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Mayday! Kids in 131 Delhi, Noida schools exposed to terror scare

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■
NEW DELHI/NOIDA

In a scare of unprecedented scale, panic gripped schools in the national Capital and adjoining Noida after 131 of them received identical bomb threats through emails on Wednesday morning, triggering mass evacuations and massive searches as panicked parents rushed to pick up their children.

The anti-terror unit of the Delhi Police has started investigations into the bomb threat email sent to schools in the Delhi-NCR region, as the initial probe hinted at a deeper conspiracy by a terror group during the Lok Sabha elections.

A case has been registered under relevant sections of law for offences like conspiracy and threat by the Special Cell and a dedicated team formed to conduct the investigation, an official said. "The matter is related to national security. It needs a deeper probe," the official said.

The schools received the threats on their official email IDs around 4 am. Bomb detection teams, bomb disposal squads and officials of Delhi Fire Service were rushed to schools but nothing suspicious was found. Multiple private schools in Noida, Greater Noida, Ghaziabad and Gurugram also received the bomb threat



but local police dismissed them as a hoax.

As panicked parents crowded outside the schools, the Ministry of Home Affairs said the mails appeared to be a hoax. In a statement, the Union Home Ministry officials said, "There is no need to panic. Mails appear to be hoaxes. The Delhi Police and security agencies are taking necessary steps as per protocol."

The schools sent out messages and notices to the concerned parents,

informing them to pick up kids at the earliest with kids using buses and vans being sent to their home.

"Dear Parent, this is to inform you that due to a message received in the school we are evacuating the children early today in their respective school buses and vans. The parents who pick up their ward from the school should reach the school by 10.30 am. at the school gate," read one such message sent to worried parents.

The anti-terror cell of the

Delhi Police will investigate the bomb threat. The case is being registered with the Special Cell and a dedicated team will be formed to conduct the investigation. "The matter is related to national security. It needs a deeper probe," the official said.

According to police, the threat was declared a hoax as "nothing objectionable" was found during searches. Bomb threats sent via email to schools in Delhi-NCR originated from Russia, as indicated by the IP address of the email, which was traced back to the domain "mail.ru". Investigating agencies said it is also possible that culprits may have masked their identity using the dark net. Such mails are often sent from a vpn that helps them mask their real ip address as is the case in these "bomb threat" emails, said the sources.

Although the email, said to be sent out by one accused, has been called a hoax, Delhi Police have stepped up security at all metro and railway stations, bus stands, and markets for precautionary measures. "We have stepped up security at every station. We have also alerted our staff to keep strict vigil on any suspicious activity," Deputy Commissioner of Police (railways) K P S Malhotra said.

Two of a kind: Congress and BJP field 3-3 'female fighters' to vie for victory in C'garh

SHRI RAM SHAW ■
RAIPUR

Notwithstanding the expected ideological differences between the Congress and BJP, there seems to be a similarity between these two parties as far as the number of their women candidates are concerned. Both have fielded three candidates each in Chhattisgarh.

Of the 11 constituencies in the state, four - Surguja, Bastar, Raigarh and Kanker - are reserved for Scheduled Tribe (ST) candidates while Janjgir-Champa is reserved for the Scheduled Caste (SC). In 2019, the BJP secured victory in nine out of the 11 seats in the state while the Congress bagged two seats.

This time, the main opposition Congress has fielded three women including a sitting MP among its 11 candidates. Shashi Singh is contesting from Surguja (ST) and Dr Menka Devi Singh is fighting from Raigarh (ST) while Jyotsana Mahant is representing the party in Kobra.

Shashi Singh is a member of the Surajpur Zila Panchayat. Her father, the late Tuleswar Singh, had served as a minister in the Ajit Jigle Congress government (2000-03) in Chhattisgarh.

Menka Devi Singh hails from the erstwhile Sarangarh royal family. She is the



daughter of Raja Nareschandra Singh, who had served as Chief Minister of undivided Madhya Pradesh. Her sisters, the late Rajni Devi Singh and Pushpa Devi Singh, had served as Congress Lok Sabha MPs. Menka Devi Singh's another sister Kamla Devi Singh was an MLA for 18 years.

Jyotsana Mahant is married to senior Congress leader and former Union minister Charan Das

Mahant, who is now the leader of opposition in the state Assembly. To contest from Korba seat, she said: "I don't think of it as a challenge. I am a common person who will fight in the elections based on the works done by our government."

On the other hand, the BJP has also chosen three women candidates - Saroj Pandey (Korba), Kamlesh Jangde (Janjgir) and

Of the 11 constituencies in the state, four - Surguja, Bastar, Raigarh and Kanker - are reserved for Scheduled Tribe (ST) candidates while Janjgir-Champa is reserved for the Scheduled Caste (SC)

Rupkumari Choudhary (Mahasamund). One of them is a former MP and a former MLA.

Saroj Pandey, a prominent female leader of the BJP whose term as a Rajya Sabha member recently concluded, has been nominated for Korba. She previously served as a Lok Sabha member from Durg and as an MLA.

Former MLA Roop Kumari Chaudhary is the candidate for Mahasamund and Kamlesh Jangde (Janjgir seat) is a new face in the electoral fray.

Cong takes another hit, two ex-MLAs quit party

RAJESH KUMAR ■
NEW DELHI

Just when the campaigning is peaking for the May 25 polls in national Capital, the Congress which is contesting on three of the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi as per arrangements with INDIA Bloc partner Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), faltered further as exodus continued on Wednesday.

Two former MLAs and observers for the Lok Sabha seat — Naseeb Singh and Neeraj Basoya — resigned from the party citing their dissatisfaction with the party's decision to form an alliance with AAP and its choice to allot Lok Sabha tickets to Kanhaiya Kumar and Udit Raj.

In separate letters to Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge, Neeraj and Naseeb, who are AICC observers for West Delhi and North West Delhi Lok Sabha seats respectively, claimed that the Congress workers are "upset" and feel "humiliated" due to the alliance with the AAP.

The Congress had on Tuesday appointed former MLA Devender Yadav as interim president of its Delhi unit after Lovely resigned citing the tie-up with AAP and statements of Congress candidates in the national Capital, exposing the cracks in the party's Delhi unit.

Last week, former Minister and four-time MLA Raj Kumar Chauhan resigned from the party, alleging that he was humiliated by Deepak Babaria, AICC in charge of Delhi Congress. Lovely has resigned from the Delhi Congress president post, protesting against party in-charge Babaria and objecting to the choice and conduct of two candidates who are "total strangers" to party workers.

In the coming days, some more leaders may resign from the party. Several former MLAs here are reluctant to campaign for Udit Raj and Kanhaiya Kumar. Several prominent leaders including former Maharashtra CM Ashok Chavan, ex-Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Nirupam, spokesperson Gourav Vallabh, former social media head Rohan Gupta, Acharya Pramod Krishnam, former defense minister AK Antony's son Anil Antony, and Gujarat Patidar leader Hardik Patel have also left the Congress.

In his letter to Congress president



Amethi, Rae Bareilly nominees may be named today

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress asserted on Wednesday that within 24 hours, the candidates for the Amethi and Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha constituencies would be announced by the party's Central Election Committee (CEC), which empowered Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge to finalise the candidates for Amethi and Rae Bareilly.

"My expectation is that in the next 24-30 hours, the Congress president will finalise and a decision taken by him will be announced," Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said in response to a question at AICC press conference.

Speculation had been rife that Rahul Gandhi might contest the Lok Sabha polls from Amethi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra from Raebareilly, a seat that was previously held by her mother Sonia Gandhi. Both seats are considered bastions of the Gandhi family and the local units of the Congress have demanded that the two scions of the family contest from there. Congress has forged an alliance with the SP in Uttar Pradesh and is contesting 17 Lok Sabha seats in the State.

Mallikarjun Kharge, Basoya said the alliance with AAP was bringing "great disrepute" and "embarrassment" to Delhi Congress workers on a daily basis.

Prajwal ready to join probe; his family invokes truth, gods

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
BENGALURU/NEW DELHI

On a day when Karnataka Chief Minister K Siddaramaiah wrote a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to cancel the diplomatic passport and take swift action against the Hassan MP Prajwal Revanna who is facing allegations of sexually abusing several women, the latter took to social media to announce that he will join the probe soon and said the truth will prevail.

Revanna's family conducted a havan at their Holenarasipura residence which is also home to his father JD(S) MLA and former Karnataka Minister HD Revanna. The MP, who left the country as soon as the election to his constituency ended, has also sought seven days' time to appear before the Special Investigation Team (SIT) formed by the Karnataka Government to enquire into the huge cache of about 3,000 explicit videos and photos allegedly pertaining to him, which have gone viral on social media.

"As I am not in Bangalore to attend the enquiry, I have communicated to CID Bangalore through my advocate. Truth will prevail soon," Prajwal, grandson of former Prime Minister and JD(S) patriarch HD Deve Gowda, said in a Facebook post.

A case has been registered against MLA and former minister H D Revanna and his son Prajwal at Holenarasipura on a complaint lodged by their former cook and relative for allegedly sexually harassing her. She also alleged that



Prajwal made video calls to her daughter and spoke in an objectionable manner, which forced her to block him.

The MP who is seeking re-election from Hassan on a JD(S) ticket, shared a letter by his lawyer Arun G to the Deputy Superintendent of Police of the SIT, in which he has sought seven days' time to appear before the official because he is abroad.

Further, in a letter to Modi, the Karnataka Government asked the PM to take other steps such as using diplomatic and police channels of the Government of India as well as international police agencies to ensure the swift return of the "absconding" Member of Parliament to face the full force of the law.

PIOUS PRESIDENT



President Droupadi Murmu offers prayers at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya

Pioneer Photo

Hindu marriage is a samskara, not a party: SC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A Hindu marriage is not an event for "song and dance", "winning and dining" or a commercial transaction, the Supreme Court has observed and said it cannot be recognised in the "absence of a valid ceremony" under the Hindu Marriage Act.

A bench of Justices B V Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih said a Hindu marriage is a 'samskara' and a sacrament which has to be accorded its status as an institution of great value in Indian society.

In its recent order passed in the matter of two trained commercial pilots, who sought a divorce decree without performing a valid Hindu marriage ceremony, the bench urged young men and women to "think deeply about the institution of marriage even before they enter



upon it and as to how sacred the said institution is, in Indian society."

"A marriage is not an event for 'song and dance' and 'winning and dining' or an occasion to demand and exchange dowry and gifts by undue pressure leading to possible

initiation of criminal proceedings thereafter. A marriage is not a commercial transaction. It is a solemn foundational event celebrated so as to establish a relationship between a man and a woman who acquire the status of a husband and wife for an evolving

family in future which is a basic unit of Indian society," the bench said. "Termining the marriage as sacred as it provides a lifelong, dignity-affirming, equal, consensual and healthy union of two individuals, the bench said a Hindu marriage facilitates procreation, consolidates the unit of family and solidifies the spirit of fraternity within various communities. "We deprecate the practice of young men and women seeking to acquire the status of being a husband and a wife to each other and therefore purportedly being married, in the absence of a valid marriage ceremony under the provisions of the (Hindu Marriage) Act such as in the instant case where the marriage between the parties was to take place later," the bench said. In its April 19 order, the bench said where a Hindu marriage is not

performed in accordance with the applicable rites or ceremonies such as 'saptapadi' (taking seven steps by the groom and the bride jointly before the sacred fire), the marriage will not be construed as a Hindu marriage.

"We further observe that a Hindu marriage is a sacrament and has a sacred character. In the context of saptapadi in a Hindu marriage, according to Rig Veda, after completing the seventh step (saptapadi) the bridegroom says to his bride, 'With seven steps we have become friends (sakha). May I attain to friendship with thee; may I not be separated from thy friendship'. A wife is considered to be half of oneself (ardhangini) but to be accepted with an identity of her own and to be a co-equal partner in the marriage," it said.

Chief Minister campaigns several places in Sagar

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav in support of BJP candidate Lata Wankhede from Sagar Lok Sabha seat, Bina and Malhotra, Lahar in support of BJP candidate Mr. Bharat Singh Kushwaha from Gwalior Lok Sabha seat.

Addressing the public meetings held in Mehgaon of Assembly and Chinor of Bhatwar Assembly, he said that Congress party and its leader Rahul Gandhi is a shop of lies. Whenever he speaks, he always lies. After independence, Congress always created obstacles in the welfare of the country for 70 years. Could not remove poverty. Now Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi is

praying for the countrymen like the Sun. The BJP government has brought BIMARU Madhya Pradesh into the category of progressive states. Yadav said that Congress and its leaders are saying that BJP will change the Constitution if it comes to power, but everyone knows that after independence, Congress was in power till 1950. He amended the Constitution several times. During the Congress government since 1950, Jawaharlal Nehru amended the Constitution about 17 times. After this Late Lal Bahadur Shastri ji 3 times, late. Indira Gandhi 29 times, late. Rajiv Gandhi also amended the Constitution 10 times. After this, Sonia Gandhiji also ran the government from behind. She also brought amendments to the Constitution several times. Amendments were made in the

Constitution also during Narasimha Rao's government. The Constitution was amended almost 100 times during the Congress rule and now they are blaming others. They could not remove poverty from the country for 70 years and now they are lying that if they come to power they will remove poverty. Congress put obstacles in all the work being done for the welfare of the country and now the public has understood. Now obstacles have started appearing in his party itself. Before 2014, there was a Congress government at the Centre. The actions of the Congress removed the Congress government. From the time of 1947, from 2003 to 2013, the then Congress government tried to separate Jammu and Kashmir by imposing Article 370. Yadav said that in the 2018 assembly elections, the Congress party had formed the govern-

ment by lying. Rahul Gandhi had said that if farmers' loans are not waived off within 10 days, he will change the Chief Minister. He ran the government for 13 months and could not change even a single minister. Their lies did not last long and their government fell. Now with everyone's blessings BJP again came to power and now we took many important decisions in the 100 days of the government. Our government has decided that those who have Ayushman card will be provided free treatment up to Rs 5 lakh, irrespective of their age. We will send serious patients to the hospital by air ambulance for treatment. Yadav said that no scheme running in Madhya Pradesh will be stopped. Other schemes including Ladli Brahmin Yojana will continue as usual.

destroyed. Today, under the leadership of Modi ji, our country is moving forward and on the path of development. The sisters presented a sack of wheat to Chauhan during the Jan Ashirwad Yatra. On this occasion, the former CM said emotionally that the sisters have given a sack of wheat today. When the sister was asked why she was giving it, the sister said, brother, this wheat is for your election expenses. The former Chief Minister said, which brother gets such love, I salute you again and again. He said that he will keep the sack of wheat here and after winning the elections, the Kanya Bhoj will be held here in which I will also come. My sisters are withdrawing money from their wallets to me and saying, brother, this is 10 rupees for your election campaign.



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav during an election campaign in support of BJP candidate Lata Wankhede ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in Bina, Sagar district Madhya Pradesh on Wednesday. Pioneer photo

Commission's endeavors yield results in empowering marginalized tribal groups

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The Election Commission of India's efforts over the last two years to include the country's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in the electoral process are now yielding results. Expressing their faith in democracy, the tribes in Madhya Pradesh have enthusiastically participated in the first and second phases. The Election Commission of India has made special efforts over the last two years to include PVTGs in the electoral process for their enrollment as voters and participation in voting. During the special summary revision for updating of electoral rolls, special outreach camps were

There are three PVTGs in Madhya Pradesh, Baiga, Bharia and Saharia. Out of the total population of 9 lakh 91 thousand 613 in 23 districts

There are three PVTGs in Madhya Pradesh, Baiga, Bharia and Saharia. Out of the total population of 9 lakh 91 thousand 613 in 23 districts in the state, there are 6 lakh 37 thousand 681 eligible voters and all of them are registered in the voter list. In the two phases of voting held so far in the state, a lot of enthusiasm was seen among the voters of Baiga and Bharia tribes. These voters reached their polling booth early in the morning. They waited for their turn to vote and voted enthusiastically, ensuring their participation in the great festival of democracy. For the convenience of these voters, new polling stations were established even in inaccessible areas.

organized for inclusion in the electoral rolls in areas where PVTGs reside. It may be noted that Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar had emphasized on the special efforts of the Commission to enroll and empower PVTGs as proud voters of the country. Baiga and Bharia tribal voters vote enthusiastically in Madhya Pradesh

Shivraj offers prayers at Ganesh temple in Sehore during campaign

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Former Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan reached Chintaman Ganesh Temple in Sehore on Wednesday and offered darshan and worship and wished for the well-being, welfare and prosperity of the people of the country and the state. Whereas, after Sanchi and Silvani assembly, the former CM today launched the Jan-Aashirwad Yatra from village Sewaniya of Ichhawar assembly of Vidisha Lok Sabha. During this, the former CM said that for me, service to the public is worship of God. All sisters are idols of goddesses and daughters are actual goddesses. People pray to God and ask for many things but I ask only one thing from God that, Lord I do not want wealth, power, knowledge, heaven and salvation. Only after my death,

development work has been done only under the Bharatiya Janata Party government. During the Congress era, there were neither roads, nor electricity nor water supply. It was not known whether there were potholes in the roads or roads in the potholes. The entire region was destroyed and

Congress president doing politics over rape, alleges CM

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

Usually, when a leader contests elections, they ask for money, but I am such a lucky brother, who has for this, the sisters are collecting money from their hard-earned money and donating it to contest the elections. The former Chief Minister said that, since childhood, I had seen discrimination between sons and daughters, had seen the sorrows and troubles of sisters. There was a lot of pain at that time and there was only one resolution in my mind that I had to bring new light in the lives of my sisters and daughters. When he became the Chief Minister, the first thing he implemented was Ladli Lakshmi Yojana. Today I am proud to say that there are more than 50 lakh Ladli Lakshmis in the state. When I was an MP, I used to get daughters married, but I alone could not get more than 21, 31 daughters married.

While discussing with the media persons in Gwalior, Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said that the state president of Congress is not able to digest the Chief Minister from an OBC category... he is continuously using mild language. Those who could not save their party's candidate are throwing mud at others. I hope they stop. On doing politics in the rape case, Chief Minister Yadav said that the laws made by the state government regarding women and minor children, through which it is necessary to hide their identity, because after this identity is revealed, there will be disappointment in the life of the victim. The victim's life will become hell. Therefore this is part of law and order. This should be avoided. Regarding Congress, he said that whatever movement they want to do, they should definitely do it, but at least making fun of the victim's family in public is equivalent to playing with their life. I can understand that they should understand the rule of law, but I believe that the one who respects the law cannot be a Congressman. Congressmen always consider themselves above the law. That is why they are called arrogant people. They should apologise. The Chief Minister said that strict action will be taken against those who break the law. Chief Minister Dr. Yadav urged that during this election period, everyone should remain within their limits. Whoever breaks the limits will pay the price.



Madhya Pradesh Bank Employees Association members and Trade Union activists take out a rally on May Day in Bhopal on Wednesday. Pioneer photo

Sexual assault on 8-year-old student in boarding school

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

An eight-year-old girl was allegedly raped in a girls' hostel of a private school in Madhya Pradesh capital Bhopal, following which a case has been registered against three persons, a police official said on Wednesday. Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav ordered a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the case. The police said they were trying to ascertain when the incident exactly took place. "An eight-year-old girl was allegedly raped at a girls' hostel of private school. Following a complaint in this regard, the police registered a case on Tuesday night against three persons under Indian Penal Code (IPC) section 376 (rape) and provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act," Misrod police station

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav ordered a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the case

in-charge Manish Raj Bhadoria said. Although the names of the accused are mentioned in the FIR, their identity is being established, he said. When asked about the allegation that the girl was drugged before the crime, Bhadoria said all these things will be clear once the investigation gets over. "The process of carrying out the medical examination of the victim and recording her statement is underway," he said, adding that several police teams have been constituted to

collect the evidence related to the case. On whether the clinical examination confirmed that the girl was raped, Bhadoria said a comprehensive report is awaited. Replying to a query that injuries and swelling were found in the girl's private part during a medical examination conducted by doctors as per the request by the victim's mother, the police official said the complainant has made this allegation, but things will be clear in a detailed medical examination. Bhadoria said that the CCTV footage of the hostel has been recovered as the date of the incident is not clear. "The accused will be arrested once their identity is established," he said. The office of Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said that taking cognizance of the matter, he has ordered an SIT to probe into the matter.

Cupping and leech therapy of Unani system benefitting patients

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

The Indian Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Bhopal has been benefiting the patients with the facilities of cupping and leech therapy from the Unani system of medicine in the AYUSH department for the last 2 months. These ancient therapeutic techniques have been practiced for centuries and are now gaining recognition for their holistic approach towards treatment. Cupping therapy involves placing cups on the skin to create suction, promote blood flow, and reduce muscle tension. This therapy treats joint pain, arthritis, skin diseases like; Effective in ringworm, eczema, and acne. Similarly, leech therapy is used to treat various diseases like; Psoriasis, Varicose Veins, Non-healing ulcers, Alopecia etc. This medical system uses medicinal leeches to remove impurities from the blood. Emphasizing the benefits of these traditional treatments, the Unani Medical Officer at AIIMS Bhopal said,

These ancient therapeutic techniques have been practiced for centuries and are now gaining recognition for their holistic approach towards treatment

"Cupping and leech therapy provide natural and effective solutions to many health problems including pain management, inflammation and detoxification." By adopting these time-honored practices, AIIMS Bhopal aims to provide patients with comprehensive care that integrates modern medical advances with traditional wisdom. This initiative underlines the institute's commitment towards holistic health care and its dedication towards exploring diverse treatment modalities. Dr. Barkati MD, Tariq can be contacted in the Department of AYUSH, AIIMS Bhopal for the above therapy benefits.

