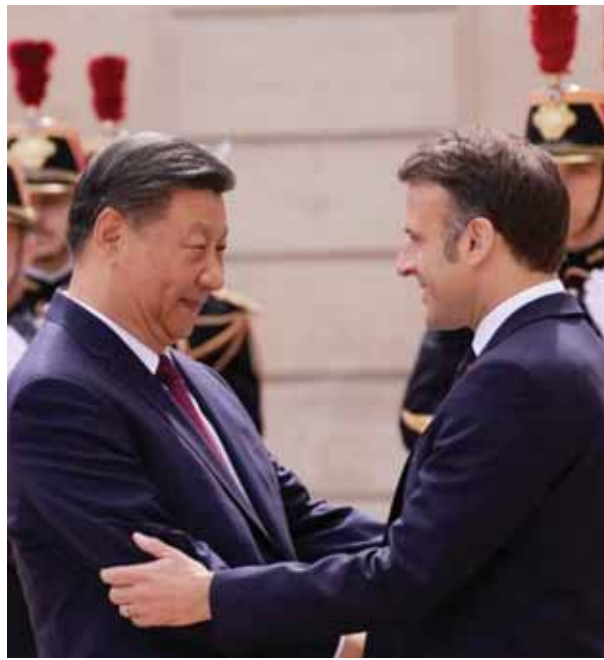
In a recent speech, he denounced trade practices of both China and the United States as shoring up protections and subsidies.

At the start of the meeting in Paris, Xi said "the world today has entered a new period of turbulence and change".

"As two important forces in the world, China and Europe should ... continuously make new contributions to world peace and development," he said. The EU launched an investigation last fall into Chinese subsidies and could impose tariffs on electric vehicles exported from China.

"The European Union and China want good relations," von der Leyen said. "We have a substantial EU-China economic relationship. ... But this relationship is also challenged, for example, through state-induced overcapacity, unequal market access and overdependencies."

Paris is the first stop on Xi's



European trip, seeking to rebuild relations at a time of global tensions. After France on Monday and Tuesday, he will head to Serbia and Hungary. France hopes the discussions will help convince China to use its leverage with Moscow to 'contribute to a resolution of the conflict' in Ukraine, according

to a French presidential official. Russian President Vladimir Putin recently announced plans to visit China this month.

Macron will press Xi over supplies from Chinese companies supporting the Russian war effort despite EU sanctions, he said. China claims neutrality in the Ukraine conflict. France

also wants China to maintain a dialogue with Kyiv, added the official, who was not authorised to be identified according to presidential policy. Last year, Macron appealed to Xi to "bring Russia to its senses"; but the call was not followed by any apparent action by Beijing.

"French authorities are pursuing two objectives that are ultimately contradictory," said Marc Julienne, director of the Center for Asian Studies at the French Institute of International Relations. "On the one hand, to convince Xi that it's in his interest to help Europeans to put pressure on Vladimir Putin to end the war and, on the other hand, to dissuade the Chinese president from delivering arms to his Russian friend."

"In short, we think that Xi can help us, but at the same time we fear that he could help Putin," Julienne wrote. As France prepares to host the Summer Olympics, Macron said he would ask Xi to use his influence to make the Games "a diplomatic moment of peace". The discussions will also be closely watched from Washington, a month before President Joe Biden is expected to pay his own state visit to France.

Germany recalls envoy in Russia for a week

Berlin (AP): Germany said on Monday it recalled its ambassador to Russia for a week of consultations in Berlin following an alleged hacker attack on Chancellor Olaf Scholz's party.

Germany last week accused Russian military agents of hacking into the top echelons of Scholz's Social Democrats' party and other sensitive government and industrial targets. Berlin has joined NATO and fellow European countries in warning that Russia's cyberespionage would have consequences. The Foreign Office in Berlin said Monday that the government is taking the latest incident "seriously" and that Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock had decided to call back German Ambassador Alexander Lambsdorff. He would return to Moscow after a week, it said.

"The German government takes this event very seriously as behavior against our liberal democracy and the institutions that support it," Foreign Office spokeswoman Kathrin Deschauer said.

Baerbock said last week that Russian military cyber operators were behind the hacking of emails of the Social Democrats, the leading party in the governing coalition. Officials said the hackers had exploited Microsoft Outlook.

The German Interior Ministry said in a statement last week that the hacking campaign began as early as March 2022, a month after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with emails at the Social Democrat party headquarters accessed beginning that December. It said German companies, including in the defense and aerospace sectors, as well as targets related to the war in Ukraine were the focus of the hacking attacks.

Maldives urges Indians to 'be a part' of its tourism

PTI ■ DUBAI

With the number of Indian tourists visiting the Maldives dwindling amidst strained bilateral ties, the archipelago nation's tourism minister on Monday urged Indians to contribute to the country's economy which is dependent on tourism.

In an interview with PTI Videos here, Maldivian Tourism Minister Ibrahim Faisal emphasised on the historical relations between his country and India.

"We have a history. Our newly elected government also wants to work together (with India). We always promote peace and a friendly environment. Our people and the government will give a warm welcome to Indian arrivals. As the Tourism Minister, I want to tell Indians

to please be a part of Maldives' tourism. Our economy depends on tourism," he said.

A full-blown backlash was directed at the Maldives following derogatory remarks against India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on social media by three Maldivian officials after Modi posted photos and video of the pristine Lakshadweep Islands on India's west coast on January 6 on his X handle. Scores of Indians, including multiple celebrities, cancelled their reservations and dropped plans to visit Maldives. The tourism arrival statistics reflected how from being a top visitor country, India's position went down from topmost to sixth position after January.

According to a sun.my report published on Monday, the number of tourist arrivals from

India declined by 42 per cent in the first four months of this year compared to the first four months of last year.

At the start of this year, India was the top tourist market for the Maldives. Shortly into the year, India dropped to sixth place amongst the top tourist markets, the news portal reported. According to Tourism Ministry statistics, Maldives recorded a total of 43,991 tourist arrivals from India as of May 4. Between January and April of last year, Maldives recorded 73,785 tourist arrivals. This year, the number stands at 42,638. The report attributed the steep decline in Indian tourists to the strained relations between India and the Maldives after the new administration led by President Mohamed Muizzu assumed office in November last year.

Pak SC suspends HC verdict denying Sunni Ittehad Council reserved seats

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

In a relief to jailed former premier Imran Khan's party, Pakistan's Supreme Court on Monday suspended a high court verdict denying the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) reserved seats for women and minorities in the national and provincial assemblies.

The Peshawar High Court (PHC) had rejected a petition of the SIC, which came to the fore after Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) backed independently elected lawmakers joined it, regarding its claim on reserved seats.

PTI was forced to take the cover of SIC because reserved seats are allotted to parties having members in the national and provincial assemblies. Since the PTI was deprived of its bat symbol before the election due to failure to hold intra-party elections as per law, it was not allowed to contest the February 8 general election as a party.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in March ruled that the SIC was not entitled to claim quota for reserved seats as none of its members contested the election from the party platform and it also failed to provide a mandatory party list for reserved seats.

There are 70 reserved seats in the 336-member National Assembly and 156 in the provincial assemblies which are allotted proportionally to the winning parties in the general elections.

The reserved seats were allocated to all political parties according to their strength in the assemblies except the PTI-backed SIC. The ECP in March also decided to distribute the seats among other parliamentary parties but the PTI rejected the verdict as unconstitutional and petitioned against it in the PHC, which rejected the plea. The SIC then filed a petition before the apex court against the PHC judgment in April.

A three-member bench of the Supreme Court led by Justice Mansoor Ali Shah and comprising Justices Muhammad Ali Mazhar and Athar Minallah took up an SIC appeal against the PHC order.