Cultivate creativity amongst children

PNS ■ JABALPUR

Motivating children for educational and cultural activities during summer holidays proves to be very helpful in their all-round development. Anjana Tiwari president of Madhya Pradesh vidut Mahila Mandal expressed her views in the summer club organized with the aim of keeping children engaged in creative activities in summer at MP Vidut Mahila Mandal Jabalpur headed by Anjana Tiwari. In the Summer Club, the member sisters enjoyed Housie and other indoor games and discussed various ways to inculcate creativity in children during summer holidays. Anjana Tiwari said that MPV Mahila Mandal has been organizing various multidimensional training programs for creativity since long. On this occasion, Secretary Kavita Nigam, Treasurer Farhat Parveen, Co-Secretary Jayashree Mulmule, Rajni Srivastava, Manager of Balak Mandir School, Rashmi Srivastava, Secretary Pratibha Pani, nursery director Pratibha Patel and other member sisters were present.

CEO asks govt to issue transfer orders of three govt officials

STAFF REPORTER ■ BHOPAL

District Dewas, Savita Soni due to his posting in the same district for more than 3 years, Balram Singh Tomar SI Crime Branch Indore due to his posting continuously for seven years, Sonali Gupta Sub Inspector Pushpraghar due to her posting in District Anuppur for 6 years, Shivkumar Singh Additional Superintendent of Police due to his home district being Umaria, UN Mishra in-charge District Officer Datia, Manish Udaniya in-charge Executive Engineer Public Works Department Datia on the basis of complaints, Devendra Tiwari District Manager Civil Supplies Corporation Rewa, Apoorva Saxena CEO District Panchayat Betul due to their posting for more than 3 years, Mahendra Vashishtha Chief Municipal Officer Neemuch, Nikhilesh Chintaman Incharge Chief Municipal Officer Khatagaon District Dewas, Anil Inwati Deputy Engineer RES Umaria, Ritesh Chauhan CEO District Panchayat Parswada District Balaghat, Sushil Patel Police Station Incharge Timarni District Harda and Ramanuj Mishra Incharge CMO Municipal Council Shahganj have been transferred due to complaints and other reasons.

Chief Electoral Officer Anupam Rajan has ordered the state government to issue immediate transfer orders of three officers. Rajan has given instructions to immediately transfer Additional Commissioner Finance Gunwant Sewatkar who has been posted in Bhopal Municipal Corporation since 2020 and Vinod Kumar Srivastava, Sub-Divisional Officer, Public Works Department, posted in Bhopal district, who is the elder brother of Arun Kumar Srivastava, the Indian National Congress candidate from Bhopal parliamentary constituency and Hans Kumar Jhinhor police station in-charge, traffic district Burhanpur, to transfer him immediately due to his posting in the district for more than 6 years. It is noteworthy that earlier Rohit Singh (Incharge Traffic) due to his posting in Morena for 6 consecutive years, Police Station Incharge (GRP Police Station) Gwalior Pankaj Diwan, due to his posting in his home district Gwalior, Chief Municipal Officer, Municipal Council Bhaunarsa.



Former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister and senior BJP leader Uma Bharti during an election campaign in support of Union Minister and BJP candidate Jyotiraditya Scindia ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in Shivpuri district Madhya Pradesh on Wednesday. Pioneer photo

Sagar Hospital organizes CME in Association with IMA

Bhopal: Sagar Group's Sagar Multispecialty Hospital organized Continuing Medical Education (CME) in Association with IMA's Bhopal Surgeon's Club Bhopal at its campus on Hoshangabad road. The CME received participation from over 53 IMA members. Former President ASI, Professor of Surgery at GMC Bhopal Dr Sanjay Jain addressed the gathering and shared information on

Nipple Discharge Causes and Management. Dr SK Nigam Colorectal Surgeon enriched the doctors on LASER in Proctology and enriched the doctors on surgical treatment of diseases of colon, rectum and anus using laser. Dr Rajeev Sharda Colorectal and Laparoscopic Surgeon shared notable information on the management of fissure in the anus and the findings of special

treatments like laser anal fissure surgery to treat fissures safely and effectively. The CME was chaired by Dr Surendra Saxena Consultant Surgeon and Dr Puneet Dixit Consultant Laparoscopic Surgeon SMH to benefit members from the scientific meeting. Dr Aditya Agrawal Director SMH and Dr Narendra Kumar Rathore President IMA Greater Bhopal crafted the CME.

Shah vows to uproot Naxalism from Chhattisgarh in two years



STAFF REPORTER ■ KORBA

Accusing former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel of nurturing Naxalism, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday vowed to stamp out Maoism from the state in two years if Narendra Modi becomes the prime minister for a third term after the Lok Sabha elections. He told a public meeting in Korba that while Baghel's government kept promoting Naxalites, within just four months of BJP rule, 85 Naxalites had been killed and 350 had been arrested in the state. Shah also mentioned the development works done under the leadership of Modi. He said: "Due to relentless efforts by the Prime Minister in the last five years, Naxalism has been eliminated from Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh,

Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. But because of Baghel's government, Chhattisgarh was left out. "If the people of the state make Modi the Prime Minister for a third time, then Naxalism will be uprooted from the state in two years." He added: "Security forces showed bravery and 29 Naxalites were killed, but Bhupesh Kakkha is shamelessly saying that it is a fake encounter. Even Naxalites accepted that they suffered a lot, but the Congress is not ready to accept it. "To win the election, the Congress nurtured Naxalism and terrorism in the country for years. But now the people of Chhattisgarh need not worry because there is a BJP government in the state and the BJP is going to form the government at the Centre. And Naxalism will definitely be wiped out." Deputy Chief

Minister Vijay Sharma, Cabinet Ministers Lakhman Lal Dewangan and Shyam Bihari Jaiswal, Korba Lok Sabha candidate Dr. Saroj Pandey and other leaders were also present at the event. Speaking exclusively with The Pioneer, Saroj Pandey said: "For the all-round development of Korba, the Congress did nothing all these years. The condition of the roads here is very pathetic. There's no electricity and drinking water in rural areas. There's not even a good hospital or school. Even today, women face several challenges which we need to address." Asking people to vote for the BJP candidate, Amit Shah said: "The people of Korba should make Sarojji victorious. The PM will himself take care of every village. Today Korba is known for the 'Missing MP', but once you choose Sarojji, she will come to your village and solve all your problems."

Pitroda remarks reflect vicious mindset of Congress: Brijmohan

SHRI RAM SHAW ■ RAIPUR

Taking a dig at the Congress party over Sam Pitroda's remarks on inheritance tax, BJP candidate from Raipur Lok Sabha constituency Brijmohan Agrawal has said that his "uncalled-for comments" reflected the vicious mindset of the grand old party which is bent upon in distorting the united fabric of the country. Speaking exclusively with The Pioneer, Agrawal, who turned 65 today, said: "His controversial statement makes it clear that the Congress is now a sinking ship. Several senior leaders have abandoned it with a heavy heart amid the Lok Sabha elections. It's clearly visible that the Congress has neither any leader nor leadership and there's no future as well for this party." Agrawal, an eight-time MLA and a prominent face within BJP, currently serves

as a minister in the Vishnu Deo Sai government. His winning streak in Assembly elections since 1990 and previous ministerial roles underscore his political acumen. He has never lost any election ever since he took a plunge into politics. The Congress has fielded Vikas Upadhyay, a Brahmin candidate, to contest against Agrawal from Raipur constituency. While Upadhyay attained his first MLA victory in 2018, he faced defeat in the 2023 elections from the Raipur City West assembly seat. The highest number of candidates, 38 in total, including five women, are in the fray in the Raipur Lok Sabha seat where polling will be held in the third and final phase on May 7. However, Agrawal



upon passing it on to their heirs. "Furthermore, implementing an inheritance tax can lead to unintended consequences, such as family businesses being forced to sell off assets or downsize in order to pay the tax bill, potentially harming economic growth and job creation. It can also create complexities in estate planning and administration, imposing additional burdens on families already dealing with the loss of a loved one," he added. "Additionally, there are concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of inheritance taxes. They may disproportionately affect certain families, particularly those with valuable assets tied up in land or businesses, while wealthy individuals may find ways to evade or minimize their tax liabilities

through loopholes and tax planning strategies," Agrawal opined. Critics argue that instead of focusing on punitive measures like inheritance taxes, policymakers should prioritize reforms that promote economic opportunity and mobility for all citizens, such as reducing barriers to entrepreneurship, improving access to education and healthcare, and creating a level playing field in the economy. Ultimately, while addressing wealth inequality and promoting social justice are important goals, implementing an inheritance tax may not be the most effective or equitable solution. It is essential to carefully consider the potential consequences and explore alternative policy approaches that better balance the needs of society with respect for individual rights and freedoms, the BJP candidate said.

Durg campaigns against child marriage

STAFF REPORTER ■ DURG

To prevent child marriages, Yuvodaya volunteers, Aganwadi workers and Mitani Didis conducted awareness activities in the rural areas of Chhattisgarh's Durg district on Wednesday. These were led by Women and Child Development officer Ajay Sharma. Through posters and dialogue, the volunteers educated the communities about the dangers of child marriages.



Child marriage is a major human rights violation that robs lakhs of children of their childhood, education and future opportunities. It severely affects the girls' overall well-being. Early pregnancy increases the risk of maternal mortality. Under the Child Marriage (Prohibition and Prevention) Act 2006, the marriage of girls below the age of 18 and boys below the age of 21 is strictly

prohibited. Whoever performs and abets child marriage is liable to be punished with imprisonment of up to two years and a fine that may extend to Rs 1 lakh. Despite legal provisions, child marriage remains a major issue in the country. Ending it will require a multi-pronged approach and collective efforts from both government and private entities, an official communique said.

3.98 lakh youth voters in Phase-III LS polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR

A total of 3,98,416 youths in the age of 18-19 years are enrolled to vote in the third and final phase of the Lok Sabha elections in Chhattisgarh, the Election Commission said on Wednesday. As many as 1,39,01,285 people are eligible to exercise their franchise in this phase. Of them, 69,67,544 are women, 69,33,121 are men and 620 belong to the third gender. A total of 6,08,050 voters are in the age group of 18-19 years and 47,88,334 are in the age category of 20-29. The total number of voters in the state has risen



by 2,65,270 to 2,06,58,430, compared to 2,03,93,160 in the 2023 Assembly elections. Surguja, Korba, Bilaspur, Raipur, Durg, Janjgir-Champa and Raigarh will see polling on May 7. The results will be announced nationally on June 4.



To commemorate the International Labour Day, MGNREGA workers in Chhattisgarh's Durg district on Wednesday campaigned for voter awareness and called for 100 percent voting in the May 7 Lok Sabha elections.

Trooper encounters wild bear while combating Naxalites

STAFF REPORTER ■ NARAYANPUR

A Special Task Force (STF) trooper on Tuesday encountered a wild bear during a gunbattle with Maoists at the borders of Narayanpur and Kanker districts in Chhattisgarh. A senior police official on Wednesday said Constable Mangal Mandavi sustained bite injuries on his leg during the face-off with the animal. He was airlifted to Narayanpur on Wednesday morning and admitted to the district hospital, he said, adding that his condition was at present stable. Ten Naxalites, including three women, were killed in a firefight in the forest between Tekmeta and Kakur villages in Abhujmad area, a



Naxalite stronghold, on Tuesday. During the exchange of fire, three bears suddenly

During the exchange of fire, three bears suddenly came up from behind Mandavi and his colleagues.

One of the bears caught hold of one of Mandavi's legs when he tried to hide among bamboo trees. The trooper hit back with a stick, prompting the bear to flee.

Former PCCF Chaturvedi joins BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ KORBA

One more former bureaucrat from Chhattisgarh, former Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (PCCF) and Head of Forest Forces Rakesh Chaturvedi, on Wednesday joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The 1985-batch Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer joined the BJP at the election rally of Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Korba, about 250 km from Raipur. Shah was in the industrial city of Korba to campaign for BJP candidate Saroj Pandey, contesting from the Korba Lok Sabha constituency. An alumni of the Government Engineering College (GEC) Raipur, now the National Institute of Technology (NIT),



Chaturvedi belongs to Chhattisgarh and has held important positions in the forest department in Chhattisgarh and the undivided Madhya Pradesh. He was appointed as the PCCF of Chhattisgarh in 2019.

Sleep loss most prevalent among popular teenagers in school: Study

AGENCIES ■

Teenagers who are popular in school are less likely to get their recommended eight to 10 hours of sleep each night, revealed a study on Wednesday. Researchers from Sweden and Australia found that with increasing school demands, activities, more independence from parents, and relationships with peers, popular children especially girls experience more insomnia symptoms. It is because of "a later melatonin onset and increased alertness in the evening," revealed the study published in the journal Frontiers in Sleep.

"Here we show that popular teenagers reported shorter sleep duration. In particular, popular girls -- but not boys -- reported more insomnia symptoms," said Dr Serena Bauducco, a sleep researcher at Orebro University. "Most interestingly, popularity also seems to negatively impact sleep both before and after the advent of smartphones," she added. To find out the link between popularity and sleeping habits, the team examined more than 1,300 Swedish teenagers, almost half of them female, aged 14 to 18. They found that those defined as more popular slept



less than their peers, the most popular ones up to 27 minutes. Further, more popular girls experienced more

insomnia symptoms, such as difficulties falling or staying asleep or waking up too early. Popular boys did not experience these symptoms to

the same extent. While the gender differences are not yet fully understood, "girls express more care and concern with

their friends and engage in helping behaviour more than boys. This might mean they carry these concerns when it's time to fall asleep," Bauducco explained. "Teenagers are arguably the most sleep-deprived population throughout their lifespan," said Bauducco. "Previous studies show that 30 minutes of extra sleep can lead to improved mental health and better school performance." While emphasising the need for more research on gender differences, the team called for adding sleep and expectations of peers around bedtime in existing sleep interventions for adolescents.

BJP amended Constitution for social justice: UP Minister

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP strengthened the Constitution and amended it for social justice during its terms at the Centre unlike the Congress, which made a "malicious attempt" to change the basic structure of the Constitution when Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister, Uttar Pradesh Minister Asim Arun said on Wednesday.

Addressing a press conference, Arun, who is the Social Welfare Minister in the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh, said that nobody has the right to change the basic structure of the Constitution and asserted that the BJP is ready to keep it intact.

"The Congress has said that it will bring back Article 370, which means the reservation provided to SCs and STs in Kashmir will also be rolled back," he told reporters at the BJP headquarters.

The BJP leader said the Congress will not get any such



opportunity as people of the country have understood its "game".

Arun's remarks came at a time when the Congress and other constituents of the INDIA bloc have gone on an offensive against the ruling BJP alleging that the party is seeking 400 plus seats in the Lok Sabha polls because it wants to change the Constitution and end the provisions made to provide reservation to SCs, STs and OBCs in the country.

"Amendments were made during the BJP rule to strengthen the Constitution, carry for-

ward the fight for social justice and the ideas of BR Ambedkar," Arun said. "On the contrary, the most malicious attempt to change the Constitution, not amend, was made by late prime minister Indira Gandhi when she was facing the prospect of losing the prime minister's seat following a high court's verdict," he added.

Arun said that the amendment brought by the erstwhile Indira Gandhi government had provided that the judiciary including the Supreme Court will now have jurisdiction to hear petitions challenging the election of the president, vice president, prime minister and speaker

"it was the most malicious attempt, among others on various occasions, to change the basic structure of the Constitution. I salute the power of the judiciary which struck down this amendment. Later, Emergency was imposed and other things were done to save her (Indira Gandhi)," the BJP leader added.

EC push led to participation of vulnerable tribals in two LS phases

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission's innovative measures, like eco-friendly polling stations in Chhattisgarh, tribal-themed booths in Odisha, and initiatives such as transportation provisions and electoral literacy clubs in Kerala, effectively encouraged the enthusiastic participation of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in the two phases of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections.

Notably, the Shompen tribe of Great Nicobar voted for the first time, marking a historic milestone in their democratic engagement. In the last 11 state Assembly polls, there were around nine lakh eligible voters from 14 PVTGs communities namely Kamar, Bhunjia, Baiga, Pahadi Korwa, Abujhmadia, Birhor, Sahariya, Bhariya, Chenchu, Kolam, Thoti, Kondareddy, Jenu Kuruba and Koraga.

Elated at the encouraging response from these elusive communities which accounts India's 8.6 per cent tribal population, the Election Commission on Wednesday



said that inclusive efforts such as setting up polling booths in previously inaccessible areas have led to significant PVTG inclusion in the electoral process.

Under the guidance of Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, special campaigns and registration drives were conducted, ensuring 100% enrollment of PVTGs in the electoral rolls across several

states, said an official from the top poll authority. In fact, in the last two years since he has been at the helm of electoral affairs, Kumar has been emphasising on a greater participation of the PVTGs in the electoral process, the EC official said.

Kumar has personally directed the state chief electoral officers and district election officers concerned to make

sure that special campaigns and registration drives are launched to register the PVTGs in the electoral rolls as a first step for their inclusion, the official pointed out.

During a special summary revision to update the electoral rolls, special outreach camps were held across specific states with a PVTG population.

At least 40 polling stations were established in unique tribal themes in an effort to draw these voters to the polls on election day in Karnataka while tribal theme-based polling stations welcomed the voters at the polling stations, with villagers in Dindori, decorating the polling stations themselves in Madhya Pradesh.

Additionally, in the State, three Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) - Baiga, Bhariya, and Sahariya - actively participated in the electoral process. Out of a total population of 9,91,613 across 23 districts, 6,37,681 eligible citizens aged 18 and above are registered in the electoral rolls.

During the voting phases,

there was notable enthusiasm among voters from the Baiga and Bharia tribes. Many of them arrived at polling stations early in the morning, demonstrating their commitment to participating in the democratic process, shared the official.

Further exemplifying the dedication to democracy, Kurumba tribal voters in the Makkali region of Silent Valley, Kerala, embarked on hours-long journeys, traversing dense forests to reach accessible polling booths. Despite their advanced age, numerous tribal voters, including women, showcased unwavering commitment, with 417 out of 817 voters being female.

The innovative use of wall paintings in local dialects not only enhanced the aesthetic appeal of surroundings but also conveyed empowering messages such as "vote for sure" and "my vote can't be purchased." Through various means, including navigating dense forests and waterways, enthusiastic voters ensured their participation in the Lok Sabha elections.

SC reserves verdict on whether private properties can be termed material resources of community

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A nine-judge Supreme Court bench reserved its verdict on Wednesday on a vexed legal question that whether private properties can be considered "material resources of the community" under Article 39(b) of the Constitution and consequently, taken over by State authorities to subservise the "common good".

The question is being dealt with by the Constitution bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud. The bench is hearing 16 petitions, including the lead petition filed by the Mumbai-based Property Owners' Association (POA) in 1992.

The POA has vehemently opposed Chapter VIII-A of the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA) Act. Inserted in

1986, the chapter empowers state authorities to acquire cessed buildings and the land on which those are built if 70 per cent of the occupants make such a request for restoration purposes.

The MHADA Act was enacted in pursuance of Article 39(b) of the Constitution, which is part of the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP), and makes it obligatory for the State to create a policy towards securing "that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subservise the common good".

The state government, represented in the court by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, said the MHADA provisions are protected by Article 31C of the Constitution, which was inserted by the 25th



Amendment Act of 1971 with an intention to protect laws giving effect to certain DPSPs. "No law giving effect to the policy of the State towards securing all or any of the principles laid down in Part IV (DPSP) shall be deemed to be void on the ground that it is inconsistent with, or takes away or abridges any of the rights conferred by Article 14 or Article 19 and no law con-

taining a declaration that it is for giving effect to such policy shall be called in question in any court on the ground that it does not give effect to such policy..." Article 31C reads.

The bench, also comprising Justices Hrishikesh Roy, B V Nagarathna, Sudhanshu Dhulia, J B Pardiwala, Manoj Misra, Rajesh Bindal, Satish Chandra Sharma and Augustine George Masih, reserved its verdict after hearing the arguments put forward by several lawyers, including Attorney General R Venkataramani and Mehta.

The POA and others have challenged Chapter VIII-A of the Act, claiming that the provisions of the chapter discriminate against the owners and attempt to dispossess them.

The lead plea was filed by the POA in 1992 and it was thrice

referred to larger benches of five and seven judges, before being referred to a nine-judge bench on February 20, 2002. Mumbai is a densely-populated city with old, dilapidated buildings that house tenants despite having become unsafe due to a lack of repairs. In order to repair and restore these buildings, the MHADA Act, 1976 imposes a cess on its occupants that is paid to the Mumbai Building Repair and Reconstruction Board (MBRRB), which oversees the repair and reconstruction of these "cessed buildings".

There are around 13,000 cessed buildings in Mumbai that need restoration or reconstruction.

However, their redevelopment is often delayed due to differences between the tenants or between the owners and the tenants on appointing a developer.

BJP invites political parties from ten countries to witness Lok Sabha polls

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Representatives of 18 political parties from 10 countries will interact with a host of BJP leaders, including party president J P Nadda and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, during their visit to India on the ruling party's invitation to get a first-hand experience of the Lok Sabha polls.