After hearing arguments, the court suspended the decision by the PHC. "We are accepting the case for hearing," Justice Shah said, adding that the PHC order upholding the ECP decision was suspended to the extent of the remaining reserved seats given to other parties.

Later, the court adjourned the matter for hearing until June 3. The final verdict whenever it comes will be a moral victory for PTI but may not have any impact on the government. The total number of PTI lawmakers would slightly increase in the assemblies but still, the party would not be in a position to challenge the government. Earlier, the SIC in its petition said that the PTI candidates joined the SIC after

their party lost its electoral symbol, adding that the ECP also raised no objections to the above independent returned candidates joining the SIC.

It contended that the fundamental premise of the proportional representation system for allocating reserved seats for women and non-Muslims, as outlined in Article 51(6)(d)(e) and Article 106(3)(c) of the Constitution, 1973, does not hinge on whether a political party submits candidate lists for reserved seats before the general election or whether the party contested the election.

Instead, the party asserted that the core constitutional basis for the right to reserved seats under the proportional representation system is determined by the "total number of general seats secured by each political party from the province concerned in the National Assembly" or the "total number of general seats secured by each political party in the provincial assembly."

Pak CJ slams panel for probe into extremist group-led sit-in

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Chief Justice Faez Isa on Monday slammed a fact-finding commission set up to investigate the extremist group Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan's 2017 Faizabad sit-in, saying that apparently, the committee's "mandate was to acquit" former ISI chief Faiz Hameed "by going out of the way".

Isa's remarks came as a three-member bench of the Supreme Court took up a set of review petitions filed against its 2019 judgement in the Faizabad sit-in case involving the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The Faizabad Dharna Commission was formed in November last year to investigate the TLP's 20-day sit-in, which paralysed life in both Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

The extremist religious party was protesting alleged changes in the oath of lawmakers. A Supreme Court panel led by Justice Isa, years

before he took oath as the chief justice, in a landmark judgment in 2019 had ruled against the sit-in and directed action against those responsible for it. However, no action was taken to implement the judgment and instead, several review petitions were filed against it, while the then government led by jailed prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party filed a corruption case against Isa. The case was rejected by the top court and the review petitions remained pending until Isa became the Chief Justice last year and took them up for hearing.

Interestingly, the majority of the petitioners withdrew their review pleas. However, the bench insisted on the implementation of the original verdict and the government set up a commission to suggest fixing the responsibility and hold officials accountable.

A bench headed by Justice Isa and comprising Justice Irfan

Saadat Khan and Justice Naeem Akhtar Awan conducted the hearing on Monday after the report of the commission was submitted. The three-member commission was led by retired Inspector General Police Syed Akhtar Ali Shah with former Islamabad police chief Tahir Alam Khan and additional interior secretary Khushal Khan as its members.

Chief Justice Isa was not pleased with the report and said it was an effort to protect the former ISI chief, who had held talks with the protestors and also signed an agreement with them. "Why is this gentleman (Faiz) being acquitted in the report by going out of the way? Apparently, the commission's mandate was to acquit Faiz Hameed," the chief justice remarked during the hearing. He said it was very disappointing and a waste of the country's time because the commission failed to call anyone on behalf of the TLP who could have helped the commission.

Chad holds prez polls after years of military rule

N'Djamena (Chad): Voters in Chad headed to the polls on Monday to cast their ballot in a long delayed presidential election that is set to end three years of military rule under interim president, Mahamat Deby Itno. Deby Itno seized power after his father who ran the country for more than three decades was killed fighting rebels in 2021. Last year, the government announced it was extending the 18-month transition for two more years, which provoked protests across the country.

There are 10 candidates on the ballot, including a woman. Analysts say Deby Itno is expected to emerge among the front runners. The main opposition figure Yaya Dillo, the current president's cousin, was killed in February in circumstances that remain unclear. "For years now, we've had to cope with the high cost of living, without any solution," said Adoumadi Jean, a teacher at a state secondary school in Moya-Chari province, in an interview with The Associated Press.

'Gulf Kingdom considers Pak high priority biz opportunity'

Islamabad (PTI): A senior Saudi official on Monday said that the oil-rich Gulf Kingdom's government and companies consider Pakistan a high priority economic, investment and business opportunity. Saudi Deputy Investment Minister Ibrahim Almutairi made the remarks while addressing a two-day Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Investment Conference, which began here on Monday. A 50-member Saudi business delegation is in Pakistan to attend the event. Almutairi said his country "believes in the economic potential of Pakistan" including its demography, location and natural resources, state-run Radio Pakistan reported. He said Pakistan is a major strategic partner for Saudi

Arabia. Referring to the "fraternal ties" rooted deep in common faith, culture and shared values, the official said, "we want to see Pakistan as one of our leading international partners." The Saudi minister said that "the gathering provides an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the great opportunity available for investment in Pakistan."

He expressed his confidence that the public and private sectors of both the countries can take their partnership to the next level. Almutairi mentioned that Saudi Arabia is a home to about two million Pakistanis who have contributed significantly to the Gulf Kingdom's vision 2030. On his part, Finance Minister Muhammad

Aurangzeb expressed the government's "commitment to fully facilitate the private sector to take the country towards export-led growth".

The Pakistan government was focused on bringing foreign direct investment to uplift various sectors, he said. Giving an overview of the country's economic situation, the finance minister claimed it was on a positive trajectory. He said that the cash-strapped country's current account deficit will be less than a billion dollars during the ongoing fiscal year. He said the country's foreign exchange reserves have risen to \$9 billion, adding that the local currency was stable over the last ten months while the inflation was down to roughly seventeen per cent.

New vaccine may be effective against all coronaviruses

PTI ■ LONDON

A team of scientists from the world's leading universities have developed a new all-in-one vaccine that they hope can protect humans against a broad range of coronaviruses, including ones that are yet to emerge.

The research published in 'Nature Nanotechnology' on Monday is based on a new approach to vaccine development called "proactive vaccinology", where scientists build a vaccine before the disease-causing pathogen even emerges, which has shown promising results in mice. The study by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the UK and Caltech in the US says the vaccine works by training the body's immune system to recognise specific

regions of eight different coronaviruses, including SARS-CoV-2 which caused the COVID-19 outbreak, and several that are currently circulating in bats and have potential to jump to humans and cause a pandemic. "Our focus is to create a vaccine that will protect us against the next coronavirus pandemic, and have it ready before the pandemic has even started," said Rory Hills, a graduate researcher in the University of Cambridge's Department of Pharmacology and first author of the report.

For example, the new vaccine does not include the SARS-CoV-1 coronavirus, which caused the 2003 SARS outbreak, yet it still induces an immune response to that virus. "We've created a vaccine that provides protection against a

broad range of different coronaviruses — including ones we don't even know about yet," said Hills.

Key to its effectiveness is that the specific virus regions the vaccine targets also appear in many related coronaviruses. By training the immune system to attack these regions, it gives protection against other coronaviruses not represented in the vaccine, including ones that haven't even been identified yet.

"We don't have to wait for new coronaviruses to emerge. We know enough about coronaviruses, and different immune responses to them, that we can get going with building protective vaccines against unknown coronaviruses now," said Professor Mark Howarth in the University of Cambridge's Department of

Pharmacology, senior author of the report.

"Scientists did a great job in quickly producing an extremely effective COVID vaccine during the last pandemic, but the world still had a massive crisis with a huge number of deaths. We need to work out how we can do even better than that in the future, and a powerful component of that is starting to build the vaccines in advance," he said. The new 'Quartet Nanocage' vaccine is based on a structure called a nanoparticle — a ball of proteins held together by incredibly strong interactions. Chains of different viral antigens are attached to this nanoparticle using a novel "protein superglue". Multiple antigens are included in these chains, which trains the immune system to target spe-

cific regions shared across a broad range of coronaviruses. The latest study demonstrated that the new vaccine raises a broad immune response, even in mice that were pre-immunised with SARS-CoV-2. The new vaccine is much simpler in design than other broadly protective vaccines currently in development, which the researchers believe should accelerate its route into clinical trials. The underlying technology that the scientific collaboration has developed also has potential for use in vaccine development to protect against many other health challenges. It is said to improve on previous work, by the Oxford and Caltech groups, to develop a novel all-in-one vaccine against coronavirus threats.