The BJP said the foreign leaders will also be given insights into the party's election campaign and will be briefed about its strategies and the overall electoral process. They will meet Nadda on Wednesday and also interact with Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw.

Australia's Liberal Party, Vietnam's Communist Party of Vietnam, Bangladesh's Awami



League, Israel's Likud Party, Uganda's National Resistance Movement, Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi, and Russia's United Russia Party are among the political parties whose representatives are visiting India. Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna and United National Party from Sri Lanka, Militant Socialist Movement, Mauritius Labour Party, Mauritius Militant Movement and Parti Mauricien Social Democrate from Mauritius, and Nepali Congress, Janamat Party, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and Rashtriya Swatantra Party from Nepal are among other parties visiting on the BJP's invitation.

CBI searches 30 locations in HPZ Token App fraudulent scheme case

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI has searched 30 locations across 10 States and Union Territories after registering a case in a fraudulent investment scheme linked to the HPZ Token App, officials said Wednesday.

The agency has alleged the scheme involved misleading the public to invest in non-existent crypto-currency mining machine rentals. The nationwide operation ended Tuesday night. Two private companies, Shigoo Technology Private Limited and Lillian Technocab Private Limited, along with their directors were booked in the case under Indian Penal Code Sections 120-B (criminal conspiracy) 419, 420 (cheating) and Section 66 D of Information Technology Act, 2000, officials said.

The CBI seized digital devices, including laptops, mobile phones, ATM and debit cards besides a trove of email



accounts, during the searches spread across Delhi-NCR, Jodhpur in Rajasthan, Mumbai in Maharashtra, Bengaluru in Karnataka as well as locations in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh.

"The HPZ is an app-based token which promises users large gains by investing in mining machines for Bitcoin and other crypto currencies. The fraudsters allegedly used a modus operandi that enticed victims to invest in the HPZ

token app on the pretext of astronomical returns on their investments in Bitcoin mining," the CBI alleged.

The probe in the case so far has unearthed 150 bank accounts related to the accused used to collect funds from investors.

"These funds were initially used for payouts to build trust, before being illicitly transferred out of India, often converted into cryptocurrency or moved through Hawala transactions," the CBI said in a statement on Wednesday.

Maximum temperature in May likely above normal: IMD

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Signalling the troubling trend of escalating temperatures and heightened heatwaves across vast swathes of the country, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted above-normal maximum temperatures for the upcoming month of May in most regions.

Particular implications will be felt on the northern plains, central areas, and adjoining parts of peninsular India. This forecast deviates from the usual pattern, as normally, northern plains, central India, and adjoining areas of peninsular India experience around three days of heat wave in May, said Mrutyunjay Mohapatra, Director General of the IMD. He issued a warning about upcoming weather patterns, raising concerns for public welfare and environmental stability.

The IMD chief said, "around 8-11 heat wave days are likely over south Rajasthan, west Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha, Marathwada and Gujarat



region are expected to see around 8-11 heat wave days in May. The remaining parts of Rajasthan, east Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and some parts of Chhattisgarh, interior Odisha, Gangetic West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, north interior Karnataka and Telangana may record five-seven heat wave days in the month."

However, above normal maximum temperatures are likely over most parts of the country in May, except most parts of

northeast India, some parts of northwest and central India and adjoining areas of north-east peninsular India where normal to below normal maximum temperatures are likely, above normal maximum temperatures are expected over most parts of the country in May.

Specifically, he highlighted that the northern plains, central region, and adjoining areas of peninsular India are likely to experience a significantly high number of heat wave days. The IMD also said that except for most parts of northeast India, some parts of northwest

and central India, and adjoining areas of northeast peninsular India, where normal to below normal maximum temperatures are likely, above normal maximum temperatures are expected over most parts of the country in May.

Mohapatra attributed the prolonged heat wave spell experienced over east and south peninsular India in April to the absence of thunderstorms and a persisting anticyclone at lower levels over the west central Bay of Bengal and the adjoining eastern coasts of

India. This weather pattern caused the sea breeze to be cut off over Odisha and West Bengal on most days.

Notably, south peninsular India recorded an average maximum temperature of 31 degrees Celsius in April, the second highest since 1901. Additionally, the average minimum temperature in April in east and northeast India was the highest since 1901, according to the IMD.

Mohapatra also highlighted a concerning trend of above-normal maximum temperatures becoming more frequent over south peninsular India since the 1980s. He pointed out that the number of heat wave days in April was the highest in 15 years in Gangetic West Bengal and nine years in Odisha. Odisha also experienced its longest heat wave spell (16 days) in April since 2016. These observations underscore the increasing severity and frequency of heat waves, which have significant implications for public health, agriculture, and the environment.

Congress asks Modi to clear stance on removal of reservation cap

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress on Wednesday asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to clear his stance on whether he will remove the 50 per cent cap on reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes.

Former Union minister Jairam Ramesh said the Congress manifesto guarantees that it will pass a constitutional amendment to raise the 50 per cent cap on reservation for SCs, STs and OBCs but Modi is trying to give it a "communal colour".

Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters here, the Congress chief spokesman alleged that the BJP is "talking about '400 paar' to get the right to change the Constitution as the BJP and the RSS are against secularism and social justice." "The Congress guarantees that it will pass a constitu-



tional amendment to raise the 50 per cent cap on reservation for SCs, STs and OBCs," he said.

"I want to ask the prime minister, who wants to give a communal colour to our Nyay Patra and wants to mislead, that will be remove the cap of 50 pc reservation for SCs, STs and OBCs," Ramesh said. He said Rahul Gandhi is holding a copy of the Constitution in his hand at public meetings because it is being attacked.

"First the prime minister's economic advisor talked about it (changing the Constitution), then many candidates and MPs also stated this. Today I want to say that this is not the first time BJP and RSS have given a 'samvidhan badlo' slogan, it has been the demand of the RSS since 1949 that there is a need to change the Constitution," Ramesh said, holding a copy of the Constitution.

He quoted a speech by B R Ambedkar on November 25, 1949, in which he had said, "The task of the Drafting Committee would have been a very difficult one if this Constituent Assembly has been merely a motley crowd, a tessellated pavement without cement, a black stone here and a white stone there is which each member or each group was a law unto itself. There would have been nothing but chaos."

"This possibility of chaos was reduced to nil by the existence of the Congress Party inside the Assembly which brought into its proceedings a sense of order and discipline. It is because of the discipline of the Congress Party that the Drafting Committee was able to pilot the Constitution in the Assembly with the sure knowledge as to the fate of each article and each amendment. The Congress Party is, therefore, entitled to all the

credit for the smooth sailing of the Draft Constitution in the Assembly." Ambedkar was quoted as saying by Ramesh. Ramesh then went on to quote an article that he claimed was published in the RSS-linked publication Organiser on November 30, 1949.

"The worst about the new Constitution of Bharat is that there is nothing Bharatiya about it. The drafters of the Constitution have incorporated in it elements of British, American, Canadian, Swiss and sundry other Constitutions... Manu's Laws were written long before Lycurgus of Sparta or Solon of Persia."

"To this day, his laws as enunciated in the Manusmriti, excite the admiration of the world and elicit spontaneous obedience and conformity. But to our constitutional pundits that means nothing," he quoted the article as saying.

Actress Rupali Ganguly joins BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

TV actor Rupali Ganguly, famous for her roles in TV serials such as Sarabhai vs Sarabhai and Anupamaa, joined the Bharatiya Janata Party here on Wednesday ahead of the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections.

Along with Ganguly, Ameya Joshi, a social worker and astrologer from Maharashtra, also joined the BJP at the party headquarters in the presence of senior leaders including national general secretary Vinod Tawde and national media department in-charge Anil Baluni.

Joshi welcomed Ganguly and Tawde into the party fold and used the opportunity to attack the opposition parties over Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Maria Alam's appeal for "vote jihad".

Alam, while seeking votes for the INDIA bloc's candidate



from Farrukhabad Lok Sabha seat, called for a "vote jihad," saying it was necessary in the current situation for the minority community to dislodge the BJP from power.

Responding to the SP leader's remarks, Tawde said, "The Opposition, which has been spreading lies, has now started a 'vote jihad' campaign. This shows they are rattled." He added, "On the one hand they are giving OBC reservation to Muslims, on the other

they are talking about 'vote jihad' during elections." Tawde asked Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and party leader Rahul Gandhi if the "campaign" was started on the instruction of the party high command.

Addressing the press conference, both Ganguly and Joshi said they have joined the BJP to work for the progress of the country under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

BJP will neither remove quota nor allow Congress to do so, says Shah

PTI ■ KORBA
Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will neither remove reservation for SCs, STs and OBCs, nor will it allow the Congress to do so. He also alleged that the Congress' formula was to speak lies loudly, publicly and repetitively, and advised party president Mallikarjun Kharge not to speak lies for a family as eventually he will be blamed for its loss in the Lok Sabha elections. Addressing a rally in Katghora town of Chhattisgarh's Korba district to campaign for Saroj Pandey, BJP candidate for the Korba Lok Sabha seat, Shah accused the grand old party of nurturing terrorism and Naxalism to win elections. "Congress party has one formula — speak lies loudly, publicly and keep repeating it. They say if (PM Narendra) Modi ji gets majority for the third term, he will scrap reservation. They circulated my fake video. We have been in power for 10 years, Modi ji



didn't remove reservation, nor will he do it," Shah said. "Modi ji used majority to scrap Article 370 and triple talaq, construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and introducing Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). Neither shall we remove reservation nor allow Congress to do so. It is a guarantee of Modi ji," he said. Targeting Congress president Kharge, Shah said, "Kharge ji, why do you lie for a family?"

Bhupesh Baghel-led government in Chhattisgarh, he said, "The Bhupesh Kakka Government encouraged Naxalism, but after the BJP came to power in the state under Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai and Deputy CM Vijay Sharma (who also hold Home portfolio), 95 Naxalites were eliminated in four months...." PM Modi eliminated Naxalism from Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra in five years, but Chhattisgarh was left as the Baghel-led Government was in power, he said. "Our security forces showed bravery and killed 29 Naxalites recently and yesterday (Tuesday) killed 10 Naxalites. But Bhupesh Kakka calls it a fake encounter despite Naxalites having accepted that they had suffered a huge loss. Congress people are not ashamed. Congress has been nurturing terrorism and Naxalism in this country for years to win elections," he claimed. Voting for the Korba Lok Sabha seat will be held on May 7.

TMC attacks Adhir over better to vote for BJP remark

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Trinamool Congress on Wednesday accused Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury of being the "B-team" of the BJP, after a video, where he was heard saying that voting for BJP is better than voting for the TMC, showed up on the internet. Commenting on the remark, Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said the goal of his party is to bring the numbers of the BJP down in West Bengal and that TMC is a part of the INDIA bloc. The purported video showed Chowdhury, the sitting MP and candidate from West Bengal's Baharampur, addressing a public meeting and saying "it's better to vote for the BJP than to vote for the TMC." The TMC, which has already been miffed with Chowdhury's repeated jibes against the party, responded to the video by blaming him for the failure of the seat-sharing talks with Congress and calling him "anti-Bengal." In a post on X, the TMC said that after acting as "eyes and



ears of BJP in Bengal," Chowdhury has now been promoted to be the "voice of the BJP in Bengal." "Listen to how the B-Team member is openly asking people to vote for the BJP — a party that refused to release Bengal's rightful due and deprived our people of their rights. Only a Bangla-Birodhi can campaign for the BJP, which has repeatedly insulted Bengal's icons," the TMC said. "On May 13, people of Baharampur will give a befitting response to this betrayal!" it added. TMC Rajya Sabha MP Saket Gokhale also attacked the Congress leader over the remarks. "Finally — from the B-team horse's mouth! Congress Bengal chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury publicly asks people in his rally to vote for the BJP and not the TMC. While Mamata Banerjee fights against the full might of Modi+Central Agencies machinery, Bengal Congress is openly asking votes for the BJP," he said in a post on X.

"In Bengal, TMC is INDIA taking on BJP. Meanwhile, Congress and CPM have chosen to become Modi's loyal soldiers. This is disgusting and beyond shameful," he said. Ramesh, meanwhile, said that the only goal of the Congress was to bring down the numbers of BJP in West Bengal. "I do not know the context of what Adhir ji said, but our aim is to reduce the numbers of BJP in West Bengal significantly," Ramesh said. "They won 18 out of 43 seats, we have to reduce their numbers and that is the only goal. This is not assembly election, this is Lok Sabha election. Congress, along with Left parties, is a part of INDIA bloc, TMC leader Mamata Banerjee has also said they are part of the INDIA bloc, though we are not in a seat sharing arrangement," he said. A triangular contest between the TMC, Congress-Left alliance, and the BJP is being witnessed in West Bengal, where the TMC has 22 out of 42 seats in Lok Sabha, BJP 17, and Congress two MPs.

Congress, MNF coalition to run Lai autonomous council in Mizoram

PTI ■ AIZAWL
After a prolonged political deadlock in Mizoram's Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC), officials on Wednesday announced the formation of a Congress-MNF coalition administration to run the 25-member council. LADC is one of the three autonomous district councils constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution for Lai people in the southern part of the state with Lawngtlai as its headquarters. Officials said 12 MNF members have joined forces with the lone Congress member, C. Laluanthanga, to form the United Legislature Party (ULP). This newly formed coalition has presented its claim to Governor Hari Babu Kamphampati to run the council. Laluanthanga is expected to become the chief executive member (CEM) of the council, officials added. Previously led by the MNF, the LADC was placed under governor's rule in March following the resignation of CEM V. Zirsanga in a graft case conviction. In February, the special court (Prevention of Corruption Act) in Aizawl had sentenced



Zirsanga to four years imprisonment and imposed a fine of Rs 4 lakh for misappropriating Rs 1.33 crore during his stint as an executive member of the council. Soon after that, eight MNF members defected from the party and tied up with the opposition and submitted a complaint to the governor expressing lack of confidence in the Zirsanga-led council. Following the CEM's resignation, one of the eight MNF members returned to Zirsanga's camp thus making a situation where no single party could garner the magic number to run the council as both the ruling and opposition camps had 12 members each, excluding the chairman. Subsequently, governor's rule was imposed, and Lawngtlai DC was appointed as the council's caretaker.

MP Opposition leader Singhar says he is not joining BJP

PTI ■ INDORE
Leader of Opposition in Madhya Pradesh assembly Umang Singhar of the Congress on Wednesday rejected speculations of joining the BJP and took potshots at Union minister Jyotiraditya Scindia whose 2020 switch over led to the collapse of the Kamal Nath government. He alleged the Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP) was spreading rumours about defection of senior Congress leaders to divert voters' attention from core issues in the Lok Sabha elections. Singhar targeted Scindia, whose exit from the Congress led to the collapse of the 15-month-old Nath government in March 2020 and paved the way for the BJP's return to power in Madhya Pradesh. Scindia later joined the BJP and became a minister

at the Centre. "BJP leaders from Delhi to Bhopal have been contacting me (for switch over) for the last several years. Even when the Kamal Nath government was toppled, I was given all kinds of inducements. Even then I did not join the BJP because I am Umang Singhar and not Scindia," the senior Congress MLA remarked. Singhar was replying to queries from reporters in

Indore about speculations of him joining the saffron party. The Congress legislator alleged the ruling BJP is putting pressure on opposition leaders by misusing central agencies like the Enforcement Directorate and the Income Tax Department. "If the Congress had done this kind of politics in the last 70 years, the BJP would not have been visible today," he maintained. The Leader of

Opposition targeted six-time Congress MLA from Vijaypur (Sheopur district) Ramniwas Rawat, who joined the BJP on Tuesday. Singhar claimed Rawat joined the ruling party out of greed for a ministerial post and sought to downplay his switch over. "It doesn't make a difference to the Congress if power-hungry people leave the party," he said. Asked about Congress candidate

from Indore Lok Sabha seat Akshay Kanti Bam withdrawing his nomination and later joining the BJP, Singhar remarked that it turned out to be a case of an "unexploded firecracker." "Whether it is Surat (where Congress candidate's nomination was rejected) or Indore, the law and the Constitution were openly violated. The BJP is trying to change the Constitution,"

In Goa, BJP banks on Modi charisma

PTI ■ PANAJI
As the two Lok Sabha seats in Goa go to polls in the third phase of the general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is banking on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "charisma," while the INDIA bloc has made the state government's failures in providing employment and corruption-free governance as its poll plank. The North and South Goa constituencies will go to polls on May 7. In North Goa, BJP's five-time MP and Union Minister Shripad Naik will battle Congress's Ramakant Khalap, and in the South Goa constituency, BJP's first female candidate in Goa and businesswoman Pallavi Dempo will take on ex-navy officer and Congress candidate Viriato Fernandes. "People want stability. They don't want a khichdi (multi-party) government," BJP Goa spokesman Yatish Naik said, expressing confidence about the party's victory in both the seats. "When they cast their votes, people need to consider who should lead the country for the next five years. Prime Minister Modi has given firm leadership to the country. He has become a world leader, and this is an important factor," the BJP leader said. Naik added that as far as infrastructure like public amenities is concerned, "people have seen the development under the BJP rule." "People want stability. They want a settled administration. The BJP will win both seats in Goa and cross the 400-mark in the country," he said. Goa Forward Party (GFP) general secretary Durgadas Kamat, however, claimed that even as voters haven't



expressed their discontent publicly, "a strong anti-government sentiment is brimming." The GFP is a partner in the INDIA bloc. "The government has failed to address the basic issues like unemployment in the state. The state government has failed to resume the mining industry in the state and also has not provided corruption-free governance," Kamat said. The GFP leader added that the BJP government has also failed to fulfil the assurances made during the Goa assembly election. "It is for the INDIA bloc to convert this sentiment into votes. I am sure that the two candidates of the alliance will win. The INDIA alliance candidate is getting overwhelming response for his campaign. The people are volunteering and attending the meetings," he said. The 2019 elections saw sitting MP Naik win the North Goa seat with 2,44,844 votes, defeating Congress candidate Girish Chodankar, while Congress's Francisco Sardinha defeated BJP's Narendra Sawaikar by a narrow margin of 9,755 votes in South Goa. Naik, who has represented the North Goa seat in the previous five elections since 1999, is up against "strong resentment" this time, Goa Pradesh Congress Committee (GPCC) general secretary Sunil Kawthankar said. "Naik has failed to perform for the last five terms due to which the people are looking at change," Kawthankar said. He also claimed that people, including the local BJP leaders, are having a hard time accepting Pallavi Dempo, the executive director of Dempo Industries, as she is not part of the party cadre. "There is resentment amongst the voters. The cadres are also not accepting Dempo because she does not belong to the cadre. She has been chosen by BJP high command and given ticket to contest from South Goa," the Congress leader added. The grand old party has put its hopes in Navy veteran Fernandes against Dempo. "Fernandes is an ex-navy man. He has the interest of the country at heart. He will win hands down in his constituency, considering the support he has been garnering," Kawthankar said.

Congress tried to defame Indian culture and civilisation, says Yogi

PTI ■ LUCKNOW
Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday attacked the Congress, saying after it became "directionless" post-Independence, it has now become "leaderless" as well and accused the party's leaders of attempting to defame Indian civilisation and culture. "Unfortunately, the country's oldest political party (Congress) went directionless after Independence and today it has become leaderless too. The Congress leaders have constantly tried to abuse the Indian culture and humiliate the 'sanatan dharma'," Adityanath told reporters here.



"During the UPA government, a senior leader of the Congress and the then Union Home Minister had tried to insult India's 'sanatan' culture in the name of saffron terror," he said. The priest CM blamed the Congress's policies for the problem of terrorism and Naxalism in the country. He

claimed that the central government has controlled the militancy in the Naxal-affected areas and pacified the restive northeast. "Every person knows that the policies of Congress became the cause of terrorism and Naxalism inside the country. Today under the leadership of Modi ji, not only terrorism

and Naxalism but the issue of extremism and anarchy in the North-East have been resolved," Adityanath claimed. He called Article 370 the "root of terrorism" and said that by abolishing it the Narendra Modi government connected Jammu and Kashmir with the mainstream of development. "Naxalism, which was spread in 120 districts during the time of UPA government, has been controlled. It has been limited to two-three districts in half of the states of the country. Very soon Naxalism will end there too," he added. Adityanath accused the Congress of sowing the seed of Partition with its appeasement of the Muslims.

Maneka Gandhi files nomination

PTI ■ SULTANPUR (UP)
BJP candidate Maneka Gandhi filed her nomination papers from the Sultanpur Lok Sabha seat here on Wednesday. Gandhi took out a roadshow to reach the collectorate and filed her papers in front of District Election Officer Kritika Jyotsna. NDA ally NISHAD Party president Dr Sanjay Nishad and Apna Dal leader and cabinet minister Ashish Patel were with her at the time of the nomination filing. After filing her nomination, Gandhi said she will do more work in the next five years than was done in the last five. She said she wants to provide more houses to the people



under the Pradhan Mantri Aawas Yojana here. "We have to take this region ahead. The people living in the area must get all facilities — this has always been my effort and will be in future as well," she said. On the opposition's allegation that the BJP, if voted back to power, will take away the reservation by changing the Constitution, she said no one can end quota.

Memories of YSR haunt Jagan's re election bid

PTI ■ KURNOOL
As electioneering intensifies, residents of Kurnool parliamentary constituency vividly recall the efficient governance of Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, the two-time former Chief Minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh, who tragically lost his life in a helicopter crash in September 2009, merely 74 km from here. Rajasekhara Reddy, fondly known as YSR, had carved a niche in state politics by working for the upliftment of the downtrodden and neglected segments of the society. YSR emerged victorious in every election he contested during his 25-year-long political career. Elections to 25 Lok Sabha seats and 175 Assembly segments in the state will be held simultaneously on May 13. As incumbent Chief Minister of bifurcated Andhra Pradesh, Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy seeks a second term, admirers of YSR in Kurnool say, after observing the former's first tenure, "Jagan is not like his father." "In the 2019 elections, we voted for Jagan in the name of Rajasekhara Reddy. But he has disappointed us. This time, we will have to reconsider," said Rafid, a fruit seller.

In Leningrad of Bihar, Left contends with saffron surge

PTI ■ BEGUSARAI (BIHAR)
A strong presence of the Left had earned Begusarai the epithet "Leningrad of Bihar" but the Red brigade here is now grappling with the saffron surge. The BJP fielded Union Minister Giriraj Singh again from Begusarai, while CPI nominated Awadhesh Rai, as the united opposition candidate in the seat where the situation has changed much compared to that in 2019. But the key change, the mindset of the voters, was noticed even earlier. The ideological drift was, perhaps, best witnessed in the watershed elections of 2014, when the seat was won by late Bhola Singh on a BJP ticket, decades after he had begun his political career as an MLA of the CPI. Five years later, with Bhola Singh no more, the BJP brought in here Giriraj Singh, an "outsider" who inflicted a crushing defeat on "local" Kanhaiya Kumar. The electoral battle this time is not as eyeball-grabbing as it was in 2019, thanks to the electrifying presence of Kanhaiya Kumar, who had launched a spirited campaign,



to which many celebrities like Javed Akhtar, Shabana Azmi, Swara Bhaskar and Prakash Raj had lent their left. The CPI debutant, who has since moved to the Congress which has fielded him from Delhi North East, was badly hit by the RJD's decision to field its own candidate who cut into the anti-BJP votes, offering Giriraj Singh a victory on the platter, with a margin of over four lakh votes. Five years down the line, though, many variables seem to have changed. The "outsider" tag against Singh, who hails from Barahiya in Lakhisarai district, right across the Ganges, may no longer stand. But the absence of an over-arching narrative of nationalism fuelled by the Pulwama terror attack leaves the Union minister devoid of

the ballast that he would have liked for his dog-whistling rhetoric. Moreover, unlike in 2019, the RJD, arguably the strongest regional party in Bihar, is not trying to play spoilsport this time. Its chemistry with the Left has also been tried and tested in the 2020 assembly polls when CPI(ML), CPI and CPI(M) together came out with a better-than-expected performance. In the assembly polls, the CPI bagged two seats, both in Begusarai, where the RJD also notched up as many, while the BJP-JD(U) combine could win only three. Unlike predecessor Bhola Singh who was a party-hopper, having tried his luck in a number of parties before joining the BJP, Giriraj Singh is a dyed-in-the-wool RSS man, who had earned his spurs as an ABVP activist. Tall and powerfully built, the Union minister has proudly prefixed "Shandilya", his "gotra", to his profile on X, and moves around sporting a fiery red "tilak" on his broad forehead and a tuft of hair dangling from the crown, warning all those who come his way that here is a man who wears his Hindutva on his sleeve.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Scare visits schools

A bomb threat directed at nearly 100 schools in Delhi-NCR serves as a wake-up call for all of us

Amid an unanticipated cloud of fear, nearly 100 schools in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) sent students home early Wednesday upon receiving a bomb threat via email. The police conducted thorough searches, but found nothing suspicious. The scare has sent shockwaves through the community, leaving parents, educators and students grappling with a harrowing reality: The threat of terror is no longer a distant concern but a chilling presence in our midst. The sanctity of schools, once regarded as a safe haven for learning and growth, has been compromised. As we confront this sobering reality, it is imperative that we do not succumb to despair but unite in resilience and resolve. Foremost, we must commend the swift response of school authorities and law enforcement agencies in addressing these threats. Their coordinated efforts have undoubtedly helped reassure people. More importantly, our intelligence agencies need to put their act together; they are the ones who should have seen it coming. We do not have enough specific information to process at the moment and no clue about the intention or the identity of the perpetrator(s); we don't know if it was a real threat or just a mischievous element playing mind games, but such threats cannot be taken lightly, especially when human lives are at risk. The threat emails, reportedly emanating from a Russian IP address, were well-planned and coordinated. Shooting in the US schools is rather rampant; Indian schools are much safer and should stay that way. All we have to do is be vigilant.



Also, this small win should not lull us into complacency. We must remain vigilant and proactive in fortifying

the security infrastructure of our educational institutions. Beyond bolstering physical security, we must also invest in fostering a culture of vigilance and preparedness within our school communities. Educators play a pivotal role in equipping students with the knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to potential threats. Empowering students with safety protocols and encouraging open dialogue can go a long way in mitigating the impact of terror-induced anxiety. It is equally important that we address the root causes of such terror acts. Socio-economic disparities, marginalisation and ideological extremism often serve as fertile breeding grounds for radicalisation. By addressing these underlying issues through comprehensive social policies and inclusive education, we can strive towards building a more resilient and harmonious society. It is equally important to remain calm and not panic. In times of crisis, it is easy to succumb to fear and division. However, we must remember that our strength lies in our unity and resilience. Now more than ever, we must stand in solidarity with one another, refusing to be cowed by the forces of terror. Together, we can create a future where every child can pursue their education without fear and where schools are not battlegrounds but beacons of hope and enlightenment.

PICTALK



Participants during a State-level bullock cart race at Theguru, in Chikkamagaluru

PTI

Democracy, economics and governance

The confluence of elections, electioneering and the economy demands meticulous examination and rethinking to make the system work flawlessly



BK JHA

As India goes ahead with its 18th General Elections, the nation finds itself at a crossroads of democracy, economics and governance. The elections, spanning 44 days from April 19 to June 1, are poised to be the lengthiest in Indian history, reflecting both the enormity of the task at hand and the significance of the decisions to be made. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning economy, evolving political landscapes and pressing social challenges, the intersection of elections, electioneering and the economy warrants scrutiny. The magnitude of election expenditures provides a glimpse into the economic dynamics surrounding the electoral process. According to the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), the anticipated expenditure for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is staggering, surpassing Rs 1.35 lakh crore. This figure, more than double the amount spent in 2019, indicates the monumental scale of electoral spending in the world's largest democracy.

With a projected voter base of 96.6 crore, the per-voter spending is estimated at around Rs 1,400, signifying both the financial investment and the democratic imperative of ensuring widespread participation. However, it's worth noting that the Election Commission's expenditure is expected to constitute only a fraction of the total outlay, pointing towards the diverse economic activities spurred by the electoral process. The Election Commission tirelessly strives to facilitate universal suffrage across the nation. Recognising the pivotal role of public figures in shaping civic consciousness, the Commission enlisted the famed actor Rajkumar Rao as its 'national icon' to galvanise youth engagement and voter turnout as the country approaches the general elections. Rao's portrayal of a dedicated poll officer in the acclaimed film 'Newton,' a poignant exploration of electoral challenges in a Naxal-affected region, resonated deeply with young voters. However, despite the cinematic depiction of electoral fervour, the anticipated



'Newton effect' has yet to materialise in voting patterns in two phases so far. Nonetheless, the indomitable spirit of election officers persists, as they traverse treacherous terrain and surmount logistical obstacles to ensure the integrity of the electoral process. Electioneering acts as a catalyst for various sectors of the economy, fostering growth and employment opportunities across the spectrum. From hospitality and transportation to textiles and advertising, the ripple effects of political campaigns are palpable. As political parties vie for voter attention, rallies, events and promotional activities proliferate, injecting vitality into local economies and stimulating demand for goods and services. Moreover, the advent of digital campaigning has revolutionised the electoral landscape, with professional agencies employed to enhance brand visibility and engagement. The economic dividends of such strategies are evident, as digital platforms emerge as potent tools for political communication and mobilisation. Amidst the fervour of electoral competition, political manifestos serve as blueprints for



ELECTIONEERING ACTS AS A CATALYST FOR VARIOUS SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY, FOSTERING GROWTH AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

governance, delineating policy priorities and economic agendas. The contrasting visions articulated by major political parties underscore the divergent approaches to addressing pressing socio-economic challenges. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), buoyed by its track record and incumbent status, advocates for policy continuity and fiscal consolidation. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on infrastructure development and economic reforms, a BJP-majority Government is poised to prioritise private investment and fiscal prudence, thereby fostering economic stability and growth. Conversely, the Indian National Congress or INDI Block champions a progressive agenda focused on job creation, social welfare and agrarian reforms. Proposals such as Government-led employment initiatives, minimum support price guarantees and education loan waivers underpin the Alliance's commitment to inclusive growth and equitable development. While political rhetoric often dominates electoral discourse, the economic imperatives transcending partisan lines merit attention. Issues such as

water scarcity, climate change and unemployment pose formidable challenges to India's socio-economic fabric, necessitating concerted action beyond the electoral cycle. The water crisis in cities like Bengaluru serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for sustainable resource management and climate resilience. Yet, the conspicuous absence of these issues from political manifestos is very disheartening. There is an urgent need for non-partisan dialogue and policy discourse on environmental sustainability and socio-economic resilience. As India embarks on its electoral journey, the confluence of elections, electioneering and the economy offers both opportunities and challenges. While the democratic process catalyses economic activity and political discourse, the imperatives of inclusive and sustainable development transcend electoral cycles. By transcending electoral exigencies and embracing a shared vision of progress, India can realise its aspirations for a vibrant democracy and a prosperous future for all.

(The author is Delhi-based senior journalist. Views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Man gets life imprisonment for murdering teenage Indian wife in London," published on April 30, this is my response. The news of Sahil Sharma's sentencing for the murder of his wife, Mehak Sharma, is a heartbreaking reminder of the devastating consequences of domestic violence. The brutal act not only robbed Mehak's family of a beloved daughter but also shattered their sense of security and left them grappling with irreparable grief. The fact that the tragedy unfolded within the confines of their own home, supposedly a place of safety, adds another layer of horror to the ordeal. Mehak's mother's poignant statement encapsulates the profound anguish and emptiness left in the wake of such a senseless loss. While the legal proceedings may offer some semblance of justice, they can never fully assuage the pain inflicted upon the victim's loved ones. It serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for greater awareness, support and intervention in cases of domestic violence to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Aadhya Chawla | Chandigarh

GLOBAL IMPACT OF BHARAT

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Covid handling changed world's perception of India: EAM," published on April 30, this is my response. India's growth trajectory under the spotlight! External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar reflects on India's changing perception abroad, citing COVID management and Chandrayaan-3 as game-changers. He highlights how decisions made domestically resonate globally, showcasing India's significance on the world stage. From bringing citizens home during crises to enhancing the value of the Indian passport, India's actions garner international attention. Jaishankar underlines India's technological prowess and socio-economic

Technological deception



Apropos the news article, "Telangana CM summoned in Shah fake video case," published on April 30, this is my response. In today's complex political landscape, technology's role in shaping narratives is undeniable. The recent controversy surrounding doctored videos

of key political figures underscores the urgency of addressing misinformation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's acknowledgement of this issue highlights the importance of responsible information sharing in the digital age. However, the entanglement of political parties in this web of deceit further exacerbates the situation. The involvement of law enforcement, as seen with the Delhi Police's actions, signals a crucial step towards accountability. Yet, the broader implications of such manipulation on societal harmony cannot be overstated. Platforms like 'X' and social media giants must cooperate fully in identifying and curbing the spread of fake content. Ultimately, restoring trust in our democratic processes necessitates collective vigilance and decisive action against those seeking to sow discord through technological deception.

Arya Sundaram | Chennai

advancements, attracting global interest in investment and exploration. The narrative shifts from India being a concern to being a source of support, showcasing its resilience and diplomatic agility. With a focus on domestic performance, Jaishankar emphasises infrastructure development and socio-political systems, which captivate foreign fascination. India's journey from a developing nation to a global player exemplifies its potential and allure on the international stage, echoing the sentiment that Bharat indeed matters.

Kabir Oberoi | Mumbai

DIVINE SYMBOLISM UNVEILED

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Astroturf | Mother calls for full alert against evil forces," published on April 28, this is my response. The intricate symbolism of the goddess's accessories reveals profound insights into the cosmic order and human existence. The conch shell, echoing the primal sound of creation, signifies the source energy that initiates and sustains all life.

Meanwhile, the lotus flower, emerging from murky waters unstained, embodies purity and detachment amid creation's diversity. The goddess's eight weapons, contrasted with her two creative symbols, underscore the perpetual struggle against malevolent forces. This juxtaposition reflects the omnipresence and potency of negativity, urging constant vigilance and defensive action. Demons, depicted in surreal forms, serve as metaphors for internal and external threats, reminding us of the deceptive allure and insidious nature of evil. In essence, the divine imagery prompts contemplation on the balance between constructive creativity and vigilant defence in navigating life's complexities. It emphasises the importance of spiritual awareness and moral integrity in combating adversities while upholding the cosmic order.

Devansh Khatri | Jaipur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Post-poll path for infra financing!

Modi 3.0 plans to bolster infrastructure creation post-election by expanding the infrastructure financing ecosystem

In the interim budget for FY25, infrastructure outlay was increased by 11.1 per cent to 11.11 lakh crore, including Rs 2.78 lakh crore for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) and Rs 2.55 lakh crore for the Railway Ministry. Post-poll, the plan for a full-fledged budget for FY25 will look to raise Rs 25000 crore of finance through green bonds - higher than Rs 20000 crore raised through green bonds in FY24.

That going ahead private investment will be a big driver of infrastructure development, is evident from the National Investment & Infrastructure Fund (NIIFF) plan to raise USD 1 billion for its second Private Markets Fund (PMF). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is likely to invest nearly USD 125 million. NIIFF manages over USD4.9 billion of equity capital commitments across its four funds-Master Fund, PMF, Strategic Opportunities Fund and India-Japan Fund. The MoRTH is looking to



raise a whopping Rs 60,000 crore in FY 25 through monetisation of Toll Operate Transfer (TOT) highways and NHAI InvIT. In FY 24, Rs 38334 crore was raised from ToT, InvIT and project-based financing. It is significant to mention that under the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP), an ambitious target of raising Rs 1.08 lakh crore has been fixed for FY25. The share of privately funded highways in the overall award of projects in FY25 is expected to meet the Government's target of 10 per cent. NHAI has drawn up a plan to develop 53 listed highways worth Rs 1.2 trillion through BOT. The

MoRTH had a healthy award project pipeline of over Rs 45,000 crore as of March 2024. Following the Government's push for private participation in highways, IRB Infra Development has committed to invest 10000-12000 crore in FY25, to add road capacity through Build Operate Transfer (BOT) mode. The recent modification in concession agreements, according to IRB, has bolstered investors' confidence by enhancing the bankability of projects. Further, the central Government is putting into place its plan to pare a large portion of NHAI's Rs 3.4 trillion debt within 5

years. This will free up NHAI's resources for development in the highways sector.

The energy sector is getting a big green private investment boost. REC Limited, a leader in the power sector in India has availed a SACE-covered green loan for JPY 60.536 billion to finance eligible green projects. In the power sector, besides the airport, Adani Enterprises is firming up its plans to plough USD 1 billion into these businesses. It is in advanced talks with several investors in the US and Europe to raise USD 1 billion for its Solar Panel business and Mumbai Airport. The company, which is enhancing its focus on green energy, raised USD 750 million through bonds in 2022. The investors and Indian corporates engaged in infrastructure development are banking on political and policy continuity for the fruition of the ambitious plan for infra financing push.

(The author is a veteran journalist; views are personal)



VINOD BAHL



FIRST COLUMN

SPIRITUAL EDUCATION CAN TRANSFORM SOCIETY

It's high time to introduce spiritual learning to save our future generations



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

All of us daily read, in newspapers, about one or the other major problem causing grave suffering to a large segment of society or mankind as a whole. These problems are classified as economic, social, political, racial, administrative, etc. and attempts are made to find solutions to them from the respective areas of human knowledge. The unjust treatment of industrial or farm labour, unfair treatment of under-privileges, bride-burning, ill-treatment of women, inhuman treatment because of racial prejudices or casteism, bonded labour and abject poverty are only some problems on the long list, the top of which is the problem of armament race that threatens the very existence of humankind.

Economic and social reforms, diplomatic negotiations, political declarations and legal enactments are only some of the measures that have been adopted to solve these and other problems over the years. Even such an august body as the U.N. also has addressed itself to some of these problems through its various organs. Though all these various efforts have borne some fruit, the problems at the core remain unsolved and there has been no satisfactory and lasting solution to resolve them. The question, therefore, remains: "What are these problems due to and how can these be solved or eliminated?"

A thorough analysis would lead us to the conclusion that all these problems are directly and indirectly caused by the absence or lack of goodwill or good motives. People generally lay emphasis on creative intelligence, scientific development, courage and life full of pleasures but, it is usually forgotten that, if there is no good motive, science and intelligence may be used to promote means of mutual destruction, courage may be employed for killing and pleasures may be gained in evil ways. Hardly is it realised that if there were goodwill towards all, there would be no armament race, no racial prejudice, no bride-burning, no exploitation, no poverty and no injustice to the labour class, for goodwill is the very antithesis of all these.



Without goodwill, conferences end in bickerings, assemblies achieve nothing, resolutions are considered mere scraps of paper, economic remedies cannot prove effective and legal acts or social reforms cannot bring the desired change. The second factor essential to solving the problems of mankind is to consider the inherent worth of human personality. We must realise that every human individual is to be revered and is not to be treated as a means for the gratification of the desires of another. No one has to be degraded, for another person's benefit, to the level of material goods and chattels or machines and tools or dolls and playthings but has to be regarded as a person. If this principle of giving respect to every being is applied in our daily lives, there would be no slavery, no bonded labour, no exploitation of the working class, no poverty, no bride-burning and no ill-treatment of one by the other based on the difference in race, religion or caste.

The ultimate and lasting solution of problems lies, without doubt, in education that develops these two qualities in men and women and such an education cannot be moral and spiritual. Trillions and Billions are spent every year by various Governments and non-Governmental agencies on solving social, economic, political, administrative and other problems without achieving the goal of ending exploitation of all sorts and thus ending class conflict, conflict, family conflict and other kinds of conflicts. This is mainly because we only talk of conflict resolution without real and practical moral and spiritual education. It's high time that the Governments and the people in power realise this and seriously do something about it & save our future generations from devastation.

(The writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist, views are personal)

Plug leakages in fertiliser subsidy

The real reason behind the leakage is control of the MRP at an artificially low level. Dubious players have a huge incentive to divert and rake in the moolah



UTTAM GUPTA



As part of the 100-day agenda of Modi 3.0, the Government intends to administer fertiliser subsidies more effectively and cut down on leakages and diversions to build on the success of neem-coated urea. It intends to conduct a pilot in a few districts on a modified version of the direct benefit transfer (DBT) that seeks to establish a linkage between the land holding of a farmer and nutrient consumption. A proposal in this regard mooted in 2020 is being resurrected. To make urea - a widely used fertiliser that supplies primary nutrient nitrogen or 'N' and constitutes nearly half of India's total fertiliser consumption - affordable to farmers, the Union Government controls its maximum retail price (MRP) at a low level unrelated to the cost of production/import and distribution, which is much higher. The excess cost over MRP is reimbursed to the manufacturer/importer as a subsidy which varies from unit to unit depending on its cost. The MRP of urea is kept unchanged (today's price is more or less the same as in 2002) even as all cost escalations are absorbed by raising the subsidy.

In the case of fertilisers supplying phosphate or 'P' and potash or 'K' which constitute the other half (call them non-urea fertilisers), there is a 'uniform' subsidy on a per nutrient basis for all manufacturers under the Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) Scheme. They are free to fix MRP but need to reduce it to the extent of subsidy. Even as the subsidy remains unchanged, rising costs mean ever-increasing MRPs. The Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (DoAC) - in consultation with states - assesses the requirement of fertilisers for each cropping season - kharif (April to September) and rabi (October to March). The Department of Fertilisers (DoF) prepares an agreed supply plan to cover all the urea requirements from domestic production and import. The states allocate all of the urea arrivals and track disbursement up to the district level.

The DoF has developed a mobile and a web application - a mobile Fertiliser Monitoring System (m-FMS) that provides information



AT A FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL, LEAKAGES ARE INHERENT IN THE WAY THE ADMINISTRATION OF FERTILISER SUBSIDIES IS DESIGNED. THE GOVERNMENT ASKS MANUFACTURERS TO SELL FERTILISER AT A LOW PRICE — A PRICE IT THINKS FARMERS CAN AFFORD

on stock, sale and receipt of fertilisers till the last retail point. The total expenditure on fertiliser subsidy - on both urea and non-urea fertilisers put together - is around Rs 200,000 crore annually. Now, when the Government talks of leakage and diversion, we are reminded of the Economic Survey 2015-16 which said as much as 24 per cent of the subsidy is spent on inefficient producers, 41 per cent is diverted to non-agricultural uses including smuggling to neighbouring countries and 24 per cent is consumed by larger, presumably richer farmers. That leaves a tiny 11 per cent going to small and marginal farmers who constitute the vast majority i.e. nearly 86 per cent of the total number of farmers.