India's service activity growth in April among fastest in 14 years: PMI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's services sector growth eased slightly in April but growth of new business and output remained sharp and among the fastest in 14 years amid favourable economic conditions and strong demand, a monthly survey said on Monday. The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Services Business Activity Index fell from 61.2 in March to 60.8 in April, highlighting one of the strongest growth rates seen in just under 14 years. Survey members attributed the latest uptick in output to favourable economic conditions, demand strength and rising intakes of new work. In the Purchasing Managers'

Index (PMI) parlance, a print above 50 means expansion, while a score below 50 denotes contraction. "India's service activity rose at a slightly softer pace in April, backed by a further rise in new orders, with a notable strength in domestic demand," said Pranjal Bhandari, Chief India Economist at HSBC. In addition to buoyant domestic demand, firms noted new business gains from several parts of the world, which collectively underpinned the second-quickest upturn in international sales since the series started in September 2014. On the job front, a few service providers in India showed an increased appetite for new hires



in April, amid rising inflows of new business. However, several companies indicated that payroll numbers were sufficient for current requirements, and the rate of job creation was marginal and softer than that seen at the end of the previous fiscal year. "In response to increased new orders, firms expanded their staffing levels, though the pace of hiring growth decelerated," Bhandari said. On the price front, wage pressures and higher food prices meanwhile led to another increase in cost burdens, which firms partially passed on to their customers. "Input costs continued to rise sharply, albeit slower than in March, but resulted in squeezed

margins for service firms, as only part of the price rise was passed on to clients through output charges," Bhandari said. Meanwhile, confidence among service providers towards the year-ahead outlook for business activity improved to a 3-month high. Marketing efforts and efficiency gains, alongside plans to price competitively and predictions that demand conditions will remain favourable, boosted optimism, the survey said. Meanwhile, the HSBC India Composite PMI Output Index moderated to 61.5 in April, from 61.8 in March, the latest reading was one of the highest seen in close to 14 years and signalled a substantial rate of expansion

across the private sector. "In terms of overall activity, aggregate output across both the manufacturing and service sectors rose significantly in April, albeit at a slightly slower pace, indicating sustained health in these sectors," Bhandari said. During April, manufacturers continued to note a stronger increase in new business intakes than service providers. Aggregate sales rose sharply, and at one of the fastest rates since mid-2010. Composite PMI indices are weighted averages of comparable manufacturing and services PMI indices. Weights reflect the relative size of the manufacturing and service sectors according to official GDP data.

Sensex closes flat, Nifty slips on profit taking by investors



PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark Sensex closed almost flat in a range-bound trade on Monday as investors booked profits in index heavyweights amid high valuation concerns. The 30-share BSE Sensex edged up 17.39 points or 0.02 per cent to settle at 73,895.54. The barometer hit a high of 74,359.69 and a low of 73,786.29. The broader NSE Nifty declined 33.15 points or 0.15 per cent to close at 22,442.70. From the Sensex basket, Kotak Mahindra Bank jumped 5 per cent after the company reported a 25 per cent growth in its March quarter net profit at Rs 5,302 crore, limited by a drop in the core income due to narrow interest margins. Tata Consultancy Services, Hindustan Unilever, Mahindra & Mahindra, Sun Pharma, Tech Mahindra and IndusInd Bank were among the other major gainers. Titan tanked 7 per cent after its March quarter earnings failed to cheer investors. State Bank of India, NTPC, Power Grid, Bajaj Finance and Larsen & Toubro were the other laggards. The domestic indices traded in a range-bound manner, said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. "The broader indices also witnessed major selling

pressure due to valuation concerns and profit-booking," he added. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.80 per cent to USD 83.62 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,391.98 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. In Asian markets, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory. Japan and South Korea's markets were closed for the holidays. European markets were trading with gains. Wall Street ended with significant gains on Friday. Billionaire investor Warren Buffett said that the Indian market has "unexplored" opportunities which his conglomerate holding company, Berkshire Hathaway, would like to explore "in the future." Buffett's remarks came at Berkshire's annual meeting on Friday when Rajeev Agarwal of DoorDarshi Advisors, a US-based hedge fund that invests in Indian equities, asked him about the possibility of Berkshire exploring in India, the world's fifth-largest economy. The BSE benchmark dropped 732.96 points or 0.98 per cent to settle at 73,878.15 on Friday. The NSE Nifty also declined 172.35 points or 0.76 per cent to 22,475.85.

FADA, Frost & Sullivan team up for study to analyse domestic PV segment

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Automobile dealer's body FADA on Monday said it has joined hands with Frost & Sullivan for a study to analyse various aspects of customer journey, encompassing sales, after-sales and product quality across the domestic passenger vehicle industry. The Customer Experience Index (CEI) study will target various segments like hatchbacks, sedans, SUVs, EVs and luxury vehicles, utilising a detailed questionnaire to capture insights from 8,000 participants across 26 cities. The study would include seven metropolitan areas, 16 tier-2 cities and three tier-3 locations, ensuring a broad and inclusive data set that spans the diverse Indian landscape. "By incorporating this customer experience index survey, we are broadening our analytical scope to encompass all facets of the Indian automobile ecosystem, thereby providing a comprehensive voice and strategic vision for all stakeholders," FADA President Manish Raj Singhania said. The insights garnered from this expansive survey will directly inform and refine OEM strategies, facilitating tailored customer experiences that foster brand loyalty and satisfaction, he added. FADA Research & Academy Chairman Vinkesh Gulati said by integrating detailed assessments of sales, after-sales and product quality experiences from various vehicle categories, the body aims to provide OEMs and dealers with the insights necessary to elevate their service standards and product offerings. The results of the study are expected in September this year. "India is poised to witness exponential growth in the automotive industry driven by the rising middle-income and youth population, adoption of electric vehicles, increased investment in the Indian automotive industry and government policy impetus," Frost & Sullivan Global Managing Partner & Executive Board Member Aroop Zutshi stated.

BSNL to launch 4G services across India in August

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State-owned BSNL will start rolling out 4G services across the country from August, using completely indigenous technology in line with the government's "Atmanirbhar" policy, according to official sources. BSNL officials claimed to have recorded peak speed of 40-45 megabit per second on the 4G network which has been rolled out in the premium spectrum band of 700 megahertz (Mhz) as well as in 2,100 Mhz band during the pilot phase. The company has rolled out 4G services in Punjab using indigenously developed technology by IT company TCS and State-run telecom research organisation C-DoT-led consortium and onboarded around 8 lakh subscribers. "The 4G core developed by C-DoT is performing very well in the BSNL network in July last year. It takes 12 months to prove the success of such complex technology but the C-DoT core has stabilised within 10 months. BSNL will launch atmanirbhar 4G technology across the country in

August," a senior government official, who did not wish to be named, told PTI. The core network is a collection of network hardware, devices, and software that provides fundamental services in a telecommunication network. Telecom regulator Trai in a recent paper explained core as part of a network that offers the functionality of aggregation, call control, switching, authentication, charging, gateway functionality, etc. TCS, Tejas Networks and government-owned ITI have bagged orders worth about Rs 19,000 crore from BSNL for deploying 4G network which is upgradable to 5G. In a recent earnings call, Tejas Networks Executive Director and chief operating officer Arnob Roy said BSNL's mobile network is getting deployed across zones. He said that wherever the C-DOT core is not available on the BSNL network, the equipment is getting integrated to the existing core. "When the C-DOT core gets deployed in those circles, in those zones, they will get parented to the C-DOT core as well. Tejas Networks Limited," Roy said.