At a fundamental level, leakages are inherent in the way the administration of fertiliser subsidies is designed. The Government asks manufacturers to sell fertiliser at a low price - a price it thinks farmers can afford. Having sold at this price, the latter claims from the former an amount equal to the excess of the cost of supply over it as a subsidy. The subsidy could have been given to the farmer directly say, by depositing the money in her bank account. But, for decades, successive Governments have preferred to route it through manufacturers. Having to deal with a handful of manufacturers instead of crores of farmers (that would have been the case if the subsidy were to be given to them directly), they have found this arrangement convenient. But, there is a big negative to it. Since the subsidy is embodied in the MRP (albeit low), the subsidised fertiliser product must reach the farmer and be used only for growing the crop. If it doesn't reach, then the benefit of subsidy is enjoyed by the person who grabs it.

After leaving the factory or the port (in case of imported stuff), fertiliser

travel a long distance moving by rails/roads to reach storage points in the district and further movement to retail outlets for sale to the farmers.

In the initial years of the fertiliser pricing and subsidy scheme (it was introduced in 1977 for urea and 1980 for other fertilisers), manufacturers were given the bulk of the subsidy on the 'dispatch' of the material from the factory. In due course, the Government shifted to disbursing 95 per cent of the subsidy to urea producers and 85 per cent to producers of non-urea on receipt of material at a district's railhead point/approved godown (balance 5 per cent/15 per cent was paid on confirmation of sales to farmers by states).

In March 2018, the Government made disbursement of subsidies to manufacturers conditional upon actual sales to farmers and these getting registered on point-of-sale (PoS) machines. But, this by itself offers no guarantee as a diversion can still happen at the retail level all the more because anybody - including non-farmers - can buy any quantity through PoS machines. All that he needs to do is to furnish his unique identity or Aadhaar number.

Meanwhile, in 2015, the Government issued an order mandating all manufacturers/importers to neem-coat all of the urea supplies. The logic was simple. Upon neem coating, it is rendered unfit for use in chemical industries; hence the manufacturers/dealers will have no incentive to divert. But, this would happen only when coating is done. This is where the rubber meets the road. Policing of a mammoth quantity across the length and breadth of the country is well-nigh impossible.

Now, apart from barring non-farmers from purchasing subsidised fertilisers, the Government wants to

link the purchase of fertilisers with the size of the land the farmer owns. The motive behind this is to make sure that her purchase is capped at the quantum required for growing the crop only; and that she doesn't get away with excess and make money from selling at a much higher price (albeit for industrial use). The farmers' land/crop data will be loaded on her biometric card. When she goes to the retailer to purchase her requirement for the season, the PoS machine will register the number of fertiliser bags that correspond to the data embedded in the card.

The retailer will deliver this number, not what she demands orally. The idea has massive appeal. But, making it work poses a daunting challenge. The Government will need to have data - on land holding, crops grown, nutrient status of the soil etc on over 140 million farm households. Apart from ensuring 'full coverage', it will have to focus on the 'accuracy' of the data as well as the 'accuracy' of the calculation as any incorrect figure or miscalculation could result in either shortfall or excess delivery of bags. Further, this data has to be updated on real-time basis to account for the impact of changes in the weather/rainfall on fertiliser requirements. This apart, the Government is missing the woods for the tree.

The real reason behind leakage is control of the MRP at an artificially low level. When urea sells at one-tenth the cost of supplying it, dubious players have a huge incentive to divert and rake in a moolah. They will do every bit to circumvent the rules resulting in the misuse of subsidies. The way forward is to end control on fertiliser prices and let the subsidy be given 'directly' to the farmers using DBT mode.

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

The idea of rotating PMs is as ridiculous as it is impractical

INDIA bloc leaders face sharp criticism for it and are cautioned against the perilous consequences of such a move

Leaders of INDI Alliance who are struggling to save secularism, pluralism and the Constitution from the shackles of Fascist, Communalist and BJP should bear in mind that Indians are not village idiots. The move to have a new Prime Minister every year for the five-year tenure of the next Lok Sabha is a sure recipe for disaster. One is at a loss for words to explain what would happen to this country in the eventuality of M K Stalin, Supriya Sule, Mamata Banerjee, Mallikarjun Kharge/Rahul Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav and Tejaswi Yadav become Prime Minister every year for one day. The post of Indian Prime Minister is not something that could be played around as per the whims and fancies of politi-



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

cians who do not have any links with the grassroots-level electorate of the country. Indira Gandhi, who ruled the country for almost 15 years was a creation of the media and she had an edge over others because she was a woman. There was a more competent woman at that time and her name was Tarkeshwari Sinha. The modern Indian history, altered and tampered with by Left historians may not have

much information about the lady, a postgraduate in economics from the London School of Economics who rose through the Congress cadre and became the deputy finance minister of the country during the tenure of Jawaharlal Nehru. Sinha had no political godfathers and it was almost certain that she would have reached the top position if she had not earned the wrath of the Royal Family of New Delhi. Even Indira Gandhi was not free from basic human natures like jealousy and inferiority complex. Sinha was the glamour girl of yesteryears and was at home in Hindi and Queen's English. With the passing away of Nehru, Sinha was left all alone and there was no one to prop up the lady who stood for free

enterprises while the Nehruvians were pontificating mixed economy and socialism and crony capitalism. Many leaders in the undivided Congress party were the right persons for the top job. Over the decades, the Congress disintegrated and degenerated and the likes of Devkant Barooah and Arjun Singh emerged as power brokers and wheeler-dealers. We had Pranab Mukherjee, a politician and gentleman, whose erudition and leadership qualities were heads and shoulders above others. But top leadership never trusted or liked Mukherjee, Madhava Rao Scindia, Rajesh Pilot or Jeetendra Prasad who were all right people for the right job. Congress became weaker by the day and the

Grand Old Party ended up as a doormat for the likes of the DMK, RJD, AAP and even a letterhead organisation by the name of MDMK and its leader Vayyapuri Gopala Samy (Vaiko). Before the 1990s, Congress used to dictate terms to the above-mentioned outfits regarding the seats it would allocate to them. Now it is the other way round. Lalu Prasad Yadav and his family would decide the number of seats to be contested by the GOP from Bihar while the Samajwadi Party leaders would have the last word in the seats to be contested by it. The roadshow held by Rahul Gandhi at Wayanad as a precursor to his filing nomination was a harbinger of the annihilation of the Congress Party. Rahul Gandhi, the

great-grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru who described the Muslim League as a dead horse in 1952, was forced not to display the party flag throughout the rally or even when he filed the nomination papers. That was the price dictated by the Sultans of Malappuram and the scion of Congress Party had no other option other than accepting their condition. One is reminded of the great Malayalam novel Oru Deshathinte Katha (The Story of a Locale) written in 1971 by S K Pottekkat. This autobiographical novel was honoured with the Jnanapeetha Award in 1982 and remains one of the ten best novels written in Malayalam. This novel tells the story of Sreedharan and the village Athirappadam where

he grew up. One of the characters in this great work is Kunhikkelu Melan, a scion of the Kelancherry Family, the locale's biggest and most powerful clan. This family-owned thousands of hectares of land, many hills, mountains and even forests. Kunhikkelu Melan, born with a silver spoon in his mouth squandered the entire property for wine and women. When he was left with nothing other than the castle of Kelancherry, he started selling the doors and windows of the ancestral home to meet the expenses for his sundowners. "Doors and windows are installed to save the house from robbers and dacoits. If there is nothing valuable in the house, what is the use of doors and windows," Melan told the villagers when he was asked

why he was selling off the chattels. India needs a good, sincere and honest leader and we are willing to accept dictatorship to a certain level. Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, who enjoyed limitless power did not end up as despots. Richard Nixon, Margaret Thatcher, Charles De Gaulle, Francois Mitterrand and even Fidel Castro were loved by our Opposition leaders despite the aversion of these leaders to democracy and secularism. A politician should aspire for power. There is nothing abnormal in it. But he should have the ability and capability to occupy that position.

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

Police clear pro-Palestinian protesters from Columbia University

AP ■ NEW YORK
 Duelling groups of protesters clashed on Wednesday at the University of California, Los Angeles, grappling in fist-fights and shoving, kicking and using sticks to beat one another. Hours earlier, police carrying riot shields burst into a building at Columbia University that pro-Palestinian protesters took over and broke up a demonstration that had paralysed the school while inspiring others. After a couple hours of one-and-off scuffles between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli demonstrators at UCLA, police wearing helmets and face shields arrived, formed lines and began to slowly corral some of the protesters. That appeared to quell the violence. Police have swept through campuses across the US over the last two weeks in response to protests calling on universities to stop doing business with Israel or companies that

support the war in Gaza. There have been confrontations and more than 1,000 arrests. In rarer instances, university officials and protest leaders struck agreements to restrict the disruption to campus life and upcoming commencement ceremonies. The clashes at UCLA took place around a tent encampment built by pro-Palestinian protesters, who erected barricades and plywood for protection — while counter-protesters tried to pull them down. People threw chairs and at one point a group piled on a person who lay on the ground, kicking and beating them with sticks until others pulled them out of the scum. It was not clear how many people might be injured. Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass called the violence “absolutely abhorrent and inexcusable” in a spot on social media platform X and said officers from the Los Angeles Police Department were on the scene.

Officers from the California Highway Patrol also appeared to be there. The university said it had requested help. Security was tightened Tuesday at the campus after officials said there were “physical altercations” between factions of protesters. Late that same day, New York City officers entered Columbia’s campus after the university requested help, according to a statement released by a spokesperson. A tent encampment on the school’s grounds was cleared, along with Hamilton Hall where a stream of officers used a ladder to climb through a second-floor window. Protesters seized the hall at the Ivy League school about 20 hours earlier. “After the University learned overnight that Hamilton Hall had been occupied, vandalized, and blockaded, we were left with no choice,” the school said. “The decision to reach out to

the NYPD was in response to the actions of the protesters, not the cause they are championing. We have made it clear that the life of campus cannot be endlessly interrupted by protesters who violate the rules and the law.” Police spokesman Carlos Nieves said he had no immediate reports of any injuries. The arrests occurred after protesters shrugged off an earlier ultimatum to abandon the encampment Monday or be suspended and unfolded as other universities stepped up efforts to end demonstrations that were inspired by Columbia. Fabien Lugo, a first-year accounting student who said he was not involved in the protests, said he opposed the university’s decision to call in police. “This is too intense,” he said. “It feels like more of an escalation than a de-escalation.” Just blocks away from Columbia, at The City College

of New York, demonstrators were in a standoff with police outside the public college’s main gate. Video posted on social media by news reporters on the scene late Tuesday showed officers putting some people to the ground and shoving others as they cleared people from the street and sidewalks. After police arrived, officers lowered a Palestinian flag atop the City College flagpole, balled it up and tossed it to the ground before raising an American flag. Brown University, another member of the Ivy League, reached an agreement Tuesday with protesters on its Rhode Island campus. Demonstrators said they would close their encampment in exchange for administrators taking a vote to consider divestment from Israel in October. The compromise appeared to mark the first time a US college has agreed to vote on divestment in the wake of the protests.



Israeli soldiers are seen at a staging ground near the border with the Gaza Strip, in southern Israel, Wednesday. AP/PTI

Blinken urges Israel and Hamas to move ahead with ceasefire deal

AP ■ TEL AVIV
 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was meeting with Israeli leaders on Wednesday in his push for a cease-fire deal between Israel and Hamas, saying “the time is now” for an agreement that would free hostages and bring a pause in the nearly seven months of war in Gaza. He said Hamas would bear the blame for any failure to get a deal off the ground. Blinken is on his seventh visit to the region since the war erupted in October in his bid to secure what’s been an elusive deal between Israel and Hamas that could avert an Israeli incursion into the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are sheltering. The current round of talks appears to be serious, but the sides remain far apart on one key issue — whether the war should end as part of an emerging deal.



“We are determined to get a cease-fire that brings the hostages home and to get it now, and the only reason that that wouldn’t be achieved is because of Hamas,” Blinken told Israel’s ceremonial President Isaac Herzog at a meeting in Tel Aviv. “There is a proposal on the table, and as we’ve said, no delays, no excuses. The time is now,” he said.

Blinken said the deal would also allow much needed food, medicine and water to get into Gaza, where the war has sparked a humanitarian crisis and displaced much of the territory’s population. After meeting with Herzog and also with families of Americans held by Hamas at his hotel, Blinken briefly greeted several dozen demonstrators calling for an immediate hostage release deal on the sidewalk outside. Chanting “SOS, USA, only you can save the day” and “In Blinken we trust, bring them home to us,” the protestors urged him to make their case to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Blinken will meet Netanyahu and his War Cabinet later Wednesday. Blinken told the families that there was a very strong proposal on the table and that Hamas needs to say yes to it. “That is our determination, and we will not rest, we will not stop until you’re reunited

with your loved ones,” he said. His comments came on the last leg of his regional visit, with previous stops in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, where he urged Hamas to accept the latest proposal, calling it “extraordinarily generous” on Israel’s part. According to the State Department, he will also visit an Israeli port where aid for Gaza is entering. The United States has staunchly supported Israel’s war since Hamas’ unprecedented attack on October 7 into southern Israel. But it has grown increasingly critical of the staggering toll borne by Palestinian civilians in Gaza and has been especially outspoken against Israel’s plan to invade Rafah, Gaza’s southernmost city where some 1.5 million Palestinians have fled from fighting elsewhere in the territory, saying that any major offensive there would bring potential harm to civilians and should be avoided.

Workers and activists across Asia and Europe hold May Day rallies

AP ■ SEOUL
 Workers, activists and others in Asian capitals and European cities took to the streets on Wednesday to mark May Day with protests over rising prices and government labour policies and calls for greater labour rights. May Day, which falls on May 1, is observed in many countries to celebrate workers’ rights. May Day events have also given many an opportunity to air general economic grievances or political demands. Police in Istanbul detained dozens of people who tried to reach the central Taksim Square in defiance of a government ban on marking Labour Day at the landmark location. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government has long declared Taksim off-limits for rallies and demonstrations on security grounds, but some political parties and trade unions have vowed to march to the square, which holds symbolic value for labour unions. In

1977, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a May Day celebration at Taksim, causing a stampede and killing 34 people. On Wednesday, police erected barricades and sealed off all routes leading to the central Istanbul square. Public transport in the area was also restricted. Only a small group of trade union representatives was permitted to enter the square to lay a wreath at a monument in memory of victims of the 1977 incident. Riot police apprehended some 30 members of the left-wing People’s Liberation Party who tried to break through the barriers. In Indonesia, workers vowed anger at a new law they said violates their rights and hurts their welfare, and demanded protections for migrant workers abroad and a minimum wage raise. About 50,000 workers from Jakarta’s satellite cities of Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi were expected to join May Day marches in the capital, said Said Iqbal, the president of the Confederation of Indonesian

Trade Unions. They gathered amid a tight police presence near the National Monument park, waving the colourful flags of labour groups and chanting slogans against the Job Creation Law and loosened outsourcing rules during a march to Jakarta’s main sports stadium, Gelora Bung Karno. “With the enactment of this law, our future is uncertain because many problems arise in wages, severance pay and the contract system,” said Isbandi Anggono, a protester. Indonesia’s parliament last year ratified a government regulation that replaces a controversial law on job creation, but critics said it still benefits businesses. The law was intended to cut bureaucracy as part of President Joko Widodo’s efforts to attract more investment to the country, which is Southeast Asia’s largest economy. In Seoul, the South Korean capital, thousands of protesters sang, waved flags and shouted pro-labour slogans at the start of their rally on Wednesday. Organisers said

their rally was primarily meant to step up their criticism of what they call anti-labour policies pursued by the conservative government led by President Yoon Suk Yeol. “In the past two years under the Yoon Suk Yeol government, the lives of our labourers have plunged into despair,” Yang Kyung-soo, leader of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, which organised the rally, said in a speech. “We can’t overlook the Yoon Suk Yeol government. We’ll bring them down from power for ourselves.” KCTU union members decried Yoon’s December veto of a bill aimed at limiting companies’ rights to seek compensation for damages caused by strikes by labour unions. They also accuse Yoon’s government of handling the 2022 strikes by truckers too aggressively and insulting construction sector workers whom authorities believed were involved in alleged irregular activities.

24 killed in China highway collapse

Beijing (PTI): At least 24 people were killed when a section of a highway collapsed early Wednesday, the start of a five-day long Labour Day holiday, in China’s rain-hit Guangdong province. The cave-in occurred at around 2am in Dabu County of Guangdong’s northern Meizhou City. Nearly 18 metres of the mountainous highway crumbled into the forested slope below, trapping 20 vehicles and 54 passengers in all, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported, quoting a local government statement. The official statement said 30 victims had been sent to hospital, while around 500 public security, emergency response, firefighting, health and sanitation and other workers were taking part in the rescue work. The condition of the hospitalised patients was “not life-threatening at the moment”, the statement said, but did not specify the level of their injuries. The reason for the collapse has yet to be declared and

the matter is under investigation, the Post reported. The accident occurred as China began a five-day break for Labour Day, one of the four major holiday and travel periods for the country when highways are toll-free and see heavy traffic. Footage and pictures shared by local news outlets showed flames and smoke rising from the collapsed section, while charred cars were visible on the gouged-out slope. The stricken highway links Guangdong to southeastern Fujian province. State-run Xinhua news agency reported that 31 people have been sent to hospital for treatment after a road cave-in on an expressway in south China’s Guangdong Province in which 18 vehicles were trapped. The cave-in happened around 2:10 a.m. on a section of the Meizhou-Dabu Expressway in the city of Meizhou, according to the government of Meizhou.

Portuguese ship hit in Arabian Sea raises Houthi rebel concerns

AP ■ JERUSALEM
 A Portuguese-flagged container ship came under attack by a drone in the far reaches of the Arabian Sea, corresponding with a claim by Yemen’s Houthi rebels that they assaulted the ship there, authorities said Tuesday. The attack on the MSC Orion, occurring some 600 kilometres (375 miles) off the coast of Yemen, appeared to be the first confirmed deep-sea assault claimed by the Houthis since they began targeting ships in November. It suggests the Houthis — or potentially their main benefactor Iran — may have the ability to strike into the distances of the Indian Ocean as the rebels previously threatened in their ongoing campaign over Israel’s war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The attack happened last Friday, according to the Joint Maritime Information Center, which operates as part of the US-led Combined Maritime Forces in the Mideast. After the attack, the crew dis-

covered debris apparently from a drone on board, the center said. The ship “sustained only minor damage and all crew on board are safe,” the center said. Ship-tracking satellite data analyzed by The Associated Press put the container ship, bound for Salalah, Oman, in the area of the attack on Saturday. The MSC Orion has been associated with London-based Zodiac Maritime, which is part of Israeli billionaire Eyal Ofer’s Zodiac Group. It was operating on behalf of the Mediterranean Shipping Co, a Naples, Italy-based firm. Zodiac referred questions to MSC, which did not respond to a request for comment Tuesday. The Joint Maritime Information Center assesses “that MSC Orion was likely targeted due to (its) perceived Israeli affiliation,” the center said in a report. Brig Gen Yahya Saree, a military spokesman for Yemen’s Houthi rebels, claimed the attack on the Orion early Tuesday. He did not explain why it took the rebels days to acknowledge the attack.

The attack immediately raised questions about how the Houthis could have carried out an assault hundreds of kilometers (miles) from the shores of Yemen on a moving target. Their primary area of attack so far has been in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connect the two waterways key for international trade. Those are close to Yemen’s shoreline — unlike the site of the MSC Orion attack. The Houthis are not known to operate an expeditionary naval fleet, nor do they have access to satellites or other sophisticated means of controlling long-distance drones. Iran, which has been supplying the Shiite rebels in their years-long war in Yemen, has been assessed by the West and experts to have been behind at least one complex attack claimed by the Houthis — the 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia’s oil fields that temporarily halved the kingdom’s energy production. Iran also routinely operates military vessels in the Arabian Sea.

UK claims drastic drop in student dependents after visa crackdown

PTI ■ LONDON
 The UK government has welcomed a “significant fall” in the number of dependents, or close family members such as a spouse and children, accompanying overseas students after its crackdown on student visas effective from early this year. In an update issued on Tuesday for the period of January to March this year compared to the same period in 2023, the Home Office said that dependents had drastically fallen by almost 80 per cent amid over 26,000 fewer student visa applications made. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in a statement on social media that the figures mean that his changes to the country’s visa system were working. “The number of students bringing family members and dependents to the UK was too high. This wasn’t fair,” he said. “Our changes are working - stu-

dent dependant numbers are now down by 80 per cent,” he said. Under rules effective from January, most international students except those on research courses cannot bring along family members. They can no longer switch their visa either before completing their course, which the government claimed misused the student visa as a “backdoor” to work in the UK amid a wider Home Office clampdown on institutions “selling immigration not education”. Indians have led the international student visa tally in recent years and these figures indicate that a downward trend noted earlier this year is likely to mean fewer Indian students choosing UK universities. “Ever-spilling numbers were eroding the British people’s confidence in our immigration system, burdening public services and suppressing wages,” said UK Home Secretary James Cleverly.

Teenager arrested in school attack in England

London (PTI): A 17-year-old boy has been arrested following reports of three people being injured at a school in Sheffield, northern England, on Wednesday. South Yorkshire Police said it was called to the Birley Community College and officers remain at the site. Minor injuries have been reported from the school premises. “Officers are at the scene after responding to reports of an incident involving a sharp object at the school on Birley Lane at around 8.50 am. Two adults were checked over at the scene after suffering minor injuries,” South Yorkshire Police said in a statement. “A child was also checked over after being assaulted,” the police said. The 17-year-old boy has been arrested on suspicion of attempted murder and remains in police custody. Police said its officers will remain at the scene throughout the day to provide assurances to those in the school and the local community.

COVID-19 sequencing scientist allowed lab access after protest

AP ■ BEIJING
 The first scientist to publish a sequence of the COVID-19 virus in China said he was allowed back into his lab after he spent days locked outside, sitting in protest. Zhang Yongzhen wrote in an online post on Wednesday, just past midnight, that the medical center that hosts his lab had “tentatively agreed” to allow him and his team to return and continue their research for the time being. “Now, team members can enter and leave the laboratory freely,” Zhang wrote in a post on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. He added that he is negotiating a plan to relocate the lab in a way that doesn’t disrupt his team’s work with the Shanghai Public Health

Clinical Center, which hosts Zhang’s lab. Zhang and his team were suddenly told they had to leave their lab for renovations on Thursday, setting off the dispute, he said in an earlier post that was later deleted. On Sunday, Zhang began a sit-in protest outside his lab after he found he was locked out, a sign of continuing pressure on Chinese scientists conducting research on the coronavirus. Zhang sat outside on flattened cardboard in drizzling rain, and members of his team unfurled a banner that read “Resume normal scientific research work,” pictures posted online show. News of the protest spread widely on Chinese social media, putting pressure on local authorities. In an online statement

Monday, the Shanghai Public Health Clinical Center said that Zhang’s lab was closed for “safety reasons” while being renovated. It added that it had provided Zhang’s team an alternative laboratory space. But Zhang responded the same day his team wasn’t offered an alternative until after they were notified of their eviction, and the lab offered didn’t meet safety standards for conducting their research, leaving his team in limbo. Zhang’s dispute with his host institution was the latest in a series of setbacks, demotions and ousters since the virologist published the sequence in January 2020 without state approval. Beijing has sought to control information related to the virus since it first emerged.

Fitness influencer in Saudi gets 11-year sentence for terrorism

Jerusalem (AP): Saudi Arabia confirmed in a letter to the United Nations that a female fitness instructor who was popular online received an 11-year prison sentence but did not specify any of her alleged “terrorism offenses.” Though the kingdom insisted the case had nothing to do with the instructor’s online presence, human rights activists say the conviction levied against Manahel al-Otaibi shows the limits of expression in Saudi Arabia. It also highlights another side of the kingdom, now run day-to-day by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who under his 88-year-old father King Salman has dramatically liberalized some aspects of women’s lives

in the country. “Her charges related solely to her choice of clothing and expression of her views online, including calling on social media for an end to Saudi Arabia’s male guardianship system, publishing videos of herself wearing indecent clothes and going to the shops without wearing an abaya,” said Amnesty International and ALQST, a London-based group advocating for human rights in Saudi Arabia that’s followed al-Otaibi’s case. The human rights organization issued joint statements on Tuesday about al-Otaibi’s prison sentence, first revealed in Saudi letter dated January 25 and sent to the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

London mayoral hopeful Tarun Ghulati determined to fight crime

PTI ■ LONDON
 Tarun Ghulati, London’s Indian-origin candidate for Mayor in the local elections on Thursday, has said the brutal sword attack on the streets of the city in which a 14-year-old boy lost his life, has strengthened his resolve that the British capital needs a crime fighter to lead it. On the eve of the election, the Delhi-born businessman challenging Sadiq Khan from winning a record third term in office said that Londoners have been failed by the main political parties and need a new dedicated professional to fight their corner in all areas. The election comes two days after a 36-year-old man — now in police custody — went on a stabbing rampage in the



Hainault area of east London on Tuesday morning, killing one and injuring four others including two police officers. “The brutal attack on the streets of my beloved city, in which an innocent little boy lost his life, has only strengthened my resolve that what London needs is a dedicated crime-fighting Mayor. I am in

the race to offer my fellow Londoners that choice tomorrow,” said Ghulati. Safety on the streets of the city is among his major electoral priorities, with visible community policing and more officers patrolling on the beat on the agenda. “It is about having enough bobbies on the beat, having the resources for police officers to do their jobs, which means making the streets safe for women to walk at night, with muggers and burglars being caught and punished,” he said. The 63-year-old is standing as an Independent candidate among 13 contestants in the fray for the local elections on Thursday, when Londoners will vote for their Mayor and also for members of the London Assembly.

China's 3rd aircraft carrier begins sea trials amid SCS tensions

PTI ■ BEIJING
 China's third aircraft carrier, the Fujian, the most advanced homemade warship, began its maiden sea trials on Wednesday as Beijing ramped up its naval power amid increasing tensions with the US in the disputed South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The ship left Shanghai Jiangnan Shipyard on Wednesday morning for the sea trials, primarily to test the reliability and stability of the aircraft carrier's propulsion and electrical systems, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported. Since its launch in June 2022, the Fujian has completed its mooring trials, outfitting work and equipment adjustments. It has met the technical requirements for sea trials. Ahead of the trials, China has imposed maritime traffic controls around the mouth of the

Yangtze River where the Jiangnan shipyard is located for "military activities". The traffic controls would last till May 9, the report said. According to the previous official media reports, China plans to have five to six aircraft carriers by 2035 for strategic deployment in the disputed South China Sea, where Beijing seeks to assert its claims over most of the vast area, the Taiwan Strait which separates the Chinese mainland and Taiwan and the Indian Ocean where Beijing is increasing its power projection. Elaborating on China's strategy in acquiring aircraft carriers, Senior Col. (ret) Zhou Bo, who spent four decades with the People's Liberation Army (PLA), said China sees their importance for possible war far from home. "I cannot speculate on how many carriers China will need. But I can tell you that aircraft

carriers are primarily not for coastal fights. They are for a possible war far from home," Bo, who is a senior fellow with the Centre for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University, told the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post in a recent interview. "People may say that one day, when China has to retreat from peaceful means to resolve the Taiwan issue, we could use aircraft carriers," he said. "Of course they are useful, but they are more useful in our power projection in the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, or Atlantic Ocean - anywhere far from our waters - because they are platforms for the ships and aircraft that make us powerful," he said. Currently, the Chinese navy is involved in a standoff with the US-backed Philippines naval ships in the South China Sea. The Philippines is trying to

assert its claim over the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea which is strongly resisted by China. China claims most of the South China Sea. The Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have counterclaims. China names its aircraft carriers after its provinces. Fujian borders the Taiwan Strait. The other two carriers were named after Liaoning and the Shandong provinces. China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, was a refit of the Soviet-era ship commissioned in 2012 followed by the indigenously built 2nd aircraft carrier Shandong in 2019. Chinese official media said Fujian is the "first fully domestically developed and constructed" aircraft carrier with an electromagnetic aircraft launch system (EMALS) similar to that of the American aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford.

Drone footage reveals devastation in Ukrainian city under Russian assault

AP ■ KYIV
 Months of relentless Russian artillery pounding have devastated a strategic city in eastern Ukraine, new drone footage obtained by The Associated Press has shown, with barely a building left intact, homes and municipal offices charred, and a town that once had a population of 12,000 now left all but deserted. The footage shows the community of Chasiv Yar — which is set amid green fields and woodland — pounded into an apocalyptic vista. The massive destruction is reminiscent of the cities of Bakhmut and Avdiivka, which Ukraine yielded after months of bombardment and huge losses for both sides. The strategically important city has been under relentless attack by Russian forces for months. Capturing it would give Russia control of a hilltop from which it can attack other cities that



form the backbone of Ukraine's eastern defenses. Russia launched waves of assaults on foot and in armoured vehicles at Chasiv Yar's outnumbered Ukrainian troops, who have run desperately short of ammunition while waiting for the US and other allies to send in fresh supplies. Rows of mid-rise apartment blocks in Chasiv Yar have been blackened by blasts, punched through with holes or reduced to piles of timber and masonry.

Houses and civic buildings are also heavily damaged. The golden dome of a church remains intact but the building appears badly damaged. No soldiers or civilians were anywhere to be seen in the footage shot Monday and exclusively obtained by the AP, apart from a lone man walking down the middle of a road between wrecked structures. The destruction underscores Russia's scorched-earth tactics throughout more than two years of war, as its troops have sought to advance, killing and displacing thousands of civilians. Chasiv Yar is located on high ground, offering Russia the possibility of a platform it can use to push towards larger cities that form Ukraine's defensive belt in the eastern Donetsk region. Capturing Chasiv Yar would set the stage for a potentially broader Russian offensive that Ukrainian officials say could come as early as May.

Indonesia's Ruang Volcano erupts again, closing schools, airports

AP ■ MANADO
 Indonesia's Mount Ruang volcano spewed more hot clouds on Wednesday after an eruption the previous day forced the closure of schools and airports, pelted villages with volcanic debris and prompted hundreds of people to flee. Seven airports, including Sam Ratulangi international airport in Manado, the capital of North Sulawesi province, remained closed after Tuesday's eruption, the second in two weeks. Schools were shut to protect children from volcanic ash. The volcano is on tiny Ruang Island, part of the Sitaro islands chain. The Indonesian geological agency urged people to stay at least 7 kilometers (4 miles) from the volcano's crater. It warned people on nearby Tagulandang Island, the closest to the volcano, of possible super-heated volcanic clouds from a further eruption and a tsunami if the mountain's volcanic dome collapses into the sea. Video released by the National Search and Rescue Agency showed about a hundred villagers from Tagulandang Island being evacuated on a navy ship. Hundreds of others were waiting at a local port to be evacuated. Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari said 11,000 to 12,000 people living within a 7-kilometre danger zone would be taken to government shelters. Tuesday's eruption darkened the sky and peppered several



villages with ash, grit and rocks. No casualties were reported. After Mount Ruang's April 17 eruption, authorities warned that a subsequent eruption might collapse part of the volcano into the sea. Ruang is among about 130 active volcanoes in Indonesia. The archipelagic nation is prone to volcanic eruptions and earthquakes because of its location on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", a series of fault lines stretching from the western coast of the Americas through Japan and Southeast Asia.

Islamabad (PTI): Authorities in Pakistan have decided to block the mobile phone SIM cards of over half a million tax defaulters as part of the drive to take action against tax evaders. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) in an Income Tax General Order (ITGO) said the mobile SIMs of 506,671 individuals, who failed to file their tax returns for 2023, will stay blocked until restored by the FBR or the Commissioner Inland Revenue having authority over the person. It ordered the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and all telecom providers to immediately implement the Income Tax General Order (ITGO) no 01 of 2024 to block their SIMs and file a compliance report by May 15, Dawn News reported. An official source said the FBR has identified 2.4 million potential taxpayers who did not exist on the tax rolls. Notices were subsequently issued to these individuals. The FBR has

Pak to block 500K+ mobile sim cards for tax non-compliance

selected over 0.5 million individuals out of the 2.4 million for SIM blockade based on one criterion: they must have declared taxable income in one of the past three years and these individuals did not file their returns for tax year 2023. According to the Active Taxpayers List (ATL), the FBR received 4.2 million taxpayers until March 1, 2024, as against 3.8 million returns received during the same period of last year. This shows a marginal increase during the period under review. In tax year 2022, FBR received a total of 5.9 million income tax returns. According to the FBR official, SIMs will be automatically restored for persons who file tax returns for 2023. Every Monday, FBR updates its ATL listings. Every Tuesday, the names of persons who appear on the ATL list will be identified and submitted to the PTA and telecom companies for restoration.

Wickremesinghe to face his own colleague in presidential polls

PTI ■ COLOMBO
 President Ranil Wickremesinghe, if stood for re-election in the presidential poll due later in the year, may have a face-up with his cabinet colleague Wijeyadasa Rajapakse, who is currently serving as the Minister of Justice. Former president Maithripala Sirisena, the chairman of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), told reporters on Wednesday that Rajapakse, 65, would be his party's candidate in the presidential election scheduled to be held before November 15 this year. "He will be the most suitable candidate from SLFP", Sirisena said. Rajapakse is a member of the now fragmented Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party, the home for members of the United People's Freedom Alliance loyal to its former leader Mahinda Rajapaksa. A part of the SLPP is current-



ly in alignment with 75-year-old Wickremesinghe while another section supports the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) — a political alliance led by Leader of the Opposition Sajith Premadasa. The SLPP Rajapaksa loyalists are unlikely to field a candidate as the party has been struggling since the 2022 mass protests. The demonstrators blamed the erstwhile powerful

Rajapaksa family for the island nation's unprecedented economic crisis. Wickremesinghe, who is yet to announce his candidacy, is banking on cross-party support for his re-election to implement an economic reform programme to pull the country out of bankruptcy. The main opposition leader Sajith Premadasa and the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake have already announced their candidature. The SLFP of Sirisena has been in disarray since early April. He was clamped by court order as the leader when he nominated Rajapakse to be the acting chair of the party. Even Rajapakse has a court restraining order to function. The two factions led by Sirisena and the former president Chandrika Kumaratunga are embroiled in a serious legal tangle for the control of the party.

Google, Apple face antitrust threats in US over tech dominance

AP ■ SAN FRANCISCO
 The US Justice Department's double-barrelled antitrust attack on Google's dominant search and Apple's trendsetting iPhone is reviving memories of the epic battle that hobbled Microsoft before it roared back to yet again become the world's most valuable company. The parallels to the Justice Department's landmark antitrust case in 1998 could provide a window into the potential breakthroughs that could be unleashed if regulators succeed in their attempts to crack down on Google and Apple. Federal lawyers have even gone as far as to assert Google and Apple may never have created so many popular products or become as powerful as they are now if Microsoft hadn't been reined in a quarter century ago. In closing arguments of a Washington, DC, trial that began last September, regulators on Thursday will apply the finishing touches to a case

alleging Google has turned its search engine into an illegal monopoly that stifles competition and innovation. The Apple case, which was only filed a month ago, is still years away from its resolution. Although regulators have lodged separate complaints against Google and Apple, the two cases are shadowed by Microsoft's legal saga that began when both those were mere specks on the technology landscape. When they went after Google in October 2020, regulators compared the lucrative deals that the company cut with Apple to lock its search engine into the iPhone and Safari web browser to the same tactics Microsoft deployed in its personal computer software to block competition. And in the antitrust lawsuits that they filed against Apple last month, the Justice Department pointed back to complaints that company co-founder Steve Jobs had raised in 1998 against Microsoft's "dirty tactics" while

urging regulators to take steps to force the PC software maker "to play fair". And that is what the Justice Department did in an antitrust case against Microsoft that caused massive distractions that opened the door for Google's search engine to become the internet's main gateway. It also culminated in a series of concessions that paved the way for Apple to extend the reach of its iTunes music store that increased the popularity of the iPod that spawned the iPhone. The Microsoft case "created new opportunities for innovation in areas that would become critical to the success of Apple's consumer devices and the company itself", the Justice Department crowed in the lawsuit that casts the iPhone as an illegal monopoly. After years of mostly fruitless attempts to compete against Google's search engine and the iPhone under the leadership of Steve Ballmer, Microsoft began to regain its stride when Satya

Nadella became CEO in 2014. Earlier this year, Microsoft's market value hit USD 3 trillion for the first time, surpassing Apple as the world's most valuable company while taking the early lead in artificial intelligence technology that's expected to reshape the world. It's an odd juxtaposition that has thrust regulators into battling two companies they helped create when they caged a colossus now angling to seize the mantle in technology's next frontier. But it's also a tableau that antitrust experts cite as evidence that the system is working to unlock more robust competition that hatches innovations. And then those breakthroughs sometimes serve as the building blocks for new monopolies that must eventually be challenged by regulators, even as fallen empires like Microsoft can still find ways to reinvent themselves. "It's not about an agenda about trying to pursue and destroy companies, it's about trying to

Imran Khan's party faces more objections to intra-party polls

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD
 Pakistan's election commission has taken up another case against jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party, questioning its status as it has not conducted proper elections for five years and has no organisational structure. A five-member bench of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) headed by Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja on Tuesday noted that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) had conducted intra-party elections afresh after Supreme Court and ECP directives but the objections to the polls needed to be clarified, ECP Director General (Political Finance) Masood Akhtar has informed the party without sharing further details. The objections regarding the appointment of the party chairman and its general body meeting were later shared with the respondents, Dawn News reported.



The document shared with Khan's PTI questioned the status of the party, which has not conducted proper elections for five years, and has no organisational structure as well as a poll symbol. The ECP has also asked the party why action should not be taken against the party under Section 208(5) of the Elections Act, 1997. Section 208(5) says: "Where a political party fails to conduct intra-party elections as per given time frame in their con-

stitution, a show-cause notice shall be issued to such political party and if the party fails to comply, then the Commission shall impose a fine which may extend to Rs 200,000 but shall not be less than Rs 100,000." PTI chairman Gohar Khan told reporters outside the ECP office the intra-party election was conducted on March 3 and a notification to this effect was also issued the next day, yet they had not been issued a certificate. Gohar maintained they would respond to any objections raised by the political finance wing of the commission but informed the bench that details of the objections had not been shared with the party. Gohar said the party had already put this information on social media but the ECP simply sent a notice stating that there were objections to the intra-party elections. He added that if the observations or objections were shared with the party, only then they will be able to reply to them

duly. He said there were as many as 175 political parties in Pakistan and none of them held intra-party elections as per the Constitution, "whereas we conducted intra-party elections in the light of the orders of the Election Commission and the Supreme Court". About Sunni Ittehad Council chairman Hamid Raza's warning that party members would quit parliament if PTI founder Imran Khan was not released from jail, the PTI chairman explained that Raza had talked about "considering the option" of resignation. Separately, Gohar on Tuesday announced that his party had finalised Sher Afzal Marwat's name for the slot of all-powerful Public Accounts Committee (PAC) chairman, ending the infighting in the ranks of the former ruling party. The PTI chairman said: "All disputes are over [now] as the party has picked the name of Marwat for the slot."

Taliban rule sparks profits in phones, books, currency exchange

AP ■ KABUL
 Yunis Safi, a businessman in Kabul, knows very well the importance of showing off your phone if you want something done. "In Afghanistan, your phone is your personality," he said, smiling, a jewel-encrusted ring on each hand. One boasts an emerald, the other a fat Russian diamond. "When you go to a meeting with the government, the better your phone, the more they respect you." Safi runs a phone shop in the posh Shar-e-Naw neighborhood. An armed guard stands outside. The iPhone 15 Pro Max adorns the shop shelves, retailing for USD 1,400. He has customers ready to part with this sum of money, which may come as a surprise to some given the country's eco-

nomic woes and more than half the population relying on humanitarian aid to survive. Afghanistan's finances were on shaky ground even before the Taliban seized power in 2021. The budget relied heavily on foreign aid and corruption was rife. The takeover sent Afghanistan's economy into a tailspin, billions in international funds were frozen, and tens of thousands of highly skilled Afghans fled the country and took their money with them. But, even amid difficult conditions, some businesses are making money out of Taliban rule. Women are reduced to customers, however, as authorities have barred them from most jobs, including retail. None of Safi's 78 staff are women. He has tapped into a diverse

consumer base — the ones hungry for the latest iPhone release and those happier with simple handsets, which make up the bulk of his sales and sell for between USD 20 and USD 200. The Taliban used to attack phone towers and threaten telecom companies, accusing them of colluding with United States and other international forces in helping track insurgents' movements through mobile phone signals. Now, they're investing in the 4G mobile networks. The Communications Ministry says 2 million new SIM cards have been issued in the past two years and that subscriber numbers are increasing. Ministry spokesperson Enayatullah Alokozai said the government was plowing USD 100 million

into the telecom sector and had fully restored hundreds of towers. There are 22.7 million active SIM cards in a country of 41 million people. Of these, 10 million are for voice calls and the rest are for mobile internet. According to Trade Ministry figures, phone imports have risen. More than 1,584 tons of phones came into Afghanistan in 2022. Last year, it was 1,895 tons. Safi said he has many Taliban customers and it's the younger ones who prefer iPhones. "Of course they need smartphones. They use social media, they like making videos. The iPhone has better security than Samsung. The camera resolution, processor, memory are all better. Afghans use their smartphones like anyone else."

Safi has the iPhone 15 Pro Max, wears an Apple Watch Ultra and owns three cars. Business was bad immediately after the Taliban takeover but it's improving, Safi said. "The people buying the new release iPhones are the ones with relatives abroad sending money to Afghanistan." Remittances are a lifeline, although they're less than half of what they were before the Taliban took power and the banking sector collapsed. At the raucous Shahzada Market in Kabul, hundreds of money exchangers clutch stacks of the local currency, the Afghani, and noisily hawk their wares. They occupy every floor, stairwell, nook and cranny. Abdul Rahman Zarak, a senior official at the money exchange market, estimates that USD 10

million changes hands daily. The diaspora sends mostly US dollars to families, who exchange it for the Afghani. There used to be more ways to send money to Afghanistan before the Taliban seized control. But there are no more links to SWIFT or international banking and that's a major reason why business is brisk at the market, he said. "The work of money exchangers has increased and strengthened," Zarak said. "Money transfers come from Canada, the US, Europe, Australia, Arab nations and other neighboring countries." Trade becomes hectic during the holidays. During the holy month of Ramadan, 20,000 people visited the market daily and it took more than 90 minutes to enter, he said. "If the sanctions are removed

and the assets are unfrozen, then maybe our business will decrease. But I don't see that happening. Many don't have bank accounts. Unemployment is high, so people send money to Afghanistan. Our business will be needed for years to come." Irfanullah Arif, who runs Haqqani Books, a specialist retailer of Islamic texts, is also upbeat about his fortunes. The majority of his customers are teachers and students at religious schools, or madrassas. There are at least 20,000 madrassas in Afghanistan. The Taliban want to build more. Last year, the supreme leader reportedly ordered the recruitment of 1,00,000 madrassa teachers. While Arif's business suffered like everyone else's in the chaotic aftermath of the

takeover, there was another reason. "All the students left the madrassas and went to work for the (Taliban) government," said Arif. The Taliban's push for religious education has given him some relief. Last year, he sold 25,000 textbooks. But there's a price to pay for success. Arif imports everything and the Taliban are laser-focused on collecting revenue, even on Islamic literature. Arif pays a tax of 170 Afghani (USD 2.36) on a carton of 100 books, the shipping cost for which is 500 Afghani (USD 6.95). Taxes on his bookstore have tripled under Taliban rule. "That's why books are expensive in Afghanistan," he sighed. "With the increase of madrassas, our trade has gone up, but so have the taxes."