Brand India more mature, fearless brand than it used to be

PTI ■ SANTA CLARA

India has made its mark as the startup capital of the world and "Brand India" has emerged as a more mature and fearless brand than it used to be two decades ago, a top marketing leader has said. India has made its mark in the startup nation category. So many great startup companies have come out of it and they have gone on to become mature businesses, Ajay Mangalani, a seasoned marketing leader in the rapidly evolving technology and SaaS industries, told PTI in an interview. "Brand India is passionate. Brand India is still hungry to make things, to build things, to create things. Brand India is also much more mature now..." said Mangalani, also the chief marketing officer of TIE Silicon Valley, on the sidelines of the TIECon, the largest gathering of tech entrepreneurs in the world. As many as 30 Indian startups participated in the recently concluded TIECon, organized by TIE Silicon Valley. "I envision the next generation of Indian entrepreneurship will be much more focused around research and will be risk takers... That level of grit and passion that the Indian community has, I have no



doubt that it is going to move in that direction of strong leadership as a startup nation," Mangalani said. An award-winning marketing leader, Mangalani for over two decades has helped Fortune 500 giants and high-growth pre-IPO AI and B2B SaaS companies break the scale barrier, crafting data-driven marketing strategies. Responding to a question, he said the world is taking note of India. "The world is taking note... India has become a value driven country as we have always been in terms of standing with our core values of trust, support, honesty, insight, and all of that. The world really appreciates where we are today," Mangalani said. India has done tremendously

well under the current leadership, especially in terms of development and digital transformation on the ground, which was crucial for the growth of both startups as well as traditional companies. Lauding Anita Manwani, the new president of TIE Silicon Valley, Mangalani said "She has a very clear vision about TIE, and she's a phenomenal operator and executor." TIE Silicon Valley, he said, is a bridge to the knowledge, the insights, the experience, and the power that comes with it. "... I think that the next generation of TIE is going to be focused on bringing in new blood, the new talent, the next generation of entrepreneurs and providing them the connectivity and growing them from there," Mangalani said.

Rupee falls 5 paise to close at 83.50 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee pared its initial gains and settled for the day 5 paise lower at 83.50 (provisional) against the US dollar, weighed down by elevated crude oil prices. Forex traders said a weak trend in domestic equities also dented investor sentiments. At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 83.43, then touched an intra-day high of 83.42 and a low of 83.50 against the greenback. The rupee finally settled at 83.50 (provisional) against dollar, registering a fall of 5 paise over its previous close. On Friday, the rupee inched up 1 paise to settle at 83.45 against the US dollar. Forex traders said US dollar demand



from importers and a recovery in crude oil prices weighed on the rupee. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight positive bias on the rise in risk appetite in global markets. However, any recovery in crude oil prices may

cap sharp upside. Any renewed geopolitical tensions in the Middle East may also weigh on rupee at higher levels," said Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 83.20 to Rs 83.70, Choudhary added. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.06 per cent higher at 105.09. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, advanced 0.80 per cent to USD 83.62 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex advanced 17.39 points, or 0.02 per cent, to settle at 73,895.54 points. The Nifty fell 33.15 points, or 0.15 per cent, to close at 22,442.70 points.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Friday, as they offloaded shares worth Rs 2,391.98 crore, according to exchange data. Meanwhile, India's forex reserves dropped USD 2.412 billion to USD 637.922 billion as on April 26, in the third consecutive weekly decline in the reserves, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on Friday. In the previous reporting week, the overall reserves had declined USD 2.28 billion to USD 640.33 billion. On the macroeconomic front, the seasonally adjusted HSBC India Services Business Activity Index fell from 61.2 in March to 60.8 in April, highlighting one of the strongest growth rates seen in just under 14 years.

Indian airlines to have 50 per cent market share in international passenger traffic by FY'28: CRISIL

PTI ■ MUMBAI

As much as half of the country's international air passenger traffic is expected to be catered by Indian airlines by financial year 2027-28, credit ratings agency CRISIL said on Monday. The share of Indian airlines in international passenger traffic, including originating or terminating as well as the traffic transitioning through the country, is seen surging 700 basis points to around 50 per cent by 2027-28, from 43 per cent in the previous fiscal, it said. The improvement would be driven by Indian airlines deploying additional aircraft and adding new routes in the international segment, as well as their inherent advantage of superior domestic connectivity compared with foreign carriers, CRISIL Ratings said in its report.



The report noted that business profiles of Indian carriers will strengthen as a result of their rising share in international traffic, which is more profitable than the domestic segment. India's international passenger traffic grew to around 70 million in fiscal 2024, from a low of 10 million in pandemic-hit fiscal 2021, and has surpassed the pre-pandemic level, according to CRISIL.

The share of Indian airlines, which was rising steadily earlier, picked up pace since the pandemic, it said. "A noticeable shift in spending patterns has emerged after the pandemic, as evident in the increasing inclination of Indians towards international leisure travel. "Increasing disposable incomes, easing visa requirements, growing number of airports and enhanced air travel

connectivity are boosting international travel," said Manish Gupta, Senior Director and Deputy Chief Ratings Officer at CRISIL Ratings. The government's focus on making India a hub for tourism is also expected to provide a fillip to inbound traffic. Thus, international passenger traffic is likely to clock a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10-11 per cent over the next four fiscals, against a mere 5 per cent CAGR in the four years prior to the pandemic, he added. Indian airlines have added 55 new international routes over the past 15 months, taking their tally beyond 300, it said. These include direct flights originating from additional cities to popular long-haul destinations in the United States, Europe and Australia, effectively reducing flying time and eliminating layovers, CRISIL said.

P note investments surge to near six years high at ₹1.5 lakh crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Investments through participatory notes in the Indian capital markets reached Rs 1.5 lakh crore at the end of February, making it the highest-level in nearly six years, driven by a strong performance of the domestic economy. The latest data includes the value of P-note investments in Indian equity, debt, and hybrid securities. Participatory notes (P-notes) are issued by registered foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) to overseas investors who wish to be part of the Indian stock market without registering themselves directly. They, however, need to go through a due diligence process. According to the latest data from markets regulator Sebi, the value of P-note investments in Indian markets — equity, debt, and hybrid securities — stood at Rs 1,49,517 crore at the end of



February compared to Rs 1,43,011 crore at the end of January. The amount has reached the highest-level since June 2017, when investment through the route stood at Rs 1.65 lakh crore, data with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) showed. The growth in P-notes generally aligns with the trend in FPI flows. When there is a global risk to the environment, investment through this route increases, and vice-versa.

Market experts said that influx in February can be attributed to robust corporate earnings and positive economic growth trends observed during the December quarter. India's economic growth accelerated to 8.4 per cent in the third quarter of 2023-24, mainly due to good performance by the manufacturing, mining & quarrying and construction sectors. Of the total Rs 1.5 lakh crore invested through this route till February, Rs 1.27 lakh crore was invested in equities, Rs 21,303 crore in debt, and Rs 541 crore in hybrid securities. In addition, assets under custody of the FPIs grew to Rs 68.55 lakh crore in February-end from Rs 66.96 lakh crore in the preceding month. Meanwhile, FPIs invested a net sum of Rs 1,539 crore in the Indian equities and Rs 22,419 crore in the debt market in February.