GST collection breaches ₹2 lakh crore milestone

April revenues at ₹2.10 lakh crore led by domestic transactions

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Goods and Services Tax collections grew 12.4 per cent to a record high of Rs 2.10 lakh crore in April, driven by increased domestic transactions and imports, raising expectations of next wave of GST reforms after the formation of the new government.

The finance ministry in a statement said that the GST collections breached the milestone of Rs 2 lakh crore in April.

"The Gross Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections hit a record high in April 2024 at Rs 2.10 lakh crore. This represents a significant 12.4 per cent year-on-year growth, driven by a strong increase in domestic transactions (up 13.4 per cent) and imports (up 8.3 per cent)," the ministry said.

The GST revenue, which is basically taxes on goods sold and services rendered, was over Rs 1.78 lakh crore last month, while it was Rs 1.87 lakh crore in April 2023. In April this year, the mop-up under Central GST (CGST) pool stood at Rs 43,846 crore, while State GST (SGST) collection reached Rs 53,538 crore and Integrated GST (IGST) Rs 99,623 crore, including Rs 37,826 crore collected through levies on imported goods. The total Cess collection was registered at Rs 13,260 crore, including Rs 1,008 crore collected on imported goods.

The central government settled Rs 50,307 crore to



CGST and Rs 41,600 crore to SGST from the IGST collection. This translates to a total revenue of Rs 94,153 crore for CGST and Rs 95,138 crore for SGST in April 2024 after regular settlement. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in a post on X (formerly Twitter) said: "There are no dues pending on account of IGST settlement to the states." After accounting for refunds, the net GST revenue for April 2024 stood at Rs 1.92 lakh crore, reflecting an impressive 17.1 per cent growth compared to the number of the same period last year. Tax experts said the robust GST revenues in April reflect a buoyant economy, self compliance by businesses, timely audit and scrutiny, besides enforcement measures taken by the department.

Deloitte India Partner Mahesh Jaising said the consistent buoyancy in GST collections has set the stage for pursuing forward thinking reforms under GST 2.0. PwC India Partner Pratik Jain said with next wave of GST reforms expected after the formation of the new government, the growth (in GST collections) may be further accelerated. It may also enable the government to take bolder decisions such as rate rationalisation or bringing products, such as ATF and natural gas, under GST ambit. According to EY tax Partner Saurabh Agarwal, the GST collection underscores the steadfast resilience of tax system amidst evolving economic landscapes. "The concerted efforts of the GST officials including zero tolerance for non-filers,

coupled with rigorous measures to combat fake invoicing and the registrations has significantly bolstered GST collections in the states' coffers," Agarwal said. Deloitte India Partner M S Mani said significant GST collection increases have been observed across all major producing and consuming states, indicating that it is widespread and not restricted to a few industrial pockets.

Tax Connect Advisory Services LLP Partner Vivek Japan said from July 2017 when GST started with an average monthly revenue of around Rs.0.9 lakh crore to April 2024 when it grossed Rs 2.1 lakh crore, GST revenues have witnessed an approximate growth of 13 per cent per annum on average. Considering inflation of 5 per cent and GDP growth of 7 per cent, there has been an average buoyancy of 1 per cent on an average per annum over the last seven years, Jalan said. Sanjay Chhabria, Senior Director, Indirect Tax at Nexdigm, said the significant rise in domestic transactions can be attributed to consumer spending being focused on beating the summer heat, with purchases like air-conditioners, beverages, as well as increased travel during long vacations from schools and colleges. "This one-time leap is a new benchmark, which reflects robust economic buoyancy and high consumer spending," Chhabria said.

Sebi makes nomination optional for joint mutual fund portfolios

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Capital markets regulator Sebi on Wednesday made the nomination optional for jointly-held mutual fund accounts in a bid to promote ease of doing business.

Additionally, Sebi allowed fund houses to have a single fund manager to oversee commodity and foreign investments. This would reduce the cost of managing the fund.

These came after a working group constituted by Sebi reviewed mutual fund regulations and recommended measures to promote the ease

of doing business. Based on the recommendation of the working group, a public consultation was carried out suggesting the option to make joint mutual fund account nominations optional and permitting fund houses to have a single fund manager to oversee commodity and foreign investments.

"Accordingly, it has been decided that the requirement of nomination ... For mutual funds shall be optional for jointly held mutual fund folios," the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said in a circular. Experts believe that the

relaxation of nomination requirements for joint holders is beneficial as it simplifies the process of nomination by allowing the surviving member to become the nominee. This streamlines the transmission process and reduces hassle in such situations. Later, the last surviving member can assign a nominee.

The regulator has set June 30, 2024, as the deadline for all existing individual mutual fund holders to nominate or opt out of nomination. If they fail to comply, their accounts will be frozen for withdrawals. In a separate circular, the regulator has eased the current

provision with respect to dedicated fund managers.

Sebi said that for commodity-based funds such as Gold ETFs (exchange traded funds), Silver ETFs and other funds participating in the commodities market, the appointment of a dedicated fund manager would be optional.

Also, the appointment of a dedicated fund manager for making the overseas investments would be optional. The appointment of a single fund manager for domestic and overseas/commodity funds is intended to reduce the cost of managing the fund.

ATF price hiked marginally, commercial LPG rate reduced by ₹19 per cylinder

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Jet fuel or ATF price on Wednesday was hiked by a marginal 0.7 per cent while rates of commercial LPG used by establishments such as hotels and restaurants was cut by Rs 19 per cylinder in line with international prices.

Aviation turbine fuel (ATF) price was hiked by Rs 749.25 per kilolitre, or 0.7 per cent, to Rs 101,642.88 per kl in the national capital, according to a price notification of state-owned fuel retailers. The increase reverses the marginal 0.5 per cent cut effected on April 1.

Rates in Mumbai on Wednesday were increased to Rs 95,173.70 per kl from Rs 94,466.41.

Prices differ from state to state depending on the incidence of local taxes. Alongside, oil firms also cut



the price of commercial LPG by Rs 19 to Rs 1,745.50 for a 19-kg cylinder. This is the second monthly reduction in rates. Prices were on April 1 reduced by Rs 30.5 per 19-kg cylinder. Rates of the cooking gas used

in domestic households, however, remained unchanged at Rs 803 per 14.2-kg cylinder.

April 1 was the first reduction in commercial LPG prices since January. Rates had gone up Rs 14 per cylinder on February 1 and Rs 25.5 on March 1.

State-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) revise prices of ATF and cooking gas on 1st of every month based on the average price of benchmark international fuel and foreign exchange rate.

Prices of petrol and diesel continue to remain on freeze. Rates had been cut by Rs 2 per litre in mid-March. Petrol costs Rs 94.72 a litre in Delhi while diesel is priced at Rs 87.62.

Report: Registration of properties in Mumbai rises 11 per cent in April

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Registration of properties in the Mumbai municipal area rose 11 per cent in April to 11,628 units mainly on strong housing demand, according to Knight Frank.

In April 2023, the registration of properties in Mumbai stood at 10,514 units.

In March 2024, the registration of properties stood at 14,145 units.

According to Knight Frank, the registration of properties stood at 11,628 units last month.

"The enduring confidence of homebuyers in the Mumbai market has maintained a positive outlook. This optimism has driven Mumbai's property registrations consistently exceeding the 10,000 mark for the fourth consecutive month in 2024," Knight Frank said.

Of the overall registered properties, residential units constitute 80 per cent. Shishir Baijal, Chairman & Managing Director, Knight Frank India, said, "The buoyant market conditions have significantly boosted the state treasury, marking its highest-ever revenue collection for April. Property registrations in April have surged, highlighting the market's attractiveness to potential homebuyers. This positive momentum is expected to persist, driven by robust economic growth and stable interest rates which are expected to remain constant," he said.

In April 2024, the consultant highlighted that Mumbai city has clocked the second-highest number of property registrations for the month of April in over 12 years.

SC dismisses L&T plea over Sharavathi tendering process

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has dismissed a plea by engineering and construction major Larsen & Toubro Ltd challenging the short-term tender floated for the construction of the Rs 8,000-crore Sharavathi pumped storage power project in Karnataka.

A bench comprising Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud and justices J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra upheld the April 25 order of the Karnataka High Court that had also declined the petition by L&T against the tender by Karnataka Power Corporation Limited (KPCL).

Sebi bans Manpasand Beverages, three top officials from market for three years

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets regulator Sebi has barred Manpasand Beverages Ltd (MBL) and its three top officials from the securities markets for three years and imposed a penalty totalling Rs 68 lakh on them for manipulating and misstating the company's financial statement.

In its order, the regulator said that the financial statements of the company were manipulated and mis-stated for financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20.

Apart from Manpasand Beverages, those restrained by Sebi are — the company's promoter, chairman & managing director (CMD) Dharendra Singh, promoter and executive director

Abhishek Singh and chief financial officer (CFO) Pares Thakkar.

Also, these four entities have been fined Rs 17 lakh each, which needs to be paid within 45 days, Sebi said in its 55-page order passed on Tuesday. Additionally, Dharendra Singh, Abhishek Singh and Pares Thakkar have been prohibited from holding position of director or key managerial personnel in any listed public company or any intermediary registered with Sebi in any capacity for five years.

Further, the company's former independent directors — Milind Babar and Chirag Doshi — were fined Rs 2 lakh each and current independent directors — Nishish Mobar and Bharti Naik were fined Rs



1 lakh each. Naik was non-executive director at the relevant time.

After receiving complaints in September 2019 from Bipin Rathod, who was the chairman of the audit committee of MBL, Sebi conducted an investigation into the matter to ascertain any possible manipulation or

misrepresentation in the books of accounts of MBL. Also, Sebi appointed Chokshi & Chokshi LLP to conduct a forensic audit of the company's financial statements for 2018-19 and 2019-20.

In the report submitted to Sebi, the auditor pointed out various irregularities in the

financial statements, which include purchases made from unregistered dealers without making payments; overstatement of purchases and sales, transactions with parties who had not filed GST returns making such transactions suspect; sales to suspicious entities, overstatement of impairments, receivables and fixed asset.

"The financial statements of MBL for 2018-19 and 2019-20 were manipulated and the figures contained therein were significantly mis-stated... This led to publication of manipulated, untrue and misleading financial results of the company during 2018-19 and 2019-20, which presented a false picture of the financial health of the company to investors," Sebi Whole Time

Member Ashwani Bhatia said. Sebi also noted that the manipulations in MBL had started prior to the investigation period, as the company was found to have mis-utilised proceeds of a Qualified Institutional Placement (QIP) done by it in September 2016. This was established by a Sebi's order passed on March 2, 2023. Also, the regulator, in its order, had found that MBL had deficiencies in internal controls and had published misleading financial statements for 2016-17 and 2017-18. Since these facts were not part of the present proceedings, the regulator has not taken them into consideration while deciding on the allegations against the entities.

Investment in housing segment jumps over three times in January, March: C&W

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Investments in residential real estate jumped more than three times in January-March to Rs 5,743 crore, contributing 63 per cent to the overall inflow in the real estate sector, according to Cushman & Wakefield. In its capital markets report released on Wednesday, real estate consultant Cushman & Wakefield highlighted that the investments in real estate rose to Rs 9,124 crore during the first quarter of the current calendar year from Rs 8,830 crore in the year-ago period. Of the total investment, the inflow in the residential segment jumped to Rs 5,743



core from Rs 1,735 crore. In the office assets, the investments grew marginally to Rs 2,248 crore from Rs 2,180 crore. However, the investments in mixed-use projects fell to Rs 865 crore from Rs 1,645 crore. The Industrial & Logistics segment, too, witnessed an inflow of Rs 268 crore, a sharp fall from Rs 2,170 crore in the first quarter of 2023.

Hospitality projects did not garner any interest from investors during January-March 2024 as against Rs 1,100 crore in the year-ago period.

Somy Thomas, Managing Director, Valuation and Advisory and Capital Markets, Cushman & Wakefield said, "Q1, 2024 witnessed another strong quarter of capital inflow into the Indian real estate sector, with the residential sector dominating on the back of renewed customer and investor confidence."

"This strong performance has attracted investor attention, leading them to put money into a market projected for

further growth," said Thomas. Domestic investors' uptick in investment numbers continued in the March quarter, which will provide further protection from any potential global headwinds, the consultant said. "As we enter the new financial year, we expect this momentum to continue, with potentially more diversified investments in the future," Thomas said.

As per the report, the investment in real estate stood at around Rs 9,130 crore (USD 1.1 billion) in January-March this year, which was 39 per cent lower than the preceding quarter and 3 per cent higher year-

on-year. "Residential sector dominated with 63 per cent of quarterly investment. In absolute terms, it is almost double the quarterly average for residential seen in the past eight quarters. Almost 48 per cent of investment in the residential sector was focused on early stages of development across top cities," the consultant said. The uptick in the share of domestic investors witnessed in 2023 continues in Q124, with their share accounting for 57 per cent of total quarterly investments, whereas foreign investors and collaborative (or mixed) deals comprised the remaining.

Petrol sales up 12.3 per cent; diesel slides 2.3 per cent in April

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's petrol consumption soared 12.3 per cent in April, but diesel sales continued to slide despite the country entering into hectic electioneering for general elections, preliminary data of state-owned firms showed on Wednesday. Petrol sales of three state-owned firms, which control 90 per cent of the fuel market, rose to 2.97 million tonnes in April compared to 2.65 million tonnes of consumption in the same period last year. Diesel demand dropped 2.3 per cent to 7 million tonnes. Demand for the nation's most consumed fuel had fallen 2.7 per cent in March.

This is despite India going into general elections where automobiles largely driven on diesel are used extensively for campaigning. While petrol sales were up mostly due to an increase in the use of personal vehicles on the back of a price cut, crop harvesting season and the onset of summer, which will increase the demand for air conditioning in cars as well as the electioneering holds out hope for reversing the trend in diesel demand. Petrol and diesel prices were in mid-March reduced by Rs 2 per litre, ending a nearly two-year-long hiatus in rate revision. Month-on-month petrol sales



dropped 5.3 per cent compared to 2.82 million tonnes of consumption in March. Diesel demand was however 4.4 per cent higher month-on-month against 6.7 million tonnes in March. Diesel is India's most consumed fuel, accounting for almost 40 per cent of all petroleum product consumption. The transport sector accounts for 70 per cent of all diesel sales in the country. It is also the predominant fuel used in agriculture sectors, including in harvesters and tractors. Petrol consumption has consistently shown a year-on-year rise, diesel consumption has been on a see-saw - rising in one month and falling in another.

Consumption of petrol during April was 15.3 per cent more than in the COVID-marred April 2022, and 56.5 per cent more than in the same month of 2020.

Diesel demand was up 4.4 per cent over April 2022, and 22.1 per cent compared to April 2020.

Jet fuel (ATF) sales rose 7 per cent year-on-year to 6,56,700 tonnes during April 2024. But, this was 2 per cent lower month-on-month when compared to 6,70,100 tonnes in March. Like petrol and diesel, ATF demand too is now firmly above pre-Covid levels. ATF consumption was 27.2 per cent more than in April 2022 and 16.3 per cent more than in April 2020. Cooking gas LPG sales were up 12 per cent year-on-year to 2.45 million tonnes in April 2024. LPG consumption was 9 per cent higher than in April 2022 and 26.9 per cent more than in April 2020. Month-on-month, LPG demand fell 8.3 per cent against 2.67 million tonnes consumed

Nethra Kumanan honoured

PNS ■ CHENNAI

India is witnessing record growth in all round sectors, including emerging as a global economic leader, the country was also emerging as a power to reckon with sports at the world level, Dr TR Paarivendhar, MP and Founder & Chancellor, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, said on Wednesday.

Addressing the gathering at an event to honour Nethra Kumanan, who has qualified for Paris Olympics to be held this year in the women's dinghy (ILCA 6) category,



Dr Paarivendhar lauded the hard work, commitment, and determination of the athlete to qualify for the Olympics and represent India.

Kumanan who completed her B.Tech in Mechanical Engineering from SRMIST, is currently pursuing her MBA from SRMIST.

Tally expects 40 per cent revenue growth in FY25; to expand overseas footprint

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Homegrown accounting software firm Tally Solutions looks to expand its footprint in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa and expects revenue growth of 30-40 per cent this financial year, a senior company executive has said. "Currently, we provide accounting software solutions mostly to the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and are growing at 20-30 per cent annually. We expect revenue growth of 30-40 per cent in 2024-25," Tally

Solutions Managing Director Tejas Goenka told PTI. Further, Goenka said that the company currently has a limited presence in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia and is planning to expand going forward. "We are present in Kenya, Indonesia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. We think there is a huge potential to expand in these three geographies. We are working on a long-term goal on the expansion and we try to be very aggressive. We aim to win the market with businesses thinking of us as

the go-to brand," he said. The company, which enjoys a 70-80 per cent market share, is continuously working on innovations and expects to maintain the current market share going forward, he said. "We continuously work on innovations and we customise according to a particular business requirement. The main challenge we face is pirated software. We expect to convert a lot of the pirated users to licensed users. Plus, there are many new businesses coming up that are automating.

VINÍCIUS JÚNIOR LEADS REAL MADRID TO 2-2 DRAW AT BAYERN MUNICH

AP ■ MUNICH

Vinicius Júnior scored twice for Real Madrid to draw 2-2 at Bayern Munich in the first leg of their Champions League semifinal. Bayern dominated but Madrid survived, and the contest is still wide open ahead of the return leg in Madrid on May 8.

With the focus on England stars Harry Kane and Jude Bellingham, as well as Toni Kroos' return to his former team, Vinicius emerged as the decisive figure on a night when his bright green boots were often a blur.

The Brazil forward opened the scoring against the run of play in the 24th minute and equalized with a coolly taken penalty in the 83rd after Leroy Sané and Kane had scored for Bayern.

"I think it's a good result," said Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti, who led Bayern to the Bundesliga title in 2017. "It gives us faith and confidence



for the second leg. It's completely open." Kane's goal, another penalty, was the England forward's 43rd goal in 43 games for Bayern this season.

"It felt like the goals were scored when the other team was better," Kroos said. "We're pretty sure that we'll advance at home."

Bayern had appealed to fans to wear red to the game and the visitors must have felt they were playing in a red cauldron as they were greeted by deafening whistles from the majority of the 75,000 in the stadium.

Fans in the "Südkurve" paid respect to deceased club great Franz Beckenbauer with a huge red-and-white choreography before kickoff. A giant banner sent a message to the players as they were warming up: "To honor the Kaiser Franz, give everything to reach the final!"

The winners of the two-leg semifinal will play either Borussia Dortmund or Paris Saint-Germain in the final in London on June 1.

"Real Madrid does this to teams, so we should not be too disappointed," Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel said. "I think we will be able to create chances in the Bernabéu. This is one of the most difficult places to win, yes, but it's a challenge. That's the beauty of it."

Bayern totally dominated the opening stages on Tuesday. Sané had an effort saved by Andriy Lunin in the first minute and the hosts went on to miss a slew of chances.

"We didn't have enough intensity, especially in the first half," Ancelotti said.

Nearly 20 minutes elapsed before Madrid enjoyed a period with the ball.

Then Kroos spotted Vinicius' run and played a perfect through ball for the Brazilian to sweep the visitors' first real chance past Manuel Neuer in the Bayern goal.

Bayern lost its early zest as the visitors saw more of the ball.

Tuchel gesticulated wildly at his players to push forward, then threw his arms up in exasperation.

Kane went closest with a free kick before the break, awarded for a foul by Nacho on Jamal Musiala, who gingerly rubbed his bandaged left leg. The Germany forward had only just recovered from a knee problem.

Sané equalized in the 53rd when he ran at the Madrid defense and cut inside Ferland Mendy before firing a fierce strike just inside the near post. Kane made it 2-1 four minutes later with a penalty awarded after Lucas Vázquez bundled over Musiala.

But it wasn't the last penalty as Kim Min-jae - who was beaten on Vinicius' first goal - brought down Rodrygo. Vinicius duly equalized from the spot.

"It was a back-and-forth game," Bayern midfielder Konrad Laimer said. "But yeah, it's Real Madrid, you can't let anything happen against this team."

Nadal plans to play in Rome after a positive week in likely his last Madrid Open



AP ■ MADRID

Rafael Nadal left Madrid feeling better about his fitness than he did when he arrived, and is now planning to play in Rome while continuing his preparations for the French Open.