Indonesian delegation appreciates The Cottage



New Delhi: Retired Air Marshal Donny Ermawan, Ministry of Defence, Republic of Indonesia led a delegation to "The Cottage" at Janpath and appreciated the diverse range of ethnic crafts of India under one roof. While going around the highly impressive wide variety of product categories, he expressed his keen interest in evolving models for growth of cottage industries of both the India & Indonesia. Seen in the picture is Anil Rajak, Addl. General Manager, the Cottage explaining the importance and intricacy of Filigree Craft from Orissa to the delegates. PMS

Rublev overcomes fever and praises doctors after winning Madrid Open for the 1st time

AP ■ MADRID

Despite sleepless nights struggling with a fever, Andrey Rublev found a way to fight back and win the Madrid Open for the first time. Rublev was feeling sick all week but rallied to beat Felix Auger-Aliassime in three sets on Sunday and clinch his second Masters 1000 title. Rublev won 4-6, 7-5, 7-5 after Auger-Aliassime double-faulted on the last point of the final at the clay-court tournament in the Spanish capital. "I would say this is the most proud title of my career," Rublev said. "I was almost dead every day. I was not sleeping at night. The last three, four days I didn't sleep." Rublev gave "full credit to the doctors," who were "doing some tricky things" just to make sure he could play. "I have no words," the eighth-ranked Rublev said. "If you knew what I had been through in the past nine days you would not imagine that I would be able to win a title." The 26-year-old Russian won his first Masters 1000 title at Monte Carlo last year. Auger-Aliassime was playing in his first final at this level. Rublev entered Madrid on a four-game losing streak after early exits at Indian Wells, Miami, Monte Carlo and Barcelona. One of his victories in



Madrid came in the quarterfinals against home-crowd favorite Carlos Alcaraz. He now has 16 career titles, and two this season after Hong Kong in January. He had arrived with a 5-1 record against Auger-Aliassime, including a win in their sole matchup on clay.

Auger-Aliassime's path to the final saw second-ranked Jannik Sinner withdraw because of an injury ahead of the quarterfinals, and Jiri Lehecka retired against the Canadian in the first set of the semifinals. Other injuries hit the men's draw in Madrid, starting with Novak Djokovic's withdrawal before

the tournament. Daniil Medvedev retired in the quarterfinals, while Alcaraz was hampered by a sore right arm and Rafael Nadal bowed out of what was likely his last appearance in his home country. Iga Swiatek won the women's title for the first time in her career on Saturday.

Klopp keeps the drama going to end as Liverpool beats Spurs 4-2

AP ■ LIVERPOOL

The smile is back on Jurgen Klopp's face - even if his Liverpool players seem intent on testing his nerves right to the end.

The Premier League title may be all but beyond the Merseyside club, but that doesn't mean the drama is over for Klopp, who will step down at the end of the season.

Last week he was arguing on the sideline with Mohamed Salah as Liverpool effectively dropped out of the title race. And while Salah opened the scoring in a 4-2 win against Tottenham at Anfield on Sunday, it was Harvey Elliott who appeared to bring the broadest smile to Klopp's face with a wonderful long-range goal in what looked like being a cakewalk for Klopp's team.

"What a goal," the Liverpool manager said. "In the game you only see it flying in and I thought, That was a good shot." The goal I saw afterwards, there was not a lot of space left or right. It went exactly where it should be. Top goal!"

Elliott's strike, after goals from Salah, Andy Robertson and Cody Gakpo, fired Liverpool into a 4-0 lead before the game had even reached the hour mark. What followed was the unlikeliest of fightbacks from Spurs that might have made this another frustrating day in what has ultimately been a disappointing finale for Klopp at the end of nearly nine trophy-filled years.

Goals from Richarlison and Son Heung-min made it a much closer contest than it had ever looked like being. And it needed two outstanding saves from Alisson, a goal-line clearance from Joe Gomez and a VAR call to prevent it from being closer still.

"It's a little bit of a mirror of the season. Really, really, really, good until we were really rubbish and then, we were okay again," Klopp said.

A nervy finish didn't stop the home fans from beckoning Klopp to produce his trademark post-match triple fist pump to the crowd after his penultimate home game in charge, with Feyenoord coach Arne Slot set to take over next season.

Mathematically, at least, it is not over for third-place Liverpool, which sits five



points adrift of leader Arsenal with two games remaining. But, in reality, a late-season slump has killed Klopp's hopes of walking away with a second Premier League crown of his reign.

His team had been heavily rebuilt over the past two seasons and was not expected to contend at the top so soon. But this season at one point offered Liverpool the hope of a quadruple of trophies. Now it feels like it is ending on an underwhelming note.

Still, Klopp, who delivered the English League Cup in February, will walk away from a team that is on the up and leave his successor with plenty of young talent to work with. The 21-year-old Elliott is a prime example and he showcased his ample potential with an assist and a goal as Liverpool threatened to run riot.

His perfectly placed curling cross provided Gakpo with the simple task of heading in Liverpool's third and then he swept an unstoppable shot from around 20 yards (meters) into the top corner and beyond Tottenham goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario.

"Harvey is exceptional. Still so young. So exceptional," Klopp said. "In the midfield position, it was probably one of the top three performances from him today. The goal was exceptional. Everyone needs moments to gain more confidence. It was a good moment. That helps definitely."

VILLA SLIPS: A bad week for Aston Villa got worse after a surprise 1-0 loss at Brighton. Unai Emery's team lost 4-2 at home to Olympiakos in the first leg of their Europa Conference League semifinal on Thursday. And on a day when it could have secured its

place in next season's Champions League, it suffered another setback when Joao Pedro headed home a rebound in the 87th after seeing his penalty saved by Robin Olsen. Only Spurs' loss at Anfield prevented it from being a bigger blow after the result at the Amex Stadium had given Ange Postecoglou's team hope in its pursuit of Villa in fourth. But Villa still missed out on the chance of making certain of a top-four finish.

CHELSEA ROUTS WEST HAM: Chelsea's troubled season could still end on something of a high after Mauricio Pochettino's team boosted its chances of European soccer next season with a 5-0 rout of West Ham. The win at Stamford Bridge moved Chelsea up to seventh in the standings and two points behind sixth-place Newcastle. Only the top six teams in the Premier League will be guaranteed a place in Europe next season.

"We need to keep this momentum and belief going," Pochettino said.

Chelsea's exorbitant spending under U.S. Owners Todd Boehly and Clearlake Capital was supposed to put the 2021 Champions League winner back in contention for the biggest prizes, qualification for Europe would represent progress after finishing in the bottom half of the table last year and another season of struggle this term.

After a morale-boosting 2-0 win against Tottenham on Thursday, Chelsea followed it up by thrashing West Ham. Nicolas Jackson scored twice in the second half after Chelsea had raced to a 3-0 lead by the break through goals from Cole Palmer, Conor Gallagher and Noni Madueke.

Mbappé plays his final CL game in Paris with PSG; defence back in spotlight

AP ■ PARIS

Mbappé plays his final CL game in Paris with PSG. But it's the defence that is back in the spotlight. No doubt Kylian Mbappé will be greeted with loud cheers and applause when he takes to the Parc des Princes pitch on Tuesday night. It will be his final Champions League match in the French capital in a Paris Saint-Germain shirt. Mbappé is leaving the club this summer after a seven-season stint, hoping the journey concludes with a Champions League triumph in Wembley on June 1. But first things first, as Mbappé tries to engineer a fightback in the second leg of their semi-final against Borussia Dortmund, trailing 1-0 from the first leg in Germany last week.

The France striker was a disappointment in the first leg and PSG now expects a strong reaction from the club's all-time leading scorer to overturn the deficit, especially after he failed to score in his last two appearances against Dortmund.

"We're confident we'll come back from that score and qualify for the final," Mbappé said on Sunday, as quoted by French media.

In support of Mbappé, PSG has plenty of firepower upfront, with Ousmane Dembele, Bradley Barcola, Gonçalo Ramos or Randal Kolo Muani available.

Coach Luis Enrique has more worries in defence after former



Bayern Munich defender Lucas Hernandez was ruled out for the remainder of the season with an anterior cruciate ligament rupture that required surgery.

The injury was a tough blow for PSG, which has conceded 14 goals in the competition this season but finally stabilized the heart of its defence with the

pairing of Marquinhos and Hernandez.

After Hernandez came off injured last week against Dortmund and was replaced by Lucas Beraldo, the Brazilian substitute's lack of experience was obvious.

Luis Enrique will, however, have to consider giving him a starting role or put his trust in

Milan Skriniar, who is back from injury and lacks both competition and rhythm.

Another option would be to pair Danilo Pereira with Marquinhos to add strength and presence in the air, particularly on Dortmund's set pieces.

Solid defending will again be crucial for PSG, which faces a team with great attacking qualities and 11 different scorers on the European stage this season.

The winner will play Real Madrid or Bayern Munich in the final in London. The old rivals drew 2-2 in their semi-final first leg in Germany. PSG, which enjoyed a rest day over the weekend after wrapping up the Ligue 1 title, has never won Europe's top club competition.

AP ■ LONDON

Arsenal needs a favour from Tottenham in title race

Four straight losses — the team's worst run of results for 20 years. Two clean sheets since the end of October. Those looking at Tottenham Hotspur to provide a late twist in the Premier League title race are, given the current evidence, going to be disappointed.

Manchester City's May 14 trip to the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, for its next-to-last game of the season, appeared to many the last possible stumbling block for the champions in their bid to reel in Arsenal and secure an unprecedented fourth straight title.

After all, not only have Spurs plenty to play for — they're still just about fighting for Champions League qualification — but they haven't lost, or even conceded a goal, against City in their four league meetings at Tottenham's new stadium

since it opened in 2019.

Arsenal, though, is surely losing hope of a favour from its north London neighbour. Similarly, Tottenham fans might be starting to lose hope that Ange Postecoglou is the man to bring a winning culture to the club without a trophy since 2008.

It all started well for the first-ever Australian to coach in the Premier League. Tottenham was top of the league in early November, unbeaten and playing the attacking football its supporters always crave.

No manager had ever taken 26 points from his first 10 games in the Premier League before Postecoglou came along with a high defensive line and an aggressive, front-foot style.

Postecoglou, it seemed, was the perfect antidote to Jose



Mourinho and Antonio Conte, pragmatic and defence-first coaches whose spells in charge of Tottenham

promised so much but ended so sourly. Fast-forward six months and it feels like the season cannot

end soon enough for Spurs, who are limping to the finish line, and Postecoglou, who is beginning to understand the

size of the task he took on almost a year ago.

"We need change. Change has to happen," Postecoglou said ahead of Tottenham's 4-2 loss at Liverpool on Sunday. It was a fourth defeat in a row, something that hasn't happened since those grim final days of Jacques Santini at Spurs in late 2004.

Over the past month, there has been a 4-0 loss at Newcastle, a 3-2 home loss to Arsenal when Tottenham was three goals behind at halftime, a 2-0 loss at Chelsea and then a defeat at Anfield that saw a lethargic-looking Spurs fall 4-0 down after 59 minutes.

And, this is the team Arsenal hopes can halt the City juggernaut next week?

Tottenham should still seal fifth place, and qualification for the Europa League,

because either side of the visit of City are matches against Burnley and already-relegated Sheffield United - the bottom two teams in the league.

Spurs are seven points behind fourth-place Aston Villa and four ahead of sixth-place Newcastle.

It raises the question of whether the first season under Postecoglou has been a success.

Spurs fans likely would have taken a fifth-place finish after seeing England captain and record scorer Harry Kane leave for Bayern Munich last August.

With Hugo Lloris and Eric Dier also departing during the season, a huge amount of experience was lost and it's in these tough final weeks of the season where that lack of senior leaders in the squad has been exposed.

It also seems that, as a whole, the fan base is still behind Postecoglou and his refreshing outlook, even if his insistence on sticking to his attacking principles can come across as naive as it is bold.

"I believe what I believe down to my core. I'll stand on the highest ground, die a noble death, believing in what I believe," he said.

"Maybe, the Premier League is a step too far. Who knows? Maybe, maybe - but I will still be on that hill, wounded, my dying breath saying, I believe, I do believe."

Whether Postecoglou will bring more balance to his managerial philosophy next year remains to be seen.

For the moment, Arsenal will just be praying that Tottenham - the team it wants to see lose any normal week of the season - can pull off an improbable victory over City to change the course of the title race ahead of the final round on May 19.



Frank Nsubuga set to become oldest player at this year T20 World Cup

PTI ■ KAMPALA (UGANDA)

Uganda off-spinner Frank Nsubuga is set to become the oldest cricketer to play in the upcoming T20 World Cup at the age of 43. On Monday, the Uganda Cricket Association announced a 15-member squad for the marquee event set to be held in the Americas from June 2, the nation's first-ever appearance in the main round of the competition.

Riazat Ali Shah will lead the side, while Riazat Ali Shah has been named his deputy. Reserve players: Ronald Lutaaya and Innocent Mwebaze.

Namibia, to seal their berth.

They will get their campaign underway versus Afghanistan on June 3 in Guyana, having been clubbed in Group C, which also includes New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and hosts West Indies.

Uganda squad: Brian Masaba (c), Riazat Ali Shah (vc), Kenneth Waiswa, Dinesh Nakrani, Frank Nsubuga, Ronak Patel, Roger Mukasa, Cosmas Kyewuta, Bilal Hassun, Fred Achelam, Robinson Obuya, Simon Sesazi, Henry Ssenyondo, Alpesh Ramjani and Juma Miyaji.

Reserve players: Ronald Lutaaya and Innocent Mwebaze.

India's first ever hybrid pitch unveiled in Dharamsala

PTI ■ DHARAMSALA

India's first-ever 'hybrid pitch' was unveiled at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association (HPCA) stadium in a grand ceremony here on Monday.

The event was attended by IPL Chairman Arun Dhumal and cricket dignitaries including Paul Taylor, a former England cricketer and SIS's international cricket director.

"The introduction of hybrid pitches is set to revolutionize cricket in India, following their success in iconic venues like Lord's and The Oval in England," said Dhumal, who hails from Himachal Pradesh.

The hybrid pitch, which combines natural turf with synthetic fibres, promises enhanced durability and consistent playability, reducing the strain on ground staff and maintaining quality playing conditions.

With only 5% synthetic fibres, the pitch ensures that the natural characteristics essential for cricket are preserved.

Taylor expressed gratitude towards the HPCA for their collaboration on this pioneering project.

"With the ICC's approval, we're excited to see the positive impact these pitches will have on the sport, starting with



installations in Mumbai and Ahmedabad next," he said.

The 'Universal Machine', a critical component in installing the hybrid surface, was developed by SISGrass in 2017 and has been instrumental in the rollout of similar pitches across England's county cricket grounds.

This innovation aligns with the ICC's recent sanctioning of hybrid pitches for

T20 and one-day international matches, with plans to expand their use in four-day county championships starting this year. The integration of technologies like SISAir, a root aeration system, further underscores the commitment to enhancing cricket infrastructure in India. This system improves the pitch's health and resilience, benefiting players with better and safer playing conditions.

Premier League referee to wear camera to offer insight into demands of being a match official

AP ■ LONDON

The referee for Monday's Premier League match between Crystal Palace and Manchester United will wear a camera on his head for a program that will be broadcast later this year offering an insight into the demands of being a match official.

The league said the head-mounted device — or "RefCam" as it is being called — worn by Jarrod Gillett at Selhurst Park will be integrated into the referee's usual communications system.

The technology is being used on a one-off basis, the league said, as part of filming for a short program promoting match officials. The footage will not be broadcast live.

"Fans will be able to view it later in the year as part of a program ... Aimed at offering further insight and education into the demands of officiating in the Premier League," the competition said.