Nadal lost in straight sets to the 31st-ranked Jiri Lehecka in the fourth round at Madrid on Tuesday. But the Spaniard was feeling good about his progress following his latest injury layoff. Nadal called it a

positive week" in every way, and said his body held up well.

"I was able to play four matches, a couple of tough matches," Nadal said. "So very positive, winning three matches, playing four matches at the high level of tennis. I enjoyed a lot playing at home. I leave here with very positive energy."

Nadal arrived in Madrid pessimistic about his physical condition, and he wasn't even sure if he would be able to play. He said he only did it because it was

Top seeded Bopanna, Ebden pair knocked out of Madrid Masters

PTI ■ MADRID

Top-seeded Indo-Australian pair of Rohan Bopanna and Matthew Ebden bowed out of the ATP Mutua Madrid Open after a shocking first-round loss to the unheralded duo of Sebastian Korda and Jordan Thompson here.

Bopanna and Ebden, who are the reigning Australian Open men's doubles champions, went down 7-6 (4) 7-5 in a contest that lasted one hour and 17 minutes.

Squaring off for the first time, the American-Australian duo matched Bopanna and Ebden shot for shot.

Korda and Thompson displayed a strong service game and saved the lone break point they conceded in the opening set.

To their credit, Bopanna and Ebden also did not allow Korda and Thompson to convert the three breaks points they ended up conceding. However, Korda and Thompson managed to gain the upper-hand by clinching the set in a tie-breaker.

Korda and Thompson gained



in confidence and managed to break Bopanna and Ebden once from the four chances that came their way.

The top seeds, in contrast, could not exert any such pressure, resulting in an early exit from the tournament being played on clay.

The rare setback notwithstanding, Bopanna and Ebden have enjoyed a good run on the circuit, winning the Indian Wells

Four Indian boxers march into semi finals

PTI ■ ASTANA (KAZAKHSTAN)

Indian pugilists Aryan, Yashwardhan Singh, Priyanshu and Sahil marched into the semi-finals with confident wins at the ASBC Asian U-22 & Youth Boxing Championships here on Wednesday.

Aryan gave India a perfect start with a 5-0 unanimous decision win against Uzbekistan's Juraev Shakarboy in the 51kg category. His win was followed by a good show by Yashwardhan (63.5kg), who made a remarkable comeback after going down in the first round to grab a 4-1 victory over Iran's Mirahmadi Babaheidari.

Priyanshu (71kg) and Sahil (80kg), on the other hand, didn't break sweat as they wrapped the bout with referee stop the contest (RSC) decision against Chinese Taipei's Wu Yu En and Turkmenistan's Yklymov Abdyrahma respectively.

Meanwhile, Jatin ended his campaign in the 57kg category with a 1-4 loss against Uzbekistan's A Nodirbek.

The youth semi-finals will be played on Friday.

Aryan (92kg), Nisha (52kg), Akansha Phalasal (70kg) and Rudrika (75kg) will be in action later tonight in their respective youth quarter-finals bouts.

Late on Tuesday, Jugnoo (86kg), Tammana (50kg) and Preeti (54kg) claimed victories to enter the U-22 semi-finals.

On Thursday, eight U-22 pugilists will take the ring for their quarter-finals bouts -- M Jadumani Singh (51kg), Ashish (54kg), Nikhil (57kg), Ajay Kumar (63.5kg), Ankush (71kg) and Dhruv Singh (80kg) in the men's category and Guddi (48kg) and Poonam (57kg) in the women's section.

The tournament has seen participation from over 390 boxers from more than 24 countries, fighting for medals across 25 weight categories. The finals for the youth and U-22 category will be played on May 6 and 7 respectively.

Red Bull chief technical officer Adrian Newey to step down from F1 team

AP ■ MILTON KEYNES, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE (ENGLAND)

Adrian Newey, the designer pivotal in Red Bull's dominance of Formula One, will step down early next year, the team said Wednesday.

The 65-year-old Newey will end his near two-decade career with Red Bull in the "first quarter of 2025."

"For almost two decades it has been my great honour to have played a key role in Red Bull Racing's progress from upstart newcomer to multiple title-winning team," he said.

"However, I feel now is an opportune moment to hand that baton over to others and to seek new challenges for myself."

Newey joined Red Bull in 2006 and helped the team win seven drivers' titles - including the last three seasons for defending champion Max Verstappen - and six constructors' titles.

Red Bull said its chief technical officer would be stepping back from F1 design and focus on its first hypercar, the RB17. "All of our greatest moments from the past 20 years have come with Adrian's hand on the technical tiller," Red Bull team principal Christian Horner said.

"For me, when Adrian joined Red Bull, he was already a superstar designer. Two decades and 13 championships later he leaves as a true



legend. He is also my friend and someone I will be eternally grateful for everything he brought to our partnership."

News of Newey's departure could spark a bidding war for his services. As Newey is free to join another team when he leaves Red Bull, it paves the way for him to have an impact on the 2026 car for whichever team he joins. The next major change in regulations is due in 2026 and having Newey on board would give his next employers a significant advantage.

Newey's departure comes in the wake of Horner being accused of "inappropriate behaviour" by a female employee. Horner was exonerated by Red Bull's parent company GmbH and has always denied the claims.

Archer Dhiraj aims for team qualification at Paris Olympics

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Dhiraj Bommadevara, the only Indian archer to qualify for the individual event of the Paris Olympics, says locking a quota in the team events at the quadrennial extravaganza is next on their radar.

The 22-year-old recurve archer qualified for the Summer Games in the men's individual event owing to his silver medal at the Asian Qualifying Tournament in Bangkok last year.

"We are trying hard to convert the individual quota into a team quota, so we are working consistently towards it, planning for it and taking part in as many tournaments as possible," Dhiraj was quoted as saying in a SAI release.

"Our first priority is to get the team quota. We will go to Paris 2024 with a simple mindset



just to give our best. The rest is not in our hands. No expectation on results. We have to be prepared for everything and perform accordingly."

The Indian men's recurve team has been in good form. Last week, the trio of Dhiraj, Tarundeep Rai and Pravin Jadhav had stunned reigning Olympic champions South Korea to land a historic World Cup gold medal after 14 years.

The World Cup in Antalya, Turkey in June is the final qualifying event for the Paris Olympics.

However, if the Indian men's team is unable to make the cut there, it is still in prime position to qualify for the Olympics owing to the rankings. The top-two ranked team in the world get direct entry for the Games. India are ranked second so far behind Korea.

Dhiraj was also a part of the silver-winning men's team at

the Asian Games last year. Despite doing well at in World Cups, World Championship and other marquee events, Indian archers have yet to get their hands on an elusive medal at the Olympics.

"We are trying to achieve better versions of our past. We're not comparing with any other nation. Our priority is only to get better and improve from lessons learnt.

Talking about the impact of the compound team's performances he said, "Our compound team is the best in the world. Its performance helps us push ourselves. Both the compound bow and the recurve bow competitions are equally tough."

"How Jyothi (Surekha) didi handles her pressure in various categories - individual, mixed or team event - is really commendable and inspiring," he added.

Man United makes more executive changes as Jim Ratcliffe new era takes shape

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Manchester United announced more changes to its executive structure as the new era under co-owner Jim Ratcliffe continues to take shape.

Interim CEO Patrick Stewart and chief financial officer Cliff Baty will step down at the end of the season by mutual consent, the club said.

Jean-Claude Blanc, CEO of Ratcliffe's INEOS Sport, will take over as chief executive until former Manchester City executive Omar Berrada takes on the role on July 13.

Baty will be replaced by former INEOS Sport chief financial



officer Roger Bell.

"I would like to personally thank both Patrick and Cliff for their support in helping us get to know the club and making us feel welcome and I respect their decisions to now

move on as we establish a new management team for the club," said Ratcliffe, who is one of Britain's richest people.

The billionaire owner of petrochemicals giant INEOS bought a 25% stake in United

Chennaiyin FC extends contract of goalkeeper Samik Mitra until 2027

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Indian super League side Chennaiyin FC has extended goalkeeper Samik Mitra's contract till end of 2027 season, the club announced on Wednesday.

Mitra joined the Marina Machans from Indian Arrows in 2020 and has played a total of 22 matches for the team in all competitions, keeping clean sheets in three games.

The 23-year-old goalkeeper from Siliguri has become a force to be reckoned with between the posts and has played a crucial role in the team's success on many occasions. With immense potential, head coach Owen Coyle expressed confidence in Mitra's abilities to continue playing for the team in the forthcoming season. "We believe in giving chances to youngsters at



the club, and Samik Mitra is someone who has great potential. He is young, and we have already seen his capabilities in the matches that he has played for the team," said Coyle.

"It's important that such talented players stay at the club, and I believe that he can continue to grow with the team," he said.

Mitra made four appearances for the club

in the ISL 2023-24 season and looks to deliver quality performances for the team in the upcoming season as well.

He also spent his early days at Chennaiyin FC, joining the club's U-18 team in 2017 and playing there during his formative years, where he acquired the necessary skills before departing for the Indian Arrows in 2019.

"I am really excited for another season with Chennaiyin FC. We qualified for the playoffs this season and want to do even better in the coming year. This club is the right place for me to grow and learn from some of the best coaches and players in the country."

"I have grown a lot in the last few years and want to continue the upward trajectory in my career," commented Mitra after committing to the club for another year.



SRH seek perfect chase against RR

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

An erratic Sunrisers Hyderabad would look to fix their chasing troubles and get their campaign back on track when they host the high-flying Rajasthan Royals in the Indian Premier League here on Thursday. A lot more is at stake for the Sunrisers than the Royals, who have virtually qualified for the playoffs. In ominous form till few days back, SRH dropped out of the top four on the points table after suffering back-to-back losses against wooden spooners Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Chennai Super Kings where they failed to chase down totals. With five wins and four losses, the 2016 champions sit on the fifth spot with 10 points. The Pat Cummins-led side's top and middle-order batters have failed collectively while chasing, forcing head coach Daniel Vettori to admit that the

idea of going all out with the bat in the second innings might not be the right thing to do. SRH have breached the 250-run mark thrice this season but all while batting first. In contrast, they haven't managed to chase a total in excess of 200 even once. "We have been successful setting totals and now we have to look at how well we are in chasing," head coach Vettori had conceded after the loss to RCB. "We're pretty well-suited to chasing, but it hasn't really come off yet. So yeah, it is something (we need) to work on," skipper Cummins had said after he lost to CSK. SRH are too dependent on the explosive starts provided by Travis Head and Abhishek Sharma. And, while the duo gets going it's great but when they flop, SRH will want to do a better job at re-building their innings. It's also about time Aiden Markram steps up and justifies his spot in the playing XI, having had an underwhelming



season thus far. Runaway leaders Rajasthan Royals, on the other hand, will look to continue their near flawless run. The inaugural edition's champions have shown they are perfectly equipped to compete anywhere. They are perched atop the table with 16 points -- four points ahead of second placed Kolkata Knight Riders. They are all but through to the knockout stage. The Royals boast of a formidable top order, comprising Jos Buttler, Yashasvi Jaiswal, and skipper Sanju Samson, with all three of them in good nick. The West Indian duo of Shimron Hetmyer and Rovman Powell and youngsters Riyan Parag and Dhruv Jurel have also shown they can hit top gear. They have an equally potent bowling attack comprising Yuzvendra Chahal, the experienced Trent Boult, Avesh Khan and Sandeep Sharma.

THE TEAMS (FROM):
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, Sandeep Sharma, Trent Boult, Yuzvendra Chahal, Avesh Khan, Rovman Powell, Shubham Dubey, Tom Kohler-Cadmore, Abid Mushtaq, Nandre Burger, Tanush Kotian, Keshav Maharaj.
Sunrisers Hyderabad: Pat Cummins (c), Abdul Samad, Abhishek Sharma, Aiden Markram, Marco Jansen, Rahul Tripathi, Washington Sundar, Glenn Phillips, Sanvir Singh, Heinrich Klaasen (wk), Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mayank Agarwal, T. Natarajan, Anmolpreet Singh, Mayank Markande, Upendra Singh Yadav (wk), Umran Malik, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Shahbaz Ahmed, Travis Head, Jaydev Unadkat, Akash Singh, Jhathavedh Subramanyan.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former Australia fast bowler Brett Lee feels Lucknow Super Giants did not manage Mayank Yadav's injury well, suggesting that the young tearaway pacer was brought back to IPL action prematurely after being sidelined due to abdominal soreness. The 21-year-old Mayank developed abdominal soreness during LSG's match against Gujarat Titans on April 7. That was his third IPL game, and he impressed one and all with his express pace and two Man-of-the-Match awards. He made a comeback in LSG's win against Mumbai Indians in Lucknow on Tuesday but walked off the field without completing his fourth over after an injury scare. LSG coach Justin Langer said the young pace sensation is feeling "sore in the same spot" that kept him out of action for almost three weeks, while captain KL Rahul that added Mayank had complained of slight pain in his sides. Lee, one of the game's most feared fast bowlers, laid the blame on the LSG top management and medical staff.

Mayank getting injured in first game on comeback has to directly be on LSG leadership: Lee



He said Mayank's initial injury would have required four to six weeks to heal, much more than the time period the youngster spent at

the sidelines before being brought back. "A side strain or whatever they're calling it, normally takes at least four to six weeks

to even come right. We don't know the depths of how big a strain it was but for somebody who is pushing the limits of his body by bowling 150

kmph, that's not good management at all," Lee said in a JioCinema release. "His first game coming back and getting injured, has to directly be on the leadership and the medical staff of the Lucknow Super Giants." The 47-year-old Lee, who took 310 wickets from 76 Tests between 1999 and 2008, sympathised with Mayank, saying he should have got the right advice. "The only person who has to pay this price is this poor young guy Mayank, who is just electric. Everyone in the IPL has loved seeing what he's brought... You wish he got the right advice, so he doesn't have to go through and absorb this. "Now, it's most probably going to mean that he's going to miss out on the World Cup if there's an injury that might come up." At the Ekana Stadium in Lucknow on Tuesday, Mayank walked off the field after bowling the first ball of

his fourth over having taken one wicket for 31 runs. He was returning to action after missing five games. Mayank made a sensational start to the IPL by taking six wickets in his first two games before getting injured. He was later seen engaging in a conversation with India and MI pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah. Former India batter Suresh Raina said Mayank must have got some valuable insight on how to manage injury. "It was a fantastic gesture from Jasprit Bumrah to talk to the youngster. He has so much experience. When (Mayank) meets him, he will learn so much from Bumrah's words about looking after an injury. It's not easy to return from an injury and take wickets," Raina said. "Team doctor Vaibhav Daga has worked with the BCCI before and helped Bumrah return to fitness as well. When Mayank bowls more with the red ball and white ball, I want to see him in Test matches when we play in Australia, England, or New Zealand. "We haven't seen pace like this in India for a while. The tips Bumrah gives him now will one day be invaluable."



Pandya and all other MI players fined for slow over rate offence against LSG

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Mumbai Indians captain Hardik Pandya has been fined Rs 24 lakh after his team's second slow over-rate offence in the Indian Premier League during their match against Lucknow Super Giants here. All the other players, including the Impact Player, were each individually fined either Rs 6 lakh or 25 per cent of their respective match fees, whichever is lesser. MI lost the match by four wickets at the Ekana Stadium on Tuesday. "Mr Hardik Pandya, Captain, Mumbai Indians has been fined after his team maintained a slow over-rate during Match 48 of the TATA Indian Premier League (IPL) 2024 against Lucknow Super Giants on April 30, 2024," the IPL said in a statement. "As it was his team's second offence of the season under the IPL's Code of Conduct relating to minimum over-rate offences, Pandya was fined INR 24 Lac. "The rest of the members of the Playing XI, including the Impact Player, were each individually fined either INR 6 Lac or 25 per cent of their respective match fees, whichever is lesser," it added.

OTHER SPORTS

I want to be on that flight to Paris, says Krishan Pathak

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Krishan Pathak finds himself in a bizarre situation. He will have to battle it out with his friend and mentor PR Sreejesh for the lone goalkeeper's slot in India's hockey squad for the Paris Olympics. In Olympics, a country can carry only a 16-member squad as against 18 players in other tournaments, and that restriction often forces the coach to sacrifice one goalkeeper to include another player in a different position. It happened in the Tokyo Olympics as Sreejesh did the custodian's duty during India's bronze-winning run, while Pathak watched the action from the gallery. But this time, Pathak is not ready to give up the slot without a fight. "The coach hasn't told us the team composition for the Olympics. My aim is to be ready 100 percent when

the call comes. There is a healthy competition going on within the squad to earn a place in the Olympics-bound team. "Every player feels that he can be part of that squad. I am no different, and I want to be on that flight to Paris," Pathak told PTI during the team's training camp at the SAI centre here. Pathak shares a deep connection with Sreejesh. In fact, the veteran was India's goalkeeping coach during the 2016 junior World Cup, where Pathak showcased his talent to a broader world for the first time. The 27-year-old insisted that the competition for an Olympic berth has not affected their personal equation. "It's dream for me to work with and play alongside Sree bhair. We are very comfortable with each other. We share a lot of information, especially when one of us commits mistakes. We point that out to each other.



"Whenever I commit a mistake, he will come and tell me what went wrong and how to rectify it. Similarly, I will do that when Sree bhair makes a mistake. We have a great bonding between us - on and off the field," detailed Pathak. The immediate assignment in front of

him is the FIH Pro-League matches, starting at Antwerp, Belgium from May 22. India will face some top-flight teams like Germany and Belgium in that tournament. Pathak wanted to assert his claim for an Olympic berth through some strong outings in the Pro-League.

"We've played eight Pro-League matches in Ranchi and Rourkela. Now, we have some more Pro-League matches coming up ahead of the Olympics. We will meet some of those teams in the Olympics too. That familiarity will help us. "As a goalkeeper, I will look to source as much knowledge from the Pro-League matches about our possible opponents in the Olympics," he added. The Kapurthala man was all praise for Indian national team coach Craig Fulton, saying that the South African is helping the players to achieve their optimum potential ahead of the quadrennial showpiece. "When he spots a weakness, he starts working on it immediately. He hates wasting time. When we went to Australia recently, our attack and defence were not working as we lost the series 0-5.



Tom Lockyer is at peace with prospect of retirement

AP ■ LUTON (ENGLAND)

Tom Lockyer, the Premier League player who suffered an onfield cardiac arrest earlier this season, says he is "at peace" with the prospect of having to retire from the sport. The Luton captain had a defibrillator fitted after collapsing during a game against Bournemouth in December. He had previously collapsed seven months earlier during a game at Wembley Stadium because he suffered atrial fibrillation. The 29-year-old Lockyer, who recently became a father for the first time, has not given up

hope of resuming his playing career. But he accepts that may not be possible. "I've made no secret saying I would love to return to football, but ultimately it would have to come down to someone who's a cardiologist or a specialist who has done full research into what has gone on and if it could happen again, because we've got a little girl now and she takes priority," Lockyer told BBC Radio Wales. "I would love to play football again, of course I would, it's my life but if it's the case that I can't, then I'm at peace with that as well.

PTI ■ CHENNAI

A Grandmaster much before the title was officially bestowed on her by FIDE recently, Indian chess player R Vaishali has revealed that there was a time she was unsure of being able to achieve the feat but managed to pull through owing to a good support structure. Vaishali completed the requisite 2500 ELO points Llobregat Open tournament in Spain to become only the third Indian woman after Koneru Humpy and Harika Dronavalli to become a GM. However, the title was officially given to her only recently following the FIDE Council meeting during the Candidates Tournament in Toronto last month. "After completing the (Women's GM) title, I knew it would be changed to GM someday. I did not think about the title so much," she told PTI

Happy that the title is finally out: R Vaishali on officially becoming GM

in an interview. "Yeah, it took some time to get it official, but I'm happy that the title is finally out. I was okay with it (the delay)," she added. The 22-year-old is basking in the glory of her solid performance in the Candidates tournament, where she won five consecutive games to finish joint second. She became a Woman Grandmaster in 2018 after completing her final norm during the Riga Technical University Open in Riga, Latvia. Having had to wait six years to finally earn the GM tag, Vaishali said she became a bit unsure of the GM tag after her ratings stagnated due to lack of com-



petition during the COVID 19 pandemic. "In between, I could not play any tournament for two years due to the (COVID-19) pandemic. But, I was working throughout, trying to improve my game. I completed my

International Master (IM) cycle post-pandemic (in 2021)," she recalled. "Although I was improving my game slowly, my rating became stagnant. There were some low moments when I felt I might not get the title, but people

believed in me and helped me to attain it," she said. Vaishali is the elder sister of R Pragganandhaa, the 18-year-old who has been making waves for quite a while. Together, they became the first brother-sister duo to qualify for Candidates' event this year. Talking about her relationship with Pragganandhaa, Vaishali stated, "We talk a lot about our games, which is natural since we have been playing together since our childhood. "He helps me a lot with my game. It's great to have such a strong player at home with whom I can discuss more about the game at any time." When asked about the support

she and her brother get from their parents, Vaishali described them as their "biggest strength". "Our parents are the biggest strength for both of us. My mother accompanies us to our tournaments on most of the occasions. She takes care of almost everything, and we just keep focusing on our game," she revealed. "Our father takes care of things like logistics, planning and finances. In fact, both of them take care of most of our needs, which indeed helps us focus more on our game. Really grateful to them." Away from chess, Vaishali is currently pursuing the PG Diploma course in Human Resource Management. However, she has no qualms admitting that she has no academic aspirations and is focused on professional chess with this month's Women's Masters in Norway being her next assignment.