MUST WIN GAME FOR DC

All eyes on Fraser-McGurk and Pant against rampaging Royals



have new Aussie sensation Fraser-McGurk, who has gone off the boil in the last couple of games. These two batters can individually change the complexion of a game, but DC will be wary of the Royals' bowling attack, which will pose a very different challenge at the Kotla compared to Sawai Man Singh. Facing spinners of Yuzvendra Chahal and Ravichandran Ashwin's calibre isn't easy, and in veteran Sandeep Sharma, RR has a bowler, who can take pace off the deliveries. The Rajasthan bowling attack has been able to maintain a decent economy rate but for DC, only Axar Patel (ER of 7.24) and Kuldeep (ER 8.45) have shown the wherewithal to stop opposition batters on their tracks.

It is time that Khaleel (ER 9.47) and Mukesh Kumar (ER 11.05) also show more consistency. South African pacers Lizaad Williams (ER 12 in 2 games) and Anrich Nortje (ER 13.36) have simply not looked the part. The last time the two teams met was in Jaipur in March and DC then had lost control during the second half of their bowling innings with Riyan playing a superb innings. The Royals batters would be licking their lips after having a look at the surface which can't get flatter than what it is right now. Riyan, skipper Sanju Samson, the dashing Yashasvi, along with finishers Rovman Powell, Shimron Hetmyer and Dhruv Jurel give Royal a very scary look and DC bowlers can only pray that it doesn't turn out to

be 'Nightmare 2.0' for the hosts. **TEAMS:** **Delhi Capitals:** Rishabh Pant (c), David Warner, Abhishek Porel, Ricky Bhui, Yash Dhull, Shai Hope, Prithvi Shaw, Tristan Stubbs, Kumar Kushagra, Swastik Chikara, Ishant Sharma, Jhye Richardson, Rasikh Dar Salam, Vicky Ostwal, Anrich Nortje, Mukesh Kumar, Kuldeep Yadav, Praveen Dubey, Khaleel Ahmed, Sumit Kumar, Axar Patel, Mitchell Marsh, Lalit Yadav, Jake Fraser-McGurk. **Rajasthan Royals:** Sanju Samson (c), Jos Buttler, Shimron Hetmyer, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel, Riyan Parag, Donovan Ferreira, Kunal Rathore, Ravichandran Ashwin, Kuldeep Sen, Navdeep Saini, Keshav Maharaj, Sandeep Sharma, Trent Boult, Yuzvendra Chahal, Avesh Khan, Rovman Powell, Shubham Dubey, Tom Kohler-Cadmore, Abid Mushtaq, Nandre Burger.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Delhi Capitals would require Rishabh Pant's killer instinct and Jake Fraser McGurk's unbelievable flair in their bid to stay alive in the IPL playoff race when they square off against a rampaging Rajasthan Royals in a must-win game here on Tuesday. The Capitals have been inconsistent so far, winning five and losing six of their last 11 games. While winning the remaining three games is a must for Pant's men, even that will only take them to 16 points which might not be enough to qualify for the last four stage of the tournament. Apart from KKR (16 from 11 games) and RR (16 from 10 games), there are at least three teams, namely Chennai Super Kings (12 from 11), Sunrisers Hyderabad (12 from 10 games) and Lucknow Super Giants (12 from 11 games), who can go beyond the 16-point mark. Given the situation, DC's best

might not be enough for qualification, but Pant would look to only "control the controllables," a policy advocated by his mentor Mahendra Singh Dhoni. On a flat Feroz Shah Kotla deck, the challenge will be two-fold for the DC skipper. At one end, he would want the Khaleel Ahmeds, Ishant Sharmas and Kuldeep Yadavs to restrict the Yashasvi Jaiswals, Sanju Samsons, and Riyan Parags to a manageable level but then with barely 60-metre boundary on one side, it will be a challenge to stop a team, whose jersey's colour (Pink) resembles their overall health. With 380 runs to his credit and three impactful half-centuries in his kitty, Pant would like to once again perform, especially when his team has been pushed to the wall. He will

We are focussed on following template set by Gambhir: Harshit Rana

PTI ■ LUCKNOW
Young pacer Harshit Rana feels Kolkata Knight Riders are reaping the rewards by following the winning template set by two-time IPL winner and current mentor Gautam Gambhir as they continued their sensational run to grab the top position in the IPL points table. Gambhir had led KKR to the IPL crown twice with the team also qualifying for the playoffs five times during his stint from 2011 to 2017. He had also guided KKR to the finals of the now-defunct Champions League T20 in 2014. However, in the last seven years, KKR could reach the playoffs only twice. Gambhir's return to the KKR camp as a mentor this year turned things around as the Kolkata-based franchise moved to the top of the table with 16 points following a dominating 98-run over Lucknow Super Giants — 8th win in 11 games — on Sunday



night. "Not only this match, this entire season we have been focussing a lot on the style of cricket that Gautam Gambhir wants us to play. He has a lot of knowledge on how to turn games in our favour and it helps us a lot in the middle," Rana said during the press conference. "Like today he gave the bowlers a free hand, to find the length to bowl depending on the wicket, and not to try too many things," he added.

Rana (3/24 in 3.1 overs) played a crucial role in the win by taking three wickets while defending a target of 235. "KKR read the wicket very well. The areas we had to bowl, we targeted the right places," Rana said. IPL's biggest buy Mitchell Starc has proved expensive this season but Rana said the team management is not at all bothered about his economy rate and has faith on the Australian speedster.

"We have not cared even for a bit on how expensive Mitchell Starc has been in IPL 2024. We have full faith in him and he won us the last game and we have no doubts on him whatsoever. "He has such a great influence on the younger players, he has such a huge wealth of knowledge," Rana said. Rana said his dream is to play for India and is focussing on his performance. "My aim is to play for India but whatever franchise I play for I try to give my best on the day of the match. I will be selected based on my performance and performance alone," Rana said. **We'd our plans but everything went Narine's way:** Naveen: It was yet another sparkling fifty by Sunil Narine (81 off 39) which helped KKR post a massive 235 for six and LSG fast bowler Naveen Ul Haq conceded that all their plans failed against the star West Indian all-rounder. "I think he played quite well. We had a plan of bowling

bouncers and yorkers and mixing it up and not being predictable against him. We did that but he played quite a brilliant innings to be honest," he said. "It wasn't like he was slogging and everything was going top edge or anything like slicing the ball. He was properly middling it and that's the case like from the beginning of the season. "He's been middling it. Everything going his way. So yeah, it was a great knock by him." The Afghan seamer said LSG could have produced a better show with the bat but they can't dwell on defeat too much as they need to focus on the next game. "The amount of games that we have played in Lucknow, I think this was the best wicket to bat on. We did not do the things in the chase that we did - say in the game at Chepauk, where the target was very high. It was not like bad or anything, there was nothing for the bowlers," Naveen said. "Pressure is always there on whatever score you are chasing. Every team has a bad day, and we cannot keep focusing on that, we have to move on."

Versatility of Jadeja makes him class act, says Finch

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Former Australia skipper Aaron Finch has termed India all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja a "class player" because of his versatility which brings in a lot of balance in all the teams that he represents. Jadeja scored 40-odd runs and took three wickets in Chennai Super Kings' victory over Punjab Kings on Sunday. "Ravindra Jadeja is such a versatile player, which makes him so effective. With the ball, he would have loved more wickets," Finch told Star Sports. "He's been economical, going at under eight per over throughout the tournament. Leading with three wickets today (Sunday), he showed he is an absolute class player." Finch was impressed that Jadeja returned with fine figures of 3/20 in his full quota of four overs while defending a not-so-big total of 169. "Three wickets for just 20 runs when the Punjab Kings were chasing a total of 170 odd runs



is just superb. It just shows why he's one of the best players in the world," the Australian said. Finch also spoke highly about Kolkata Knight Riders' Sunil Narine. The 2021 World T20-winning Australian skipper feels that it is extremely difficult to contain Narine for a long period of time. "It's truly remarkable, isn't it? I mean, seeing Sunil Narine stride out to open the batting. "Before this season, you're thinking, if we can just keep him quiet for a couple of balls,

he'll try and do something and play a big shot. But this season, he's not only getting off to explosive starts but also batting smartly and seizing control of the innings," Finch said. The 35-year-old Narine smashed 81 off just 39 balls to power KKR to a comfortable 98-run win over Lucknow Super Giants on Sunday night. In the process, Narine also became the fourth player to score more than 450 runs and take 10 plus wickets in a single IPL edition.

OTHER SPORTS

Indian women and men 4x400m relay teams qualify for Paris Olympics

PTI ■ NASSAU (BAHAMAS)
The Indian men's and women's 4x400m relay teams qualified for Paris Olympics after finishing second in their respective second-round heats at the World Athletics Relays here on Monday. In the women's competition, the quartet of Rupal Chaudhary, M R Poovamma, Jyothika Sri Dandi and Subha Venkatesan clocked 3 minutes and 29.35 seconds to finish second behind Jamaica (3:28.54) in heat number one to book a Paris Games ticket. Later, the men's squad of Muhammed Anas Yahiya, Muhammed Ajmal, Arokia Rajiv and Amod Jacob finished with a collective timing of 3 minutes and 3.23 seconds to also finish second in their heat, behind USA (2:59.95). The top two teams in each of the three heats in the second round were to qualify for the Olympics to be held



from July 26 to August 11. It was a sort of a surprise that the women's 4x400m team qualified for the Olympics as the focus was more on the men's 4x400m team which has broken Asian record in back-to-back global events — Tokyo Olympics and 2023 World Championships — as well

pulled out midway due to cramps. Arokia Rajiv took the place of Ramesh in the team and he ran the third leg after Anas and Ajmal. The Indian men's 4x400m team was on third position when anchor-leg runner Jacob took the baton from Arokia but the Delhi boy ran a fantastic race to overtake his Mexican opponent and finish second. It was not about the timing but more about Olympics qualification for the Indian men's team which ran 3:00.25 at the Tokyo Olympics for the then Asian record before bettering it during the 2023 World Championships with yet another Asian record of 2:59.05. Monday's timing was well below the team's best. India had even given a mighty scare to formidable USA during the heat race at the 2023 Budapest World Championships before settling for the second place. Meanwhile, India pulled out of the

mixed 4x400m relay second round heat races on Monday as Ramesh was not available after suffering muscle cramps while running the men's 4x400m first round heat on Sunday. Ramesh had run both the mixed 4x400m and men's 4x400m races on Sunday. India had featured in mixed 4x400m relay in the Tokyo Olympics where the event made its debut. The Indian women's 4x400m relay team will be returning to Olympics after missing out in Tokyo Games. The Paris participation will be the eighth time for the Indian women's 4x400m team, the first being in 1984 Games. For the men's 4x400m, this will be the fourth time India will be taking part in the Olympics, the first being in the 2000 Sydney Games. With this, India now have at least 19 Paris-bound track and field athletes and the list includes defending javelin throw champion Neeraj Chopra among others. The athletics events at the Games will begin on August 1. A total of 70 teams have qualified for relay events at the Paris Olympics following two days of thrilling action at the World Athletics Relays Bahamas.

Jyoti to lead Indian junior women hockey team for Europe tour

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Defender Jyoti Singh was on Monday named the captain of the Indian Junior Women's team by Hockey India with midfielder Sakshi Rana as her deputy in a 22-member squad which will tour Europe from May 21 to 29. India will play six matches across three nations against Belgium, Germany and two club teams in the Netherlands — Bredase Hockey Vereniging Push and Oranje Rood — from May 21 to 29. "There's great camaraderie in the squad. All of us have gotten to know each other pretty well during the camp. Everyone here is very skilful and talented," Jyoti said in a HI release. "It will be fun and a good learning experience playing abroad against other top-quality teams." India will play their first match on May 21 against Bredase Hockey Vereniging Push in Breda before taking on Belgium at the same venue on May 22. India will then play Belgium a second time but with the latter

playing host on this occasion on May 24. This will be followed by consecutive games against Germany on May 26 in Breda and May 27 in Germany respectively. India will then return to Breda to play their final game of the tour on May 29 against Oranje Rood. "Playing against good teams from other countries helps in developing an understanding of different approaches to the game. An exposure tour like this provides all of us with a tremendous opportunity to take our game to the next level," vice-Captain Sakshi Rana said. **TEAMS:** **GOALKEEPERS:** Aditi Maheshwari, Nidhi **DEFENDERS:** Jyoti Singh (C), Lalhanluangi, Anjali Barwa, Puja Sahoo, Mamita Oram, Nirukullu **M I D F I E L D E R S :** Kshetrimayum Sonia Devi, Rajani Kerketta, Priyanka Yadav, Khaidem Shileima Chanu, Sakshi Rana (VC), Anisha Sahu, Supriya Kujur **FORWARDS:** Binima Dhan, Hina Bano, Lalrinpuii, Ishika, Sanjana Horo, Sonam, Kanika Siwach.

AP ■ MILAN
Roma attempted to bounce back from European disappointment but could only draw 1-1 against Juventus in Serie A on Sunday in a result that did little to help its hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League. Bremer canceled out Romelu Lukaku's first goal from open play against Juventus. Both teams also hit the woodwork as Juve's winless run continued. Third-place Juventus, which is winless in its last five matches, is six points ahead of fifth-place Roma with three rounds remaining. The top five in Serie A qualify for the Champions League after Italy earned an extra spot in next season's competition. Roma is just three points above sixth-place Atalanta, which has

Roma draws 1-1 against Juventus

also played two matches fewer. Roma was looking to recover from a 2-0 loss to Bayer Leverkusen in the first leg of the Europa League semifinals on Thursday, and started positively with Rasmus Kristensen's header coming off the crossbar in the 11th minute. The capital side took the lead just four minutes later in somewhat chaotic circumstances. Paulo Dybala pulled the ball back from the byline and Bryan Cristante's shot was blocked by Juventus defender Federico Gatti on the line but went straight to Lukaku for the tap in. It was his first goal against Juventus from open play after



netting from the spot against the Bianconeri for Inter. Juve leveled in the 31st minute when Federico Chiesa whipped in a cross from the right and Bremer headed it in

at the back post. Chiesa came close to firing his team in front right at the start of the second half but his effort went off the right post and across the face of goal. **MILAN PROTEST:** AC Milan's hardcore fans protested during the team's 3-3 draw against Genoa. There was a strange atmosphere at San Siro as the Milan ultras - who also unveiled banners calling for more ambition, communication and a clear transfer strategy — remained silent during the match and left 10 minutes before the final whistle. Milan was leading 3-2 by then, after recovering from Mateo Retegui's early penalty, but conceded a comical third goal as Morten Thorsby's cross ricocheted off Retegui and home defenders Fikayo Tomori and Malick Thiaw. It

went down as an own-goal by Thiaw. It was a sixth straight match without a win for Milan, which nevertheless is second and mathematically assured of Champions League soccer next season. **RELEGATION BATTLES:** Hellas Verona boosted its chances of Serie A survival with a 2-1 win over Fiorentina as fellow strugglers Empoli and Frosinone played out a disappointing 0-0 draw. All three teams had been locked on 31 points ahead of the weekend, just two points above the relegation zone. Verona was helped by Fiorentina coach Vincenzo Italiano opting to rotate his team ahead of the second leg of the Europa Conference League semifinal on Wednesday. Fiorentina beat Club Brugge 3-2 in the first leg last week